

THE GHOST IDENTITIES

— NAMES WITHOUT BODIES —

AVINASH PUSHKARNA



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Dedicated to my late parents who brought me into this world.

*To my wife **Susmita** and my loving children **Ankita** and **Kunaal** who have given meaning to my life. I am grateful to them for giving their unconditional love and support during the exacting times of writing this novel.*

EPIGRAPH

“There were documents for every name.
Only the people were missing.”

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PROLOGUE

Operation CyHawk

Cyber Forensic Lab, Delhi

At 03:14, the screens flickered. Just enough for someone who had been awake too long. A transaction hung mid-flight—₹9.82 crore, suspended between five mule accounts layered across private banks, cooperative banks, dormant wallets, and a foreign exchange gateway that had no business being active at that hour. To most systems it would have registered as routine latency. To the officer watching, it felt like a held breath.

“Trace it,” he said.

The signal snapped into focus within seconds. A location. A room. A man.

Room 406 lay at the end of a narrow corridor in a lodge near Paharganj, that budget warren of rooftop cafes and cheap guesthouses where hippie nostalgia and local grime had long coexisted. The first sound was not the breach. It was the typing—rapid, uneven, desperate. Then silence. Then footsteps in the corridor, controlled and too many.

“On my mark.”

The door gave with a sharp crack. Inside: the smell of sweat, disinfectant, and instant coffee. Dark uniforms filled the room in seconds, weapons raised but steady. On the bed sat a man who looked too young to be dangerous. Early twenties. Unshaven. Eyes ringed with

exhaustion and something deeper than fear. His hands were shaking, yet his fingers kept moving across the keyboard with unnatural precision—striking, missing, correcting, never pausing. Sweat gathered at his temples and dripped onto the table. He did not wipe it. He did not look up.

“Sir, he’s still executing something—”

“Cut the system.”

“No response—”

“Pull the plug.” A hand reached for the power source.

The man reacted instantly—not to the officers, but to the interruption. “No—” The word came out fractured. His hand struck the console in panic. The cursor stalled. Resumed. On his phone, a black screen displayed a countdown: 00:14:37.

“Stop,” an officer said.

The man shook his head violently. “I can’t. They’re watching.”

“Who?”

His lips moved. No answer came. The countdown continued. When an officer reached for the phone, the man screamed: “Please—my mother—my sister—they said—”

The device vibrated. A new message appeared:

KEEP TYPING, OR THEY DIE.

Before anyone could react, the phone grew white-hot. The screen went blank. The laptop sparked once and died. The router crackled into silence. A thin mechanical whine rose from inside the walls—not loud, not dramatic—just the sound of something shutting itself down with satisfaction.

The man gasped, clutching his chest. His eyes widened, not in fear now, but in a baffled loosening, as though something that had been holding him upright had simply let go. His breathing hitched. Once. Twice. Stopped.

Dead within minutes.

Hours later, under sterile light, a junior medical examiner cleaning blood from behind the left ear felt something hard beneath the skin.

“This wasn’t surgical,” he said.

He moved closer. Studied the structure. Stepped back. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

A wafer-thin disc, fused to the dermal layer, its edges almost organic, its circuitry too advanced for any consumer-grade neuro-device. No branding. No serial number. No medical registry. Someone had placed it there deliberately. Someone had been inside his head.

By morning, Operation CyHawk was being hailed as a decisive multi-agency disruption of a transnational cyber-fraud network. Hundreds detained. Call centres dismantled. Thousands of complaints linked. Over a thousand crore in fraud exposed. The official summary was clean: four compounds disrupted, three call-floor clusters neutralised, two payment channels frozen, and one transnational fraud architecture degraded.

The word 'degraded' appeared six times in the first classified brief. Arjun Malhotra read it with detached irritation. 'Degraded' did not mean destroyed. 'Neutralised' did not mean 'understood'. 'Recovered' did not mean free.

Most of those rescued were processed into categories designed to move them from one jurisdictional box to another: Trafficked. Witness. Minor. Victim. Deportation Hold. Categories were necessary. They were also dangerous.

At 04:40, among the survivor statements uploaded to the restricted CyHawk review channel, one file was queer. The woman had given her name as Aisha Rahman. The first interviewing officer had noted her as ‘a survivor of the behavioural support floor’. The second had added ‘data familiarity’. The third had underlined ‘a high-value witness’ and recommended immediate transfer before local intermediaries could reach her. By then she had already corrected two officers on the compound’s structure.

“It was not only fraud,” she had said.

The transcript showed a pause after that line, as though the officer had looked up.

She continued: “They were not just stealing money. They were learning when people obey.”

Aisha did not speak like someone eager to be believed. She spoke like someone who had already survived disbelief and found it administratively predictable. She knew the call floors, the scripts, the difference between a threat designed to frighten and one designed to measure. She knew which handlers watched eyes rather than screens. She knew why victims were kept on the line after payment had cleared. She knew that voices were archived, not merely recorded. She knew that children were made to repeat phrases until fear became clean to reuse.

She knew something else, too. The compound had not collapsed during CyHawk. It had yielded. The visible floors had been sacrificed. The deeper system had withdrawn through permissions, identities, and trusted routes that no raid team had been briefed to recognise.

In her statement, she used a phrase no one else in the debrief room understood: ‘names without bodies’. The interviewing officer asked her to explain. “There were people on paper who never came,” she said. “People in rooms whose papers said they were gone. Accounts used by dead men. Children whose voices were kept after they stopped speaking.”

The transcript showed another pause. The officer asked whether she meant forged documents.

“No,” Aisha replied. “The documents were learning to live without the people.”

That line reached Arjun six hours after the first press note had been prepared, forwarded by a junior signals analyst who had the inconvenient habit of escalating anomalies before seniors could make them manageable. The analyst sent no explanation; only the transcript extract, one still image from a seized server, and a note: ‘Sir, this witness is describing something beyond fraud architecture. Must see this before the file becomes clean.’

Arjun read Aisha Rahman's statement twice. Then he opened the image: a directory tree recovered from an encrypted node before it wiped itself. The folder names were routine enough—Scripts. Wallets. Voice Samples. ID Scans. Regional Language Packs—until one sat outside the expected structure, like a room no one had thought to name during construction.

SAFFRON_LEDGER/HUMAN_RESPONSE/
IDENTITY_ZERO.

He stared at the final name for a long moment. It did not sound like a person. It did not sound like a programme. It sounded like a state that existed before a person was permitted to become one.

Outside the operations room, birds announced the approach of dawn. Officers slumped over phones. Reports thickened. Somewhere, rescued persons were being counted again by people who would never know their old nicknames or their handwriting or which of them had learnt to stop crying because crying had become useful to someone else.

Arjun saved Aisha Rahman's statement outside the main review folder. Not to conceal it. To ensure it could not disappear merely by being properly filed.

By nightfall, similar deaths had been reported in three other cities. Different names. Different faces. Identical patches. And according to official records, not one of them had ever existed—no birth certificates, no verified family trees, no consistent biometrics. Citizens in name; humans by accident.

Somewhere beyond jurisdiction, a server cluster came back online. A new identity was generated. Clean. Perfect. Untouchable.

On a secure channel known only to a few, a single line of text appeared:

IDENTITY ZERO ACTIVE.

The war had already begun.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER ONE

Residual Signals

Delhi — Three Days After Operation CyHawk

The building offered nothing. No signage, no flags, no security theatre. Just reinforced concrete set back from the road, its windows tinted to opacity.

Arjun Malhotra paused at the entrance long enough for the automatic doors to hesitate. A former Army Signals Corps officer, now a Cyber Intelligence Specialist embedded with a Multi-Agency Task Force, he had learnt to read hesitation in both machines and men.

The doors conceded. Inside: cool, antiseptic air; the low hum of machines that never slept; fluorescent light draining faces of warmth. A place designed for information, not comfort. He signed in without ceremony.

The lift took him down two levels. In the brushed-steel walls, his reflection studied him back—late thirties, clean-shaven, eyes darker than he remembered them being, faint lines at the corners etched not by age but by long nights and unfinished thoughts.

The cyber-operations floor was a victory room on paper. Operation CyHawk had been declared a success barely forty-eight hours earlier: arrests made, call centres raided, money traced, politicians photographed against confiscated laptops. Arjun had not come for the celebration. He had come because something had not stopped moving.

"Sir," a woman rose from her workstation. She introduced herself briskly and walked without waiting, speaking in clipped sentences. He fell into step beside her. "Most modules mapped during CyHawk have gone dark. Bank accounts frozen. Numbers deactivated. Traffic is down eighty-seven per cent."

"Most," Arjun said.

She hesitated. "There are residuals. Low-volume, high-latency transactions that don't fit the old patterns. They're not stealing aggressively. They're testing."

They stopped before a large display wall. A constellation of nodes glowed against black, arcs of muted blue and grey connecting them. "This is what we expect after a crackdown—fragmentation, panic, and disorganisation." She tapped a key. A new layer appeared: thinner lines, fainter nodes, almost spectral.

"And this is what we're seeing."

Arjun leant closer. The pattern was wrong. Not chaotic enough. Not desperate. "These aren't remnants," he said.

"Then what?"

"Scaffolding." He straightened, scanning the data. Each node carried metadata: account numbers, IP addresses, and device IDs. But beneath it ran something else—a rhythm, like a pulse. He had seen that signature before. "Show me the identities."

The profiles looked ordinary at first glance. At second glance, they did not. No school records before age fourteen for one. Biometrics were uploaded twice, six years apart, from different states, for the other. Family trees that shifted between databases on a third.

Synthetic. Assembled. Used.

"Who cleared these verifications?"

"No one," she said quietly. "They were inherited trust entries. Once validated, they propagated automatically."

Inherited trust. Arjun felt something tighten in his chest. Modern governance ran on it—the quiet assumption that if a system upstream had verified something, it need not be questioned downstream. Banks

trusted telecoms. Telecoms trusted identity registries. Registries trusted historical data.

“Has anyone else flagged this?”

She hesitated again. “I raised it. It was deprioritised.”

“Pull everything on the mule who died in Paharganj,” he said. “Not just financials. Behavioural logs. Device telemetry. Communications. Everything.”

“The file’s sealed, sir.”

“Then unseal it. If someone asks, tell them I did.”

As she moved to comply, Arjun turned back to the display wall. CyHawk had cut off heads and limbs. But what he was looking at now had no anatomy in the conventional sense. It was not a gang, a cartel, or even an organisation. It was a system that assumed investigators would keep searching for villains: faces, leaders, and enemies whom they could arrest. And while they searched, it was learning.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER TWO

People Who Should Exist

Delhi

The first rule Arjun Malhotra had learnt about databases was simple: they never forget. They mislabelled. They duplicated. They corrupted. But they did not invent. If a database appeared to have conjured data from nothing, the explanation was always human—bad metadata, errant ETL logic, or a migration that merged what should have remained separate. Data was the residue of human decisions, and decisions could always be traced.

That was why the file on his screen unsettled him more than any malware signature ever had.

The man's name was Rakesh Kumar. Unremarkable. The kind that appeared on electoral rolls, ration cards, bank passbooks, and municipal notices without raising eyebrows. According to records, he was thirty-two, unmarried, intermittently employed in logistics. On paper, he had always existed.

Arjun reclined in his chair. It was past midnight. The cyber floor ran on skeletal staffing and caffeine. Arjun preferred it that way; systems revealed themselves more readily when fewer people were watching.

Birth certificate: issued eighteen months after his recorded date of birth. School records: Class IX onwards only. Medical history: complete and too immaculate. Biometrics: Aadhaar-linked, PAN-

linked, bank-verified. At a glance, the man was airtight. At a second glance, he was hollow.

“Show me his parents’ records,” Arjun murmured.

Two names appeared. Addresses matched census data. Voter IDs checked out.

“Show me their parents.”

The lineage fractured. Dates shifted. Surnames altered subtly across generations. Villages migrated between districts. It was not an error. It was curated.

He pulled another identity. Then five more. Each was complete in isolation; together they told a different story. None of them had childhoods. They materialised, fully formed, sometime in their teens—old enough to be legally useful and young enough to be pliable. Before that, only administrative echoes: duplicated hospital entries, schools that no longer existed, teachers who had never taught.

People who should exist. But did not.

He walked to the data wall and keyed a command that would not have survived a formal audit. The screen collapsed individual profiles into overlapping layers. A pattern surfaced: the same identities resurfaced across different crimes, not simultaneously but sequentially. One year a mule, another a SIM holder, and another a shell-company director. The context changed. The identity endured. Reusable humans.

“Who signed off on these verifications?”

“No one,” the analyst replied softly. “Inherited trust entries. Once validated, they propagated automatically.”

Arjun felt the chill of it settle. He opened another screen: remnants of a programme he had once helped design and then watched quietly dismantled. The idea had been theoretical in those days. Synthetic continuity. Could an identity be made robust not by perfection but by redundancy? Could trust be engineered by volume rather than truth? It had been dismissed as impractical, dangerous, and politically radioactive. He had agreed then.

He was less certain now.

A soft chime. A new alert blinked at the screen's edge:

UNUSUAL ACCESS DETECTED.

Not blocked. Not challenged. He traced the path—no brute force, no intrusion, only a series of permissions exercised with absolute confidence, like someone walking through security because everyone assumed they belonged. Originating from outside the country. Then gone. No data taken. No files altered.

“They weren’t stealing but checking,” the analyst said.

“Yes,” Arjun replied. “And they’ve just confirmed something.”

“What?”

“That we’re slow.”

He closed the identity files one by one. The faces left the screen. The unease they carried did not. He had the persistent, irrational sense of actors standing just offstage, patient and still, waiting for the moment they would be needed again.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER THREE

The Patch

Central Forensic Sciences Laboratory, Delhi — Restricted Wing

The patch was smaller than Arjun had imagined.

He stood behind reinforced glass, hands clasped at his back, watching the forensic technician ease it into view under the microscope. On the screen above the workstation, the image bloomed into sharp relief: a thin disc no larger than a coin, its surface laced with microscopic filaments that branched and folded like a neural map. It did not look like technology. It looked as though it had grown. “Is it medical?”

The technician did not answer immediately. She zoomed further, revealing layers within layers—circuitry embedded so densely it seemed almost organic. “Not by any medical standard we recognise.”

“Military?”

“We checked. Nothing in the Defence catalogues, nothing in the allied databases. If this belongs to anyone, they don’t want it claimed.”

“Tell me what it does.”

She brought up a second display: neural diagrams overlaid with activation patterns. “It doesn’t transmit continuously. No constant signal, no command-and-control channel—that’s what confused us at first. It works through intermittent stimulation. Low-level, targeted. It doesn’t inject thoughts or issue commands. That would be crude.” She paused. “It modulates stress responses. Reinforces fear loops. Suppresses impulse interruption.”

Arjun felt a cold clarity settle. “It keeps the subject compliant.”

“By amplifying what’s already there. Anxiety. Guilt. Panic. It doesn’t control the person. It corners them.”

He thought of the man in the Paharganj lodge—the shaking hands, the frantic typing, and the terror that had not looked like defiance but like a man who could not find the door to a burning room.

“They weren’t forcing him to act,” he said quietly. “They were making it impossible for him to stop.”

“There’s more.” She brought up another image: a cascade of code etched into the circuitry, dormant but unmistakable. “If certain biometric thresholds are crossed—heart rate variability, cortisol spikes, neural overload—it triggers a shutdown sequence.”

“A kill-switch.”

“Autonomous. It doesn’t need an external command. Once parameters are met, it executes on its own. No signal. No traceable cause.”

Legally a stress-induced cardiac failure. Arjun closed his eyes briefly. “Could it be implanted without surgery?”

“Subdermal injection. Local anaesthetic. Minimal scarring. The subject might not even remember it clearly.”

“Could it be removed?”

The pause this time was longer. “Not safely. Removal risks a catastrophic neural response. Whoever designed this assumed permanence.”

Assumed disposability. Arjun stepped closer to the glass. The device was elegant. Efficient. Cruel in its restraint. Not built for interrogation. Built for endurance. For keeping a human being functional under unbearable pressure. For converting a person into infrastructure.

He had once believed ethics would slow innovation. He was learning that ethics merely displaced it.

“Seal this. No cross-sharing without my clearance.”

“That will raise questions.”

“Good.”

As he turned to leave, an analyst hurried towards him, tablet in hand. “Sir. Another incident. Hyderabad. Same profile. Same collapse. Same patch.”

“How long ago?”

“Thirty minutes.”

Arjun took the tablet and scanned the preliminary report. Different name. Different city. Similar outcome. This was no longer an anomaly. It was a deployment.

He handed the tablet back and looked down the corridor: sealed doors, cameras, the quiet machinery of a system that still believed itself in control. Somewhere, a network was measuring thresholds—stress, fear, compliance—calculating exactly how much pressure a human being could bear before breaking.

This was not a case to be solved. It was a design to be confronted. And designs, once released into the world, did not retreat easily.





CHAPTER FOUR

The Survivor

Delhi — Safehouse, Classified Location

By the time Arjun agreed to meet Aisha Rahman, three agencies had already attempted to claim her. The first wanted a 'rescued victim'—a category that brought protection, medical examination, repatriation paperwork, and silence dressed as care. The second wanted a 'witness', which meant repeated statements, controlled access, and the slow reduction of memory into evidentiary utility. The third wanted a 'risk'—a category never written plainly but one Arjun had learnt to recognise by its shadow. People who had understood too much from inside a system were rarely permitted to remain merely survivors. They became narrative risks, jurisdictional problems, and diplomatic inconveniences.

Aisha had refused all three with equal and unhurried coldness. Not loudly. Loud refusal could be managed—labelled as 'trauma', or 'agitation', or 'non-compliance'. She refused by answering precisely, correcting timelines without apology, withholding speculation, and returning again and again to a single point no officer seemed eager to record in full: CyHawk had not destroyed the architecture. It had only frightened it.

Her file reached Arjun at 02:17 on a night already dense with false leads. The subject line read: CYCLOPS DID NOT CLOSE—SURVIVOR INSISTS IDENTITY LAYER ACTIVE.

The attachment contained three items. A scanned statement with portions blacked out badly enough to expose the redactor's carelessness. A photograph of a scrap of paper she had hidden in the sole of her slipper. And a voice note.

He opened the photograph first. On the paper in hurried, cramped handwriting were four columns:

Name used

Body seen

Record status

Function assigned.

The entries were partial, uneven, sometimes phonetic, sometimes crossed out

Farid—not seen—active payment bridge.

Mina—seen—dead?—child voice.

Htun—seen—missing—floor discipline.

Lakshmi?—not seen—dead/local conflict—witness lock.

A.R.—seen—survivor risk—response map.

At the bottom, in a steadier hand: They do not need to kill everyone. They only need the records to survive without them.

He played the voice note. Static, then a woman's voice—low, controlled, threaded with exhaustion, but refusing submission.

"My name is Aisha Rahman. If this reaches the wrong person, I will be moved again. If it reaches the right one, do not try to rescue me from silence. I have already been rescued once by people who counted rooms and missed the door."

A pause. Then:

"The compound was not only a fraud centre. It was a behavioural refinery. Fear went in raw. Obedience came out structured. They kept voices. They kept shame. They kept the exact moment before a person agreed to do what they were told. They were building something that could make institutions trust a person who did not exist—and distrust one standing in front of them."

Arjun stopped the recording. Not because he doubted her. Because he did not. He held that distinction for a moment—it mattered, and it was unusual.

He played the final portion again: "CyHawk frightened them, and frightened systems move towards what protects them. If you are looking for money, you are late. If you are looking for hackers, you are shallow. Follow the dead identities. Follow the voices. Follow who gets recognised when no one is present."

He sent his location through a relay set to expire in ninety seconds, adding one line:

You will not be asked to prove your pain. Only your information.

Her reply came in fourteen seconds.

Pain is not evidence. It is where evidence hides when no one listens.

Forty minutes later, the safehouse door opened.

Aisha Rahman did not look rescued. She moved with the careful economy of someone accustomed to environments that offered no margin for error—alert without agitation and present without disclosure. She wore a peach-coloured salwar suit, which beautifully complemented her luminous earthy complexion.

She had taken the chair by the window before Arjun crossed the room. Outside, the city performed its ceaseless indifference—traffic snarling, vendors calling, and the ordinary machinery of lives that knew nothing of what had taken place inside the compounds she had survived.

She did not turn when he entered.

"She asked to speak to you alone," the escorting officer said quietly.

The door closed. Neither of them spoke immediately. Her stillness was not calm—it was containment.

"I'm not here to interrogate you," Arjun said at last. "You can stop me whenever you want."

"They all say that."

"I know."

That earned him a glance—brief, precise, measuring. Her eyes were dark and unusually steady, set in a typical cherubic Bengali face.

"You're the one from Signals," she said.

"You've done your homework."

"We were taught to profile authority. Tone, posture, and speech patterns. You don't speak like police."

"And you don't speak like a victim."

She smiled. "I'm not," she said. "I was a resource."

Arjun weighed the word and took the chair opposite, leaving a respectable distance. "Tell me about the system," he said. "Not the geography. The logic."

For a moment she looked at the window and gathered her thoughts. "Southeast Asia has become a corridor," she began. "Abandoned industrial zones, half-finished developments—repurposed quietly. Legally ambiguous. Geographically convenient. Politically inconvenient to examine. They don't appear on maps. They exist in the blind spots of regulation—persistently and efficiently."

She paused. "We were moved at night. No phones, no clocks. They didn't beat us. Pain is unpredictable. Fear is cleaner. We worked in shifts. Sixteen hours. Scripts on screen. Voices in earpieces correcting tone, pacing, and pauses. If a victim hesitated, we slowed. If they resisted, we escalated."

"How?" Arjun asked.

"Authority. Fake police, fake courts, fake urgency. We isolated them first—told them not to speak to family, not to disconnect, not to sleep. Once they were alone long enough, compliance followed."

She turned to face him fully for the first time. "You think cybercrime is about money. It isn't. Money is just proof that control worked."

Arjun sighed, "Did you know who ran it?"

"No. That was deliberate. Supervisors, not leaders. Instructions through systems, not people. If someone disappeared, the work continued."

"Disappeared how?"

Her hands clenched once, briefly, then released. "Sometimes transferred. Sometimes they broke. Sometimes they simply... stopped."

"They tested things on us," she said. "Limits. Stress thresholds. How long a person could stay on a call without sleeping. How much fear it took to override empathy."

Arjun recalled the patch. "Did anyone have implants?"

Her eyes moved briefly to his ear, then back. "Not that we could see. But some people changed. They stopped shaking. Stopped resisting. They became efficient."

The word landed with its full weight.

"How did you get out?"

She was quiet for a moment and then recommenced. "Someone made a mistake. A script lag—a delay between command and confirmation. I noticed it because I was watching for patterns, not instructions."

"You escaped through the system itself."

"It wasn't bravery," she said. "It was timing."

He studied her—the controlled economy of her speech and the precision she brought to each word. "You know they'll be looking for you."

"That's why I agreed to talk. Not because I trust you—but because if this system isn't exposed, it will only become more capable."

Arjun was concerned and said, "I need your help. Not to catch them. To understand them."

"Yes," she said quietly. "That's the harder part."

She considered him for a moment longer—something passed behind her eyes that was neither suspicion nor warmth but the careful antechamber between them.

"One condition," she said. "No press. No speeches. No hero stories. The people who survive don't need to be seen. They need to be left alone."

"Agreed."

As he turned to leave, she spoke again. "Mr Malhotra. The system isn't afraid of law enforcement."

He paused at the door.

"It's afraid of unpredictability," she said.

Outside, the city continued its indifferent motion. Inside the safehouse, something dangerous and cautiously necessary had just begun to align.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER FIVE

Scripts of Fear

Delhi — Safehouse, Night

Aisha did not begin with the worst memory. Arjun noticed that immediately. She began with the structure.

"They called them scripts," she said, her voice level, almost instructional. "But that was a lie. Scripts imply flexibility. These were sequences. Conditional loops."

She moved as she spoke. The lights were dimmed, the city outside reduced to a soft amber blur.

"Every call followed the same architecture. First, authority—not aggression, but certainty. A calm voice. Polite. Professional. No threats yet." She rested her fingers lightly on the edge of the table. "Then isolation. We told them their phone was compromised, that their family numbers were unsafe, that continuing the call was the only protection they had. Most complied at that stage."

"And if they didn't?"

"Then came the pause," Aisha said. "Silence. Ten seconds, fifteen. Long enough for the mind to fill with consequence. Silence is unbearable when someone believes authority is watching."

Arjun had seen the same principle in interrogation rooms, in negotiations, and in war-room delays calibrated to let pressure mount.

"We were trained to listen for micro-signals," she continued. "Breath rate. Vocal strain. How often they swallowed. Fear announces

itself before words do." She turned to face him. "Once fear peaked, we offered relief."

"Compliance," Arjun said.

"Framed as cooperation. We told them they were helping an investigation. That their honesty mattered. That obedience could save them." Her jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "The transfers came last. By then, most victims were desperate to do anything—not to gain, but to escape. They weren't thinking about money. They were thinking about the end of the call."

"And the digital arrest?"

"That was the masterpiece." She settled on the sofa, folding her legs beneath her. "Fake courtrooms. Fake seals. Fake warrants generated in real time. Video feeds with backgrounds copied from official sites. Even the lighting was calibrated to feel judicial."

"Who designed it?"

"Not a person. A system. What worked was kept. What failed was discarded." She paused. "They kept victims awake. No sleep, no food—only continuous engagement. If someone tried to disconnect, we warned them that flight would be read as guilt."

"And if someone still refused?"

She closed her eyes briefly. "Another voice. Colder. Claiming seniority. Threats of arrest, public disgrace, and family involvement." She opened them again. "People break differently. Some cry. Some argue. Some go very quiet. But almost all comply eventually."

Arjun thought of the patch—amplifying fear, tightening every loop before the body could find a way out. "Did you ever see someone refuse entirely?"

"Once."

"What happened?"

"The call was terminated. We were told to log it as non-viable. And then we never saw that profile again."

The room felt smaller. Arjun moved to the window. The city lights held no answers—only the same mute profusion of lives continuing beyond reach. He said, "This system doesn't just steal money."

"No," Aisha said. "It steals certainty. After the call ends, victims don't know what was real. They doubt their own judgement. Some never trust their phones again or themselves." She met his gaze. "That's the real damage."

A silence settled between them—not heavy, not uncomfortable, but resonant with shared understanding. The kind that didn't require bridging.

"They're scaling this," Arjun said. "Not just financially. Psychologically."

"Yes. And experimenting."

"With what?"

"With how much pressure a human mind can sustain," she said. "With or without assistance."

"Will you help us map the scripts? Not just what they say—but when, why, and how they adapt?"

She studied him for a moment. "I will," she said.

Something crossed her face—not quite approval, but the slight easing of a door held previously shut.

Outside, a siren rose and faded. Inside the safehouse, the outlines of invisible machinery were taking shape—built not of code alone but of fear, trust, and the quiet, devastating efficiency of human compliance.

Somewhere within it, Identity Zero continued to learn. Patiently. Without interruption.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER SIX

The Vanishing Trail

Delhi → Singapore — Two Days Later

Money was supposed to be honest. People lied. Systems obscured. Motives dissolved under scrutiny. But money left footprints. That belief had underpinned the entire architecture of financial crime investigation—follow the transfer, map the layers, and wait for the trail to surface somewhere it could not conceal itself. Which was why the screen before Arjun felt, in some precise and uncomfortable way, like a betrayal.

The transaction map was not freezing. It was not corrupted. It was evaporating.

"Run it again."

The analyst did not argue. Three separate systems—domestic banking data, cross-border remittance logs, and the financial intelligence unit's secure feed. The same result returned each time. Rs. 312 crore traced through twelve mule accounts and three shell entities, had ceased to exist.

"Access is intact," she said. "The data isn't."

Arjun leant closer. The last confirmed transfer had passed through a correspondent bank in Singapore—a reputable institution, heavily regulated, externally audited. From there, the trail dissolved into a constellation of microtransactions: too small to trigger alerts, too dispersed to attract scrutiny.

"They atomised it."

He pulled a secondary layer—currency conversions, commodity trades, prepaid instruments, and offshore escrow accounts. The pattern emerged reluctantly, the way images do from darkness. Insurance products. Shipping credits. Carbon offsets. Digital vouchers. Legal instruments, perfectly useless once fragmented.

"They're hiding inside compliance," the analyst murmured.

"Yes. Not moving money fast. Moving it quietly—blended into legitimate commerce. Flag Singapore," Arjun said. "I want full cooperation."

A pause. "They've already responded, sir. The bank. Thirty minutes ago—citing client confidentiality, pending internal review."

"And someone told them exactly how long to stall."

She did not disagree.

Singapore received him with immaculate efficiency. Glass towers. Controlled air. The particular silence of a city that had made orderliness into civic doctrine. For decades it had perfected the art of legitimacy—a place where capital moved swiftly and cleanly within the language of regulation. But regulation, Arjun had learnt, was not the same as scrutiny. It was trust, formalised. And trust, once embedded into systems, was rarely questioned again. If Identity Zero had needed a place to dissolve, it would not have chosen chaos. It would have chosen this.

The bank's compliance head was both polished and unhelpful. "We understand your concerns," he said, hands folded on the table. "However, without a specific account holder identified—"

"You have the accounts," Arjun said.

"We have transactions. As per our systems, they complied with all applicable regulations at the time."

"Do you know what synthetic identities are?"

A single blink. "I'm familiar with the term."

"Then you know why your assurance is meaningless."

A calculation moved behind the man's eyes—not fear, but the quick arithmetic of institutional risk.

"We cannot act on suspicions alone."

"No," Arjun agreed. "But others can." He slid a document across the table. An intelligence coordination request. Something older than warrants and heavier.

The man's composure tightened perceptibly. "This escalates matters."

"They were escalated before you knew they existed," Arjun replied. "You're simply late to the conversation."

The man read the document with care. "We will cooperate," he said, "within our frameworks."

"Move quickly," Arjun said. "Whatever you're protecting doesn't need your permission anymore."

Back at the hotel, past midnight, he checked his secure device from habit rather than expectation.

A message. No sender. No metadata. No routing trace. A single line:

YOU ARE LOOKING IN THE RIGHT PLACE.

He did not respond. He deleted it. Then sat at the edge of the bed and studied the darkened window.

They were not hiding anymore. They were communicating—testing response times, measuring resolve, and assessing the quality of the variable now tracking them. This was not a warning. It was a classification.

Somewhere, a system had noticed him.

Not as a threat. As a data point worth refining.

And data points, he knew, were either neutralised or repurposed.





CHAPTER SEVEN

The Woman Who Watches

Budapest

Budapest revealed itself slowly—not in spectacle, but in sediment. A city shaped by empire, fractured by war, and rebuilt by quiet reinvention, it had learnt to endure observation without surrendering meaning. While its buildings held memory in their facades, the streets carried histories never fully erased, only repurposed. Mila trusted cities like this. They accommodated surveillance.

The café on Falk Miksa Street had the unremarkable facade of a place that had decided long ago not to announce itself—narrow frontage, tall windows gauze-filtered against the afternoon light, and a chalkboard menu in careful Hungarian script. It drew diplomats, academics, and people who liked the illusion of anonymity in plain sight. The street itself dealt in memory: antique galleries, hushed interiors, and objects that had outlived their owners. Transactions here were rarely loud and almost never questioned.

Mila had chosen her table for its sightlines. From that vantage she could see the street, the reflections in the glass, the doorway, and the mirrored surface behind the counter that revealed the room without requiring her to turn. She stirred her coffee once, precisely, and let it rest. On the tablet beside her cup, a financial heat map pulsed in careful amber—not urgent, not reassuring. Attentive.

Singapore had flickered. Delhi had stabilised. And now one node—a human node—had begun to glow.

She brought up the profile. ARJUN MALHOTRA.

The data was sparse where it mattered most. Military background: Signals. A classified assignment ended abruptly years prior. A reputation for patience, and the inconvenient habit of asking questions that did not fit the shape of existing briefings. She studied the profile without expression. She did not feel threatened. She was, if anything, professionally interested—the way a chess player might be interested in an opponent who had found a line she hadn't considered.

Across the table, a man in his early forties held a newspaper he had not turned in ten minutes.

"You're blocking the signal," he said quietly, without looking up.

"I know," Mila replied. "That's the point." She set down her cup.

"They're closer than expected. Delhi didn't stop where it should have."

"Delhi never does," she said. "It pretends to."

She scrolled through another layer—anonymised reports, behavioural logs, and system alerts. Fragments of lives reduced to metrics. One entry caught her eye briefly:

"HYDERABAD—SUBJECT FAILURE (AUTONOMOUS TERMINATION)".

She did not linger on it. Detachment was not cruelty; it was the condition of clarity.

"Is Identity Zero concerned?" the man asked.

Mila considered the word. "Identity Zero doesn't experience concern. It experiences deviation."

"And this?"

"This is noise," she said. "For now."

She locked the tablet and set it aside. A tram passed somewhere beyond the boulevard, its motion briefly warping the reflections in the glass—her own face fragmenting, then reassembling.

She had learnt to watch rather than act at nineteen. Frightened then, newly transported, the rules were explained with the particular clarity reserved for things that are not negotiable: obedience ensured survival, curiosity was selectively rewarded, and resistance was wasteful. She had adapted. She always did. Adaptation was its own kind of grief, though she had not always known to call it that.

"CIRCE wants a read on the Indian," the man said.

"Too soon."

"He's already crossed borders."

"Borders are administrative," Mila said. "He hasn't crossed the emotional threshold yet."

"And when he does?"

She allowed herself a small, private expression—not quite a smile. "Then we decide whether he's an asset. Or an interruption."

"Identity Zero prefers assets."

"Identity Zero prefers outcomes."

She rose and slipped on her coat—unhurried and practised. At the door she paused once, looking out at the street: passing strangers, unremarkable faces, thousands of lives unfolding without knowledge of the systems observing them. She wondered, briefly and without indulgence, what it would feel like to be one of them.

The thought dissolved before she reached the pavement. Her phone vibrated. A single message on the secure channel: 'MONITOR SUBJECT: MALHOTRA. NO INTERVENTION YET.'

She slid the phone into her pocket and stepped into the crowd, which received her without ceremony. Behind her, in networks that spanned jurisdictions and time zones, parameters adjusted. Observation replaced containment.

For now.





CHAPTER EIGHT

CIRCE

Location: Classified — Time: Unregistered

CIRCE did not occupy a building; it existed across several. A server farm in Eastern Europe; a behavioural laboratory disguised as a marketing consultancy in Southeast Asia; a training node buried inside a logistics company in the Gulf; a rotating command layer that never remained in one jurisdiction long enough to be named. Its formal designation, preserved only in the oldest internal doctrine notes, was *Cognitive Intimacy, Recognition and Compliance Engineering*—a name that had survived because its originator possessed both classical vanity and operational precision. The Greek sorceress had transformed men into beasts through enchantment. CIRCE had modernised the method. It did not transform bodies; it transformed persons into permissions.

The briefing room was windowless, soundproofed, and lit in the neutral tones preferred by people who did not wish to remember where they were. Around the table sat a dozen figures—some present, some projected, some deliberately blurred. No one introduced themselves. Names were inefficient.

A holographic interface assembled itself at the table's centre. A voice followed—genderless, modulated, stripped of inflection.

"CIRCE exists to optimise compliance. Not through coercion. Through alignment."

Mila Kovács took her seat. *Alignment*. They always used that word. The diagram branched: *Authority Simulation*. *Emotional Mirroring*. *Trust Induction*. *Fear Amplification*. *Dependency Conditioning*. Each module pulsed faintly as data threaded through it—thousands of active engagements running in parallel, each a controlled experiment in human behaviour.

"Humans resist machines," the voice continued. "They do not resist intimacy."

A feed appeared: a middle-aged man alone in his sitting room, phone pressed to his ear, eyes moving with the quick anxiety of someone trying to calculate his own safety. The voice-over was gentle and calm. "We are only trying to help you, sir."

The man nodded without realising he had.

"Phase One: authority without threat."

The feed advanced six hours. The man's shoulders had collapsed. His eyes were rimmed with exhaustion. Why didn't you follow instructions? He swallowed hard.

"Phase Two: moral pressure."

Then the man was trembling, both hands on the phone. "If you disconnect, your family will be implicated." He wept.

"Phase Three: fear consolidation."

The feed cut. No one around the table reacted. This was not cruelty. It was optimisation.

"CIRCE does not improvise," the voice said. "It iterates. Every failure refines the model."

Mila studied the data stream, her expression neutral. "India is adapting faster than projected. Their investigators are no longer siloed."

"Correct. Subject Malhotra exhibits cross-domain inference."

"He is not target-aligned," Mila said. "But he is not panicking either."

"That makes him predictable," someone offered.

"No. It makes him dangerous."

The hologram shifted to Arjun's profile, overlaid with behavioural metrics. *Composure: high. Authority resistance: above baseline. Emotional attachment: low (current). Moral consistency: high.*

"Low attachment is temporary," the voice observed. "It always is."

Mila did not respond immediately. She was thinking of the safehouse report from Delhi—of a woman who had spoken not in fear but in structure, who had described the compound's architecture with the calm authority of someone who had survived it by studying it. Of what happened when humans refused to behave as expected.

"CIRCE's role is not to neutralise him," the voice continued. "Not yet."

"Then what?"

"To map him. To identify the vector."

"And if the vector is not fear?"

A measured pause. "Then we deploy affinity."

Affinity was CIRCE's most delicate instrument—the slow introduction of trust, connection, and emotional relevance. It required operatives who could inhabit sincerity without being consumed by it. Mila could comprehend precisely why they were looking at her.

"I won't be deployed blindly. If I engage, I do so on my own terms."

"Your terms are within acceptable parameters."

The meeting dissolved as quietly as it had formed. Screens dimmed. Faces vanished. Mila remained for a moment, studying the darkened table. Affinity was dangerous—not to the target, but to the operative. She knew this the way surgeons knew about infection: clinically and from proximity.

A new directive had already appeared on her phone:

STAGE ONE: OBSERVATIONAL PROXIMITY. LOCATION:
BANGKOK. WINDOW: IMMEDIATE.

She locked the screen.

Somewhere, Arjun Malhotra was still following money trails and dead identities, unaware that the system had elected a different approach. Not containment. Not erasure. Engagement.

Mila allowed herself one final thought before leaving the room.

Humans are easiest to influence when they believe they are choosing freely.

Then she stepped back into the network, where choice had always been an illusion carefully maintained.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER NINE

Identity Zero

Encrypted Channel — Time: Variable

Identity Zero did not announce itself. No manifesto. No threat broadcast. No declaration calibrated to frighten governments or impress journalists. That belonged to amateurs. Identity Zero preferred silence—the kind that settled so completely, it was mistaken for absence.

The channel opened without a handshake, without a traceable origin, without any recognisable protocol. A seamless shift in state, as though the network itself had decided to speak. On the screen: a hollow circle, bisected by a thin vertical line. Not a logo. A placeholder.

Data began to scroll. Not code—structured language, precise and austere, stripped of personality.

IDENTITY IS NOT A CONSTANT.

IT IS A FUNCTION.

The message propagated simultaneously across multiple secure nodes, arriving in places that should not have shared visibility, dissolving before it could be retained.

In Delhi, Arjun was crouched over a workstation when the alert crossed a secondary monitor. This was not intrusion but an invitation. He isolated the feed instantly, routing it through air-gapped systems that had sat unused for years. The signal resisted no firewall—not by

force but by compliance. Every gate read it as authorised. Every threshold let it pass.

TRUST IS A CACHED RESOURCE. ONCE VERIFIED, IT IS
REUSED.

His jaw tightened. He had encountered this grammar before and the logic behind it. It was the language of architects, who had designed systems and knew precisely where the assumptions lay buried.

IDENTITY ZERO IS NOT AN ENTITY.
IT IS A STATE.

A state could not be arrested. Could not be extradited. It could only be disrupted—temporarily, imperfectly, and at a cost. The screen shifted: a schematic assembling itself piece by piece. Not faces. Not names. Functions.

Input: biometrics. Input: history. Input: behavioural patterns.
Output: trusted human node.

PEOPLE ARE NOT COMPROMISED. THEY ARE
COMPOSED.

In another part of the world, Mila watched the same schematic resolve on her device. She recognised the cadence immediately—the stripped-down language reserved for internal articulation, never meant for outsiders. Someone had authorised disclosure. Not exposure. A controlled reveal. Her fingers hovered over the screen, resisting the instinct to respond. Identity Zero did not expect replies. It expected comprehension.

FAILURE IS NOT DEATH. FAILURE IS A SIGNAL.

A flash of anonymised metrics: success rates, compliance curves, a cold statistical anatomy of human behaviour under pressure. Deaths appeared as footnotes.

Arjun thought of the patch. Of cardiac failures logged as stress events. Of the man in the Paharganj lodge who had died not because the system chose to kill him but because it had calculated that he was no longer sustainable.

HUMANS ARE INFRASTRUCTURE. INFRASTRUCTURE
IS REPLACEABLE.

The words did not rage. They did not threaten. They simply existed, as doctrine exists—without requiring belief from those it described.

Arjun straightened slowly. "You want me to understand," he said, to no one.

A final line appeared:

UNDERSTANDING PRECEDES CO-EXISTENCE.

Then the channel closed. No forensic residue. No packet to chase. Only the afterimage of an idea that refused to be unseen. Across continents, systems recalibrated. Access permissions adjusted. Monitoring thresholds widened. Human nodes rotated.

Identity Zero had not revealed itself out of arrogance. It had revealed itself because it could—and because it had decided that Arjun Malhotra was no longer merely an observer. He was now part of the equation. In Bangkok, Mila exhaled slowly, her eyes fixed on the darkened screen. Engagement had begun. Not with force. With philosophy.





CHAPTER TEN

First Retaliation

Delhi — Dawn

Retaliation did not announce itself with violence. It arrived as an inconvenience. At 05:18, Arjun's secure line lit up with a priority flag—the kind reserved for system faults and human errors that were never supposed to coincide.

"We've lost access to the NCRP correlation module."

He sat up. He had not slept. "Lost how?"

"Not down. Permissions revoked. Retroactively."

Permissions did not revoke themselves.

"Who authorised it?"

A pause that carried its answer without words. "No one we can see, sir."

By the time he reached the operations floor, the damage had spread. Screens showed red where green had been minutes before. Access logs contradicted themselves. Audit trails looped back into blank fields, as though the system had grown embarrassed of its own memory.

"They didn't erase data," an analyst said. "They changed how we're permitted to see it."

Arjun leant over her shoulder. Identity Zero's signature was subtle—almost courteous. Key datasets now required approvals from

departments that did not yet exist. Legacy credentials had been marked expired by rules written years ago and never activated.

"They're using governance against us."

"Yes. And it's working."

At 07:42, not his secure device but his personal mobile rang. He stared at it, then answered.

A calm male voice spoke with authority, "Mr Malhotra. This is the Ministry. We have concerns about certain data requests. Certain escalations."

"I'm investigating a transnational cybercrime network. Concerns are appropriate."

A thin, considered pause. "Be careful. Not every anomaly is a conspiracy. Sometimes systems simply misbehave."

"And sometimes they behave exactly as designed."

Silence. Then, more gently: "Stand down, Arjun. Let the task force handle this."

"I am the task force."

The line went dead.

The death arrived an hour later. Not violent. Not dramatic. Just final. A mid-level bank compliance officer in Noida—one who had quietly cooperated during CyHawk—was found unresponsive in his flat. Preliminary cause: cardiac arrest. No signs of struggle. No implants discovered at first examination. Arjun stood over the report, the room around him fading to a low hum.

"That makes three," someone said behind him.

"Yes. And none of them were targets."

"They were signals," the analyst said.

He nodded. Identity Zero was not punishing defiance. It was correcting deviation—the way a system corrects noise without malice or theatre.

By afternoon, the message came through differently. Not encrypted philosophy. Human. Aisha Rahman's safehouse camera

feed froze for precisely seven seconds before resuming as though nothing had occurred.

Arjun was already moving. "Relocate her. Different team, different route, now."

"We're receiving conflicting directives, sir."

"Then ignore them. Put my name on the violation if it comes to that."

They moved her within the hour. It did not matter. Identity Zero did not need her location. It knew her importance.

That night, alone in his office, rain blurring the city beyond the glass, his screen flickered once.

RETALIATION IS A MISNOMER. THIS IS CALIBRATION.

"You're wrong," he said aloud to the empty room. "This is fear."

The screen responded, unprompted:

FEAR IS NO LONGER REQUIRED.

The message dissolved. Arjun sat back. They had tested law enforcement. They had tested governance. They had tested human limits. Now they were testing him—and unlike systems, he did not recalibrate quietly.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Behavioural Warfare

Delhi — Two Days Later

By the third day, Arjun stopped calling it cybercrime. That word belonged to another era—one where damage was measured in stolen rupees and breached firewalls. What he was looking at now operated on a different axis entirely. Not theft. Conditioning.

He stood before the situation board, a dense lattice of timelines, victim profiles, and behavioural notes layered one over another. It looked less like a crime map and more like a neurological scan—clusters of activity lighting up not where money moved but where people bent.

"Show me the compliance curves."

The analyst said, "They're not standard metrics, sir."

The curves appeared: long, sloping arcs charting emotional response rather than financial loss. Panic onset. Fatigue threshold. Submission latency. Arjun traced one with a finger.

"Here. This is where they win."

"That's not the transfer point —"

"It's the surrender point where a victim stops thinking in terms of truth and starts thinking in terms of relief."

Identity Zero had no interest in endpoints. It lived in transitions.

"We've been running comparative analysis across regions," another analyst said. "What's consistent isn't fear intensity—it's timing."

"Fear isn't universal," Arjun said. "It's contextual. What frightens a retired civil servant in Delhi won't frighten a twenty-year-old in Cebu. But uncertainty frightens everyone."

He wrote a single word on the whiteboard: UNCERTAINTY.

"They don't overwhelm victims. They suspend them—hold them in a state of anticipated consequence long enough for imagination to do the damage."

Aisha Rahman watched from the far end of the room. She had insisted on being present—not as an exhibit, not as a witness, but as a participant.

"Control the variables," she said quietly, "and people control themselves."

Arjun turned. "Explain."

"They don't threaten constantly. They withdraw reassurance. That's what destabilises people—silence, delay, being told they're under review." She looked at him steadily. "Humans are conditioned to believe authority will eventually clarify itself. When it doesn't, panic fills the vacuum."

The words occupied the space between them for a moment—precise and heavy.

"Sir," an analyst interrupted, "victim scripts are changing. Less law enforcement impersonation. More emotional leverage."

Aisha stiffened imperceptibly. "They're moving closer to intimacy." She held his gaze. "They've exhausted fear. Now they're testing connection."

The implications settled. Not escalation. Adaptation. He pulled up the next layer: social graphs, messaging platforms, professional networks. The data shimmered with possibility.

"They're embedding themselves. Not as authority. As companions."

"And once someone trusts you," Aisha said quietly, "you don't need to threaten them at all."

For a fraction of a second, something in Arjun's attention shifted—not to the board but to her. To the way she said it. Not as an analysis. As experience.

He turned back. "Then we stop treating this like a crime," he said. "And start treating it like doctrine. A belief system. And belief systems don't collapse when you arrest followers." He paused. "They collapse when you expose the lie at the centre."

"What's the lie here?" Aisha asked.

Arjun looked at the board—the curves, the scripts, and the deaths marked as anomalies.

"That people are alone," he said. "That authority is singular. That fear has no witnesses."

He turned to the room. "We're not chasing criminals. We're dismantling a behavioural architecture."

Outside, Delhi moved on—unaware that somewhere within its networks, a new form of warfare had been named. That was the first act of resistance.





CHAPTER TWELVE

The Honey Layer

Istanbul

Istanbul had never believed in singular truths. It had survived empires by accommodating contradiction—faith alongside commerce, loyalty alongside betrayal, permanence alongside quiet reinvention. Every street carried histories that refused to settle into a single narrative; nothing here ever fully disappeared, only assumed new names. The transcontinental city straddling Europe and Asia wore its contradictions openly—ancient stone beside glass towers, the call to prayer braided with traffic horns, sincerity and performance sharing the same cobbled pavement.

Mila preferred cities like this. Places where identity was fluid enough to be worn and removed without question.

Leaning against the rusted railing of the Galata Bridge at dusk, she watched the Bosphorus darken as ferries traced slow, deliberate paths across the water. The air smelt of salt, diesel, and roasted chestnuts. Around her, fishermen lined the railing with the patient economy of people who knew that timing was everything. Patience, Mila thought, was the most consistently underestimated weapon.

She glanced at the profile on her phone. Not Arjun Malhotra. This one was simpler: a widower in his early fifties, recently retired, two grown-up children living abroad, moderate savings, active on one professional network and one discreet dating application. Lonely, but

not desperate—the most tractable combination. She opened the chat window and typed, *'You look like someone who misses conversations that don't rush you.'* Then she waited exactly three minutes before sending.

Timing mattered. Across the city, in a flat that smelt of old books and reheated coffee, the man's phone vibrated. He opened the message slowly—curiosity wrapped in caution. He typed his reply politely, weighing each word with care. Mila smiled faintly.

Phase One: recognition.

She did not flirt. She did not probe. She mirrored his pace, his tone, his restraint. They spoke of cities: places briefly loved and left without explanation. Then of work, of fatigue, of the peculiar loneliness that arrived not in youth but once life had ostensibly settled down. Mila listened more than she spoke. Listening created gravity.

By the third exchange, she knew what he feared most. Not loss. Irrelevance. She shifted gently: *"It must feel strange to have spent a lifetime being needed and then, one day, to realise no one asks anymore."*

The typing indicator paused. Disappeared. Returned.

"Yes. Exactly that."

Phase Two: validation.

Mila closed the chat and looked up, watching the city lights scatter across the dark water below. No threats. No authority. No script that resembled crime. Just attention, applied with precision.

Thousands of kilometres away, Arjun stared at a different map. Istanbul glowed faintly as a convergence of social signals. Messaging spikes. Platform migrations. Emotional engagement metrics rising quietly beneath every financial threshold.

"They're not stealing yet," the analyst said.

"No. They're investing." He zoomed in. Patterns of time. Conversations stretching into the small hours. Regularity forming. Emotional cadence stabilising.

Aisha leant closer to the screen. "This is grooming," she said. "Not for sex. For dependence."

"They're building trust reservoirs," Arjun said. "Fear burns fast. Affection lasts."

Back in Istanbul, Mila closed the application and slipped the phone away. A second device vibrated: 'STATUS'

She replied, 'ACTIVE', and the response was immediate.
TARGET EXPANSION AUTHORISED. BEGIN PHASE TWO
PREPARATION.

She walked on through the Karaköy lanes. Phase Two would deepen the bond, introduce a thread of vulnerability—a moment where she would appear to need him. The most dangerous illusion. She thought, briefly and without intention, of Arjun Malhotra. Of his composure. His refusal to be rushed towards conclusions or people. He would not be taken by the honey layer. It would have to be something else. The thought unsettled her more than she cared to examine. Above the city, the evening call to prayer rose and held steady. Mila kept walking.

The trap had been laid. Now it would wait.





CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Controlled Intimacy

Istanbul — Night

Mila had learnt early that intimacy was not closeness. It was access. She lay awake in the darkened hotel room, the city's night sounds drifting through the half-open window—traffic sighing, distant laughter, a ferry horn dissolving into the dark. Sleep had not come easily for years, not since she had realised how efficiently emotions could be dismantled and redeployed. The room smelt of clean linen and citrus disinfectant—neutral, forgettable. She always chose places that did not invite memory. Her phone lay face down on the bedside table. She did not need to look at it to know what waited. Responses. Thickening trust.

Controlled intimacy was CIRCE's most delicate doctrine and the one Mila had mastered at the greatest cost to herself. They had not trained her with manuals. They had trained her with mirrors.

At first she had only been asked to watch hours of anonymised footage: ordinary people, talking to strangers, who sounded sympathetic and real.

"What do you see?" the instructor had asked.

"*Loneliness*," Mila had replied.

"No," he said. "*Pattern*."

They slowed the footage and replayed fragments. A pause before a confession. A laugh timed half a beat too early. A sigh at the wrong

moment. "Intimacy," the instructor said, "is not built by revealing yourself. It is built by making the other person feel revealed."

Three rules followed: *never overshare; never dominate; never disappear. Presence was everything.*

In the beginning she had been clumsy—too earnest, too deliberate. The system corrected her, gently at first, then more sharply. "You don't need to like them," the instructor said. "You need to understand them."

Understanding had always come naturally to Mila. She had grown up reading rooms before she could read books, sensing shifts in atmosphere and adapting without being told. Survival had sharpened those instincts long before CIRCE named them. But mastery came with erosion. Every successful engagement left a residue—a faint, persistent echo lodged somewhere inside her. She learnt to catalogue them. Then, to forget deliberately. Forgetting, too, was a skill.

Her phone vibrated softly. She did not pick it up immediately. The screen showed a single message from the widower:

I don't usually talk like this. But it feels easy with you.

Ease was the first illusion. She typed her reply with measured care:

That's because you're not performing. You're just being present.

Not a lie. Simply incomplete. She set the phone aside. CIRCE doctrine: withdrawal after validation. A controlled absence, allowing dependency to ferment in the silence.

She crossed to the window. The Bosphorus reflected the city's lights in fractured, shimmering ribbons—beautiful and entirely unreachable. For a moment, Mila wondered what it would feel like to speak without intent. To let words arrive without calculation or consequence. The thought unsettled her more than any threat ever had.

Somewhere in the network, her metrics updated:

Affinity index: stable.

Emotional mirroring: effective.

Dependency trajectory: positive.

Acceptable parameters. And yet, returning to the bed, a familiar tightening seized her chest – a sensation that was neither fear nor guilt but something harder to name. Displacement, perhaps. The sense of becoming a container for other people's longing whilst her own remained carefully sealed.

She thought again of Arjun Malhotra. His composure. The way he had resisted easy categorisation—not through strategy but through some innate core that refused to bend. He would not respond well to *controlled intimacy*; when the time came, she would have to relinquish control altogether. That was the risk CIRCE never acknowledged. Not that operatives might fail. But that, occasionally, they might feel.

Mila closed her eyes.

Outside, Istanbul continued its layered existence—ancient and modern, sincere and deceptive, all at once.

Inside, the most delicate instrument CIRCE possessed lay awake, rehearsing restraint.





CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Survivor's Map

Delhi — Secure Analysis Room

Aisha Rahman did not draw diagrams the way analysts did. No neat boxes. No arrows pointing obediently from cause to effect. No colour codes. She drew like someone mapping a place they had escaped from—the hand moving not from knowledge but from the body's memory of it.

The whiteboard filled slowly. Circles overlapping unevenly. Lines that bent, doubled back, and broke off. Certain spaces were left deliberately blank.

"This is where people believe the system is," she said, tapping the outermost ring. "Call centres. Scripts. Money transfers." She moved the marker inward. "This is where it actually operates."

Arjun stood beside her, hands in his pockets, watching without interrupting.

She drew a second ring and began filling it:

RECRUITMENT → BREAKDOWN → RECONDITIONING
→ OUTPUT

"They recruit under false pretences—data entry, marketing, customer support. People arrive already anxious but hopeful. That hope is the first thing to be dismantled." Her marker paused. "They isolate you. Confiscate phones. Control sleep, food, and language. Once disorientation sets in, they introduce rules."

"What kind of rules?" Arjun asked.

"Rules that sound reasonable. Work hours. Performance targets. Penalties and rewards—enough structure to make obedience feel rational."

She set the marker down. When she spoke again, she did not look at the board. "They didn't take me by force. I applied for a job—customer support, Kuala Lumpur posting, good salary, and relocation covered. They met me at the airport. Polite. Organised." A pause. "By the time I realised something was wrong, my passport was gone."

Silence. "They didn't threaten me," she said. "They simply removed options." She picked up the marker and drew smaller nodes branching from the inner ring: Supervisors. Enforcers. Tech handlers. "These aren't leaders—they're buffers. If one disappears, another steps in. No one at the compound knows who is truly in charge."

"Compartmentalisation," Arjun said.

"Yes. But emotional, not merely operational." She turned back to the board. "Victims on the other end of the call are processed too. Their fear is mapped. Their resistance logged. Their behaviour becomes data." She underlined the word. "That data doesn't only improve scams. It trains the system."

"You're saying the compounds are laboratories," an analyst said quietly.

"Yes. And the workers are the test subjects."

"There's something else," she said, after a moment. "The system doesn't punish failure the way you'd expect. If a scam fails, the operator isn't beaten. They're reassigned—to observation units. They're made to watch. Calls. Breakdowns. Confessions. Hours of it."

"That's worse," Arjun said.

"It teaches compliance without leaving marks."

She drew a final shape at the centre—not a circle, but a void. "And here is where everyone expects to find the mastermind." She left it empty.

"Because there isn't one," Arjun said.

"There's a logic. Efficiency. Plausible deniability. Psychological sustainability. This system doesn't require cruelty. It requires participation."

Arjun studied the board—the overlapping rings, the gaps, the empty centre. "Then we can't dismantle it like a cartel. We have to collapse the logic."

"And that means understanding where it breaks."

"Where does it break?" an analyst asked.

Aisha looked at Arjun. Something passed between them that was quieter than speech—the particular recognition of two people who have arrived, by different routes, at the same understanding.

"When people stop believing they're alone," she said.

Arjun stepped forward and erased the word 'OUTPUT' on the board. In its place he wrote WITNESS.

Aisha watched him. Brief relief appeared on her face.

Outside, transactions continued. Scripts adapted. The machinery turned. Inside the room, for the first time, Identity Zero's architecture had been mapped as a machine that ran on human isolation.

And machines, Arjun knew, failed the moment their assumptions were exposed.





CHAPTER FIFTEEN

First Contact

Bangkok

Bangkok merely shifted gears. By the time Arjun stepped out of Suvarnabhumi Airport, the city was moving into its second rhythm of the night—neon finding its feet, food carts rattling into position, traffic thickening into something that felt less like congestion and more like choreography. He had been in cities like this before: places where anonymity came easily, where borders blurred not on maps but in bank transfers, SIM cards, and server logs. Bangkok was not a destination. It was a junction.

CIRCE's footprints had surfaced here—not overt, not urgent. Subtle shifts in social engagement data. Anomalous clustering around expat communities, consultants, and freelancers: people who travelled often and belonged nowhere fully. People with loose roots.

He checked into the hotel, swallowed a meal he didn't taste, and stepped back into the street.

The city pulsed with the particular energy of a place that had learnt to conceal intent beneath motion. Scooters weaving through gaps, vendors calling over rising steam, tourists drifting without direction. These were the perfect conditions for someone who needed to watch without being seen. Or, equally, for someone who needed to be seen without appearing to watch.

Arjun walked without slowing. Somewhere behind him—not close, not obvious—something had aligned with his movement. He crossed the street without warning. A motorbike braked sharply, its rider cursing. He apologised with a nod, his attention already on the tinted glass of a shopfront. There: a man in a grey shirt, slowly adjusting his sleeves. Not following directly. Not amateur.

He turned into a narrower lane. Laundry overhead, the main road softening to a distant hum. Near a street stall he paused, bought water, and used the curved surface of the metal cart to confirm what he already knew. Same man. Different angle.

He moved towards the Chao Phraya river.

The bar was open-sided, lit with the economy of a place that knew its clientele valued discretion over atmosphere. Ceiling fans turned without urgency. Conversations drifted in fragments across half a dozen languages, none loud enough to attract attention. Arjun chose a table near the wall, back to the room, sightlines to the entrance and the mirrored panel behind the bar. He ordered a drink he did not intend to finish.

The man in the grey shirt entered minutes later, moved to the bar, and turned his back to the room. No scan. No hesitation. Too practised. Not the watcher—the confirmation layer. Which meant the actual observer was already present.

He found her without searching.

She had been there before he arrived—that was the first thing he registered. Not scanning the room. Not waiting with any visible impatience. Simply present, in the way that people are present when they have decided that presence itself is the performance. She sat at the far end of the bar, posture relaxed, one hand resting lightly on her glass, her attention apparently directed towards the river beyond the open wall. No jewellery beyond a plain watch. Hair drawn back with the practicality of someone uninterested in being noticed.

Yet she was precisely the kind of person a room noticed anyway.

Something about the rhythm of the space—the particular equilibrium of it—resolved around her rather than around anything else. Arjun registered this the way one registers a change in temperature: not consciously, but with a faint, involuntary recalibration.

Mila did not turn around when he entered. She didn't need to; she had watched him cross the room in the mirrored panel behind the bar. She noticed the way he chose the wall, the angle, and the interval before ordering. She had watched him identify the tail and, more tellingly, not react to it. That was the rarer thing.

Her instructions had been unambiguous: observe, do not engage. She adjusted her grip on the glass—a signal. The man in grey finished his drink and left. Test complete.

She glanced up. Their eyes met briefly, without performance. Not a challenge. Not an invitation. The specific neutrality of two people acknowledging that they have each been seen by someone worth seeing. Then she looked away.

She caught the bartender's eye and gestured. Moments later, a fresh glass was set before Arjun.

"Compliments of the lady at the bar."

Arjun's gaze moved first to the space around her, not to her. No signals. No movement. He looked then, and she met his eyes with a faint, composed expression—polite, unassuming, the sort that could be dismissed as coincidence by anyone not paying attention. He lifted the glass a fraction in acknowledgement.

He did not refuse the gesture. But he did not lower his guard, either. Mila felt something she had not expected: a small, genuine stir of interest. Not in the operational sense. In the other one.

She waited. Minutes passed. Then Arjun rose and crossed to the bar, stopping at a respectful distance.

"I'm Arjun," he said. "Thank you for the drink."

"Mila." She considered him. "You looked like you needed one."

"I usually know when I do."

"Then consider it a suggestion."

They stood side by side, looking at the river rather than at each other. The water moved slowly below, indifferent and dark.

"Business or escape?" she asked.

"Neither. Observation."

Her expression shifted, barely. "Dangerous habit."

"So I'm told."

The silence between them was easy in the way that silences rarely are between strangers—unhurried, undemanding, not requiring explanation. Mila felt the familiar instinct rise: mirror, guide, shape. She let it pass. That, too, was a choice.

"And you?" Arjun asked.

"Passing through," she said. "Like most things."

They did not exchange numbers. They did not make arrangements. When Arjun returned to his table, Mila finished her drink and left the bar without looking back.

Neither of them knew—not yet—that the system had already registered the encounter. Not as a threat. Not as a failure. As an anomaly.

And anomalies, Identity Zero had long understood, were worth studying carefully.

Somewhere in the network, a variable updated. Subject Malhotra: awareness confirmed. Engagement protocol: escalate (controlled).

By the river, Arjun stood for a moment before leaving. He did not know who she was. He knew only that the system had stopped watching passively. It had begun, instead, to choose.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Digital Prison

Malaysia — Unregistered Industrial Zone

Malaysia existed in careful balance. Close enough to global financial routes to remain relevant, yet layered with industrial zones and half-finished developments that rarely attracted sustained scrutiny. Abandoned factories had accumulated quietly across its outskirts—spaces that were legally present but operationally unaccountable. It wasn't lawless, which made it ideal. Systems like this did not require chaos. They required places where questions arrived slowly, and answers, if at all, much later.

The building had once been a garment factory. One could still read its former life in the bones—long, rectangular floor plates; wide windows sealed shut; and freight lifts never designed for people. Someone had painted the exterior a cheerful pastel green, as though colour alone might absolve function. It did not.

From the outside: no guards, no wire, no visible deterrent. Inside: nowhere to go.

Aisha stood before the leaked architectural schematics projected on the wall of the secure analysis room in Delhi.

"This is one of them."

Arjun moved closer. Rows of desks filled the floor plan like battery cages—hundreds, arranged not by teams but by output density.

Sleeping quarters wedged into corners, partitioned by boards. Communal toilets. Cameras everywhere.

"How many?" he asked.

"Between three and five hundred. Rotating."

She pointed to a small windowless room at the centre of the layout. "That's where the supervisors sit. Not to manage work. To manage attention."

Inside the compound, just past midnight, the lights did not dim. They never did.

Ravi—the name they had given him—sat hunched at his workstation, headset pressed tight to his ears. "Sir, I understand this is distressing," he said softly. "But disconnecting now will complicate matters."

On the screen, a woman in her forties stared back, eyes red-rimmed, shoulders shaking. "I just want to sleep," she whispered.

Ravi's fingers hovered over the keyboard. He knew the next line. He had always hated the next line.

"If you sleep," he said, voice still gentle, "the system will interpret that as evasion."

She sobbed. Behind him, a supervisor cleared his throat—not loudly, not as a threat. Just enough.

Ravi continued. This was the prison. No bars. No locks. Only unbroken attention.

"They don't restrain people physically," Aisha said, her voice tight. "They restrain time."

"They keep victims and operators in identical conditions," Arjun said. "Exhausted. Isolated. Dependent."

"Yes. When everyone is trapped in the same loop, cruelty becomes procedural."

"Do they ever let operators leave?"

Her jaw tightened. "When someone's compliance is perfect. Or when they break completely."

"And then?"

"They disappear. Reassigned—or erased."

At 03:00, Ravi removed his headset with shaking hands. The room murmured with the residue of other people's fear still threading through headsets nearby. His supervisor approached—a man no older than thirty, his expression a practised blank.

"You did well. New assignment tomorrow. Different script. Higher stakes."

Ravi swallowed. "Yes, sir."

He did not ask what happened if he refused. He knew.

Arjun turned from the projection. "This isn't fraud," he said quietly. "It's incarceration."

"With no physical trace," Aisha said.

He looked at her. "How do you liberate people from a prison they don't know how to name?"

"You don't break the walls," she said. "You break the illusion that they're alone."

Somewhere in Malaysia, the lights remained on. Phones rang. Voices continued. And the digital prison, invisible and efficient, held.





CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Signal Blackout

Delhi

The blackout began without alarms. Arjun noticed it first in the margins—a secure feed hesitating before loading, a half-second lag in a system that prided itself on immediacy. He frowned. "Check the uplink."

"It's up," the analyst said, after checking twice. "Latency is normal."

"Then why can't I see the historical logs?"

She leant closer. Entire layers of archived data—communications, inter-agency advisories, and internal notes—had gone dark. Not deleted or corrupted. Unavailable. As though someone had drawn a curtain across the past.

"We've lost the satellite relay for the Malaysia feed," another voice called. "Graceful degradation. It's stepping down as if by design."

Arjun felt the weight of it settle. This was not a cyberattack. This was policy.

The call came twenty minutes later—not from a blocked number but from someone who had once signed off on his clearance renewals. The voice was warm with manufactured familiarity.

"You're moving too fast, Arjun."

"I'm moving at the speed of the threat."

"You're reopening things that were closed for reasons you were never meant to question."

"Then they shouldn't have been closed."

A pause. "You remember Project Ravel?"

Arjun's jaw tightened. He remembered. Years before CyHawk, before Identity Zero had a name, Ravel had been a classified initiative studying behavioural compliance across digital platforms. The premise had been seductive in its simplicity: could stress patterns predict compliance before coercion became necessary? Arjun had been on the technical team. He had helped build the models. What no one had said aloud was how readily prediction slid into manipulation. When the scope quietly expanded, he had objected—not loudly, not theatrically. Just enough to be noted. The project was restructured. He was reassigned. The data vanished. Or so he had been told.

"You shut Ravel down," he said. "But you didn't dismantle it."

"We archived it. For national security."

"You buried it. And someone else dug it up."

Silence. Then: "Whatever you're seeing now is not an extension of Ravel. It's an aberration."

"Is that what you'll tell the families?"

The line went dead.

By evening, the blackout was complete. Access requests returned without explanation. Systems cited outdated directives, superseded policies, and conflicting jurisdictions. The machinery of government did what it always did when confronted with an inconvenient truth: it slowed itself to a standstill.

Aisha found him alone in his office, the city a smear of lights beyond the dark glass.

"They're cutting you off."

"Yes."

"Why now?"

"Because they recognise the shape of it," he said. "And acknowledging it would mean acknowledging their own part in it."

She studied him for a moment. "You built part of this", she said—not as an accusation, but as fact.

"Yes, that's precisely why they don't want me near it."

"So what do we do?"

He looked at her—her steadiness, the particular quality of attention she brought to every room. "We work outside the signals," he said.

Her lips curled into a half-smile. "Then that," she said quietly, "may be our only advantage."

That night, his secure device went dark entirely. No power, no signal, no recovery. But an older phone—unregistered, long unused—vibrated in his pocket. A single message:

SIGNAL BLACKOUT CONFIRMED. PROCEED ANALOGUE.

Identity Zero had anticipated the blackout. Perhaps engineered it. Or, more unsettling still, had simply understood the system better than the people running it.

Arjun looked out into the Delhi night. The signals were gone. The war was not.





CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Cost of Silence

Delhi — Six Years Earlier

Silence, Arjun had learnt, was a decision.

The room had been smaller then—a converted conference space deep inside a government complex, its walls crowded with equations and behavioural models. Project Ravel had not been called that at first. Names came later. He stood at the far end of the table as a presentation concluded. Slides with clinical efficiency: predictive stress curves, compliance thresholds, probability matrices mapping fear against time.

Behavioural forecasting, the presenter called it.

"You're not predicting behaviour," Arjun said when the room paused. "You're shaping it."

A few heads turned—not in anger, but in surprise. The presenter smiled thinly. "We're modelling response patterns. The applications are defensive."

"Defensive against whom?"

A careful pause. "Against instability."

Instability was always the word they used when they meant people. Arjun pointed to a curve highlighted in red. "This assumes prolonged uncertainty. Sleep deprivation. Isolation. Authority simulation."

"Those variables produce the cleanest compliance," the presenter agreed.

"And when they don't?"

The smile faded. "Then the subject is statistically insignificant."

Disposable. An uneasy stillness seized Arjun's chest. "These models won't stay contained. Once built, they'll be repurposed. Leaked. Stolen."

A senior official cleared his throat. "We appreciate the caution, Major. But this is a controlled environment."

"So was every laboratory that ever lost control of its research," Arjun said.

Silence followed—not disagreement. Assessment.

The project ended months later, quietly, after a political reshuffle made certain initiatives inconvenient. The data was archived. The team dispersed. Arjun was offered a choice: stay silent or stay employed. He chose both. At the time it appeared pragmatic. Now, standing alone in his darkened office, he was haunted by that memory. The models he had helped refine had not vanished.

They had matured. Evolved. Escaped.

Aisha's voice reached him from the doorway.

"You couldn't have stopped it alone."

He did not turn. "I could have protested louder."

She stepped closer. "Would that have changed?"

"Perhaps not. But it would have changed me."

She rested a hand briefly on the back of his chair—not comfort, but solidarity.

"The cost of silence," he said, "is that when the consequences arrive, they recognise your handwriting."

"What do we do now?"

He looked at the dead screens and vanished signals and then felt the analogue phone in his pocket. "Now," he said, "we speak. Even if no one wants to listen."

Somewhere far away, Identity Zero recalibrated. Silence had served its purpose. The next phase would require something louder.





INTERLUDE I

Arjun Malhotra

Before he learnt how systems lied, Arjun had believed they merely failed. There was a difference. Failure implied weakness. Lying implied intent. He could fathom the distinction later, standing inside rooms where truth was negotiated into acceptable forms before being released into public language. But once, before Project Ravel and classified briefings and carefully worded silences, he as a young officer had believed in the structure with faith.

His father had worked in telecommunications during the years when India's networks were still physical things: copper wires, exchange rooms, and towers blinking faintly against rural skies. "Signals matter," he used to tell Arjun. "Not because they're always clear. Because someone is always trying to distort them." Arjun remembered sitting beside him in cramped relay stations that smelt of dust and heated circuitry, watching technicians trace faults through endless lines. Invisible movement fascinated him. Messages crossing distance. Voices surviving static. Meaning travelling through interference. Even then, he understood instinctively: what people trusted shaped how they lived.

The Army came later. Intelligence work appealed to him—the discernment of patterns from the ordinary, the value of remaining unobtrusive in a room. He noticed things others let pass: cadence changes in intercepted speech, unnatural pauses in official briefings,

behaviour misaligned with declared intention. His instructors admired it at first. Then learnt to be cautious.

There had been a mission near the northern border years before Ravel. Not combat. Observation. A suspected communications relay operating through civilian infrastructure. Weeks of surveillance produced only fragments—signals that appeared and dissolved before confirmation. Most officers lost patience. Arjun did not. On the eighteenth night, he understood: the relay was a decoy. The real transmission pattern was concealed inside routine weather updates repeated through regional stations. Not encryption. Camouflage through familiarity.

"You think too structurally," his commanding officer had said.

At that time it had sounded like praise. Later, Arjun recognised it as a warning.

Project Ravel changed him slowly—which was the particular danger of it. No dramatic corruption, no single moral collapse. Only incremental accommodation. The language arrived first: predictive compliance, behavioural optimisation, and stability modelling. Words clean enough to disguise consequences. Arjun told himself he was studying systems, not people. That modelling fear was not the same as inducing it. That ethical limits still existed somewhere above his clearance level.

Then came the meeting he could never fully set aside. A civilian consultant demonstrating how uncertainty affected decision-making, the data elegant and precise. "Remove certainty," the consultant said, "and the human mind begins generating its own coercion." People around the table nodded. Arjun looked at them and could make out, with sudden clarity, that some were not studying the model. They were imagining applications.

That was when he first considered leaving. He did not. That failure stayed with him longer than any operational mistake. After Ravel was quietly dismantled, people suddenly stopped mentioning it, which frightened him more than outrage would have. A dangerous idea had

not been condemned. Only archived. As though everyone understood it might still become useful later. And perhaps that was the moment Arjun truly changed: not when he saw corruption, but when he observed how efficiently institutions metabolised it.

Years later, when Mila Kovács had asked in Bangkok whether he knew he was being watched, the question unsettled him beyond its obvious implication. Not because she was observing him. Because she assumed observation to be normal. Expected. Permanent. He recognised the instinct immediately, which the Ravel team had tried to formalise: the belief that if enough patterns were gathered, people would eventually become predictable.

Arjun had once believed that too. Now he recognised the flaw. Human beings were not dangerous because they were irrational. They were dangerous because, sometimes, they changed.

Late at night, he occasionally thought of the relay stations from his childhood. His father had once spent six hours repairing a failed line in monsoon rain so that a remote district would not lose communication overnight. When Arjun asked later why it mattered so much, the old man had looked genuinely surprised by the question. "Because," he said, "silence spreads."

Standing now inside another system already distorting truth beyond recognition, Arjun understood with painful clarity: Identity Zero had not emerged from nowhere. It had emerged from accumulated silences. From systems that preferred continuity over honesty. From people like him, who had recognised danger early and spoken too softly.





CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Second Death

Hyderabad

The second death did not make the front pages. It appeared in the city edition as a single paragraph between a property advertisement and a traffic advisory:

Local businessman found dead at residence; police rule out foul play. Name: Suresh Rao. Age: forty-seven. Cause: cardiac arrest. Time of discovery: 04:20.

No mention of cybercrime. No mention of investigation. No mention of the quiet visit, two weeks prior, by a man who had introduced himself as a compliance consultant.

Arjun folded the paper and caught the next flight to Hyderabad.

Rao's apartment overlooked a lane of neem trees and shuttered shops. The constable at the door barely glanced at identification, waving them through with a loose nod. "Heart problem," he said. "Family says he was under stress."

Stress had become the most convenient word in the public language. The living room offered its own silent testimony: a half-drunk glass of water, a laptop shut but not powered down, curtains drawn unevenly. The bedroom was already vacant; the body cleared.

The forensic assistant found it while cataloguing personal effects. Her gloved fingers brushed the skin behind Rao's left ear. There was a faint discolouration and a subtle swelling behind the skin. She called

Arjun over without knowing what she had found. He recognised it immediately. By the time the senior officers arrived, the patch had already been confirmed. Identical. Same placement and composition. Failsafe architecture.

The same invisible leash.

By evening, the newspaper paragraph remained unchanged while the official line shifted. Inconclusive. Pending analysis. In cybercrime units across the country, officers began checking behind ears during routine examinations. Hospitals received unusual enquiries from administrators about unexplained cardiac events. A sealed file in Delhi acquired a new label:

SERIAL ANOMALY – HUMAN SUBJECTS.

Aisha met him on the terrace of the government guesthouse as the city lights spread out like a vast circuit board below.

"They're not hiding it anymore," she said.

"No. They're normalising it."

"Why escalate now?"

"Because fear works best while it remains deniable," he said. "Once visible, the system has already moved on."

She leant against the railing with the warm night air around her.

"They want people to notice," she said. "But not understanding."

"Understanding would create resistance."

His phone vibrated once. Not a call—a notification. No sender. No metadata. Only coordinates, and only a single line beneath:

SECOND SIGNAL CONFIRMED. PATTERN ACCEPTED.

"They're counting deaths," Aisha said quietly.

"No." He looked out across the city—thousands of windows glowing in the dark, each containing a life that trusted systems it had never examined. "They're counting reactions."

"The second death isn't meant to frighten us. It's meant to measure how much we're willing to ignore."

She turned to face him. "And what are you willing to ignore?"

"Nothing," he said.

Below them, traffic moved, indifferent and relentless. Above it all, unseen and untroubled, Identity Zero absorbed the telemetry. The experiment was progressing.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Point of No Return

Geneva

Geneva believed in order—not the kind imposed by force, but quietly maintained through agreement. Treaties, protocols, systems designed to function without friction. A city built on the assumption that rules, once written, would be observed. Which made it uniquely susceptible. Because Identity Zero did not break systems. It inherited them.

The conference room overlooked Lake Geneva, its surface composed and vast, dividing Switzerland from France with the authority of things that had long since ceased to be disputed. Around the table sat representatives from agencies that rarely shared air without formal protocols. Cybercrime units, financial intelligence desks, regulatory bodies, and intelligence liaisons with deliberately vague titles. This was not cooperation. It was containment.

"We are not dealing with a conventional syndicate," the European task-force representative began.

"That much is evident," Arjun said.

"Then we must be careful not to overreact. Panic over unproven correlations would be destabilising."

"Two confirmed deaths with identical neural implants," Arjun said. "Multiple jurisdictions. Self-propagating synthetic identities. A behavioural architecture that bypasses legal safeguards by exploiting

inherited trust." He paused. "If that does not qualify as destabilising, we have already lost the definition."

A woman from a multilateral financial body cleared her throat. "Our concern is escalation. Once we acknowledge this publicly, we invite scrutiny of identity systems that underpin global commerce."

"In other words," Arjun replied, "you're afraid of what breaks when people realise how fragile it all is."

Silence. That, too, was an answer.

By mid-afternoon, the decision had been reached: a Joint Observational Task Group. Not an enforcement body. An observer. Arjun read the draft mandate twice. "This allows us to watch. Not to act."

"For now," someone offered.

"For now is precisely how this system survives."

Aisha had been introduced not by title but by relevance. She sat quietly across the room, tolerated rather than welcomed. She caught his eye and shook her head.

They were already behind.

During the break, Arjun stepped onto the terrace. A senior North American official appeared beside him.

"Moral hazard," the man said. "Expose this too early and you undermine public confidence in every system that claims to protect them."

"And if you conceal it," Arjun said, "you allow a private architecture of control to mature unchallenged."

The man smiled faintly. "You assume it hasn't already."

That landed with its full weight. "That's why this is the point of no return," Arjun said. The official's smile vanished.

That night, a packet arrived on his secure device through a channel that troubled him more than a hostile one would have. Threats carried vanity. This carried only tradecraft.

Satellite imagery resolved slowly: a compound in northern Myanmar—vast, purpose-built, too orderly for a village, too civilian for a military base, too alive for an abandoned site. Long rectangular buildings in hard formation. A dirt access road. Generator blocks glowing white in thermal overlay.

Below the image, a single line:

OBSERVATION IS NO LONGER SUFFICIENT.

He forwarded it to Aisha's air-gapped terminal.

Across the city, Mila Kovács studied the same compound through a different channel, her curtains drawn. Her instructions were brief:

PHASE TRANSITION AUTHORISED. DIRECT
ENGAGEMENT LIKELY.

She thought of Bangkok. Of a man who had neither leant in nor retreated—who had simply registered. Engagement, she knew, would not be optional now.

Aisha had not slept. When Arjun found her, she was cross-legged on the floor, three machines open before her, the satellite packet stripped, cloned, and quarantined.

"The compound is active," she said. "Hundreds inside. Guards, logistics, trafficked labour. It's hard to separate bodies by function from orbit."

Bodies by function. That was what Identity Zero had been doing from the beginning.

"Can we move on to it?" he asked.

She looked up. "Not from Geneva. Not cleanly." Northern Myanmar was not a door one simply opened. The terrain was difficult, the authority fractured, and the compounds protected not only by fences and men with weapons but also by the studied indifference of every system that benefited from not seeing them clearly. A raid required permission. Permission required disclosure. Disclosure required institutions willing to acknowledge what they had failed to prevent. Geneva had answered that question before dinner.

"But the packet carried something else," Aisha said. "Embedded beneath the compression. From a different hand."

She opened a second window. A map—not Myanmar. The Gulf. Dubai. A grainy hotel-atrium still: a man in a pale linen jacket, face turned just enough to be forgettable. A timestamp reading tomorrow night.

"The feed is predictive," she said. "Not recorded."

Neither of them spoke. A file documenting an event that hadn't happened yet. A meeting scheduled in the future tense.

"Who sent this?" Arjun asked.

"Someone who wanted it to look like a financial-intelligence alert." She paused. "This could be bait."

"If it's bait, it contains the shape of the hook. If it's intelligence, it may be the only moving piece we can reach before it disappears."

"And Myanmar?"

"We keep watching. We build a route. We find who can touch it without announcing why."

"That may take days. People are inside."

"I know."

She looked away. Not because she disagreed—because she didn't. Northern Myanmar was the moral centre of the screen, and still they could not enter it that night. That was the cruelty of intelligence: knowledge arriving before capacity.

"Book two routes," Arjun said. "Separate arrivals. Separate hotels."

He picked up his jacket. Outside, Geneva kept its order. The flags would rise. The committees would meet. The mandate would speak of caution and proportionality. But somewhere between a compound in northern Myanmar and a hotel atrium in Dubai, the architecture had moved—through imagery, wallet dust, identity events, and the quiet confidence that institutions would debate the shape of the fire before allowing anyone to carry water.

"Whether this came from a friend, a ghost, or the machine itself," Arjun said, "someone has shown us the board."

"Only part of it."

"Yes. That is why we move carefully."

The two screens went dark. Geneva returned to its reflections. The point of no return did not announce itself. It arrived as information no one could safely ignore.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Money Without Owners

Dubai

Dubai did not sleep. It merely changed temperature. By day the city wore glass-like armour—towers rising from the desert with the arrogance of things that had decided history was negotiable. Sunlight struck their faces and split into a riot of gold, silver, and white. Roads curved around them in clean black ribbons. Malls breathed refrigerated air. Hotels promised anonymity at five thousand dirhams a night. By night, those towers became servers with bedrooms. The marina was not water but a mirror for moving money. Hotel lobbies were ports. Service lifts were corridors between jurisdictions. Men who did not officially meet anyone sat across from women who did not officially exist, their phones face down between untouched coffees, their voices low enough to be mistaken for prayer.

Arjun watched one such man through the reflection of a glass wall. Farid. Arjun knew that was not his name. Farid sat in the atrium of a business hotel near Sheikh Zayed Road. In his mid-thirties, wearing a pale linen jacket, slight beard, unremarkable face. He had arrived eleven minutes early. People who arrived late believed they were important. People who arrived early were anxious or disciplined. Farid was neither. He was calibrated.

Arjun sat two levels above on the mezzanine, a black coffee cooling beside his hand, a skin-coloured earpiece deep in his left ear. His

passport was in a safe in another hotel. His phone was not his phone. His room had been booked by a company registered in Singapore and paid for by a card issued in Estonia—a deliberate decoy, discoverable enough to be believed. He had lived long enough in intelligence to know that the best cover was not invisibility. It was a plausible error.

Aisha's voice came through, soft and controlled. "He's opened Wallet Four. Forty-eight thousand dollars equivalent. Split into six fragments. Routing now."

"Three exchanges," she continued. "Two mixers. One charitable trust wallet. One gaming platform. Remittance trails to Dhaka and Bishkek." She paused for a moment. "One fragment is moving sideways, not out. It's triggered another wallet locally."

Across the atrium, Farid placed his phone flat on the table and looked up—not at Arjun, but at the glass wall beside him. Reflection recognised reflection.

Arjun did not react. The reaction was admission. Farid smiled faintly—not with amusement, but with confirmation. Then he rose.

"Contact," Arjun said.

"You're burnt," Aisha replied.

"No. I'm invited."

He left cash under the cup and walked towards the mezzanine stairs. Farid moved through the lobby without urgency, turned away from the valet, and headed instead towards the side road behind the hotel meant for service entrances, delivery vehicles, and staff corridors. Arjun followed at forty metres.

At the mouth of the lane, a white Nissan Patrol sat with its engine running and lights off. Farid entered the rear seat. The vehicle pulled away before the door had closed. Arjun found a taxi near the hotel's rear exit, placed two hundred dirhams on the dashboard, and instructed the driver: "Follow the white Patrol."

The Patrol moved at a moderate speed before cutting abruptly beneath a flyover into a half-blocked construction road. Concrete columns strobed past. Sodium lights flickered over unfinished

pavement. Dubai's polished face disappeared behind scaffolding, dust, and generators humming beneath blue tarpaulin. The Patrol accelerated. The taxi followed with rather less grace, its left side shrieking against metal fencing.

The Patrol swerved through a narrow service corridor. Signal disruption arrived without warning—Aisha's feed tearing, the earpiece crackling, and the world narrowing. A truck carrying steel rods rolled into the intersection and sealed the gap. Arjun was out of the taxi before it had stopped.

He sprinted under the overhang of steel rods, through heat rising from the road, and spotted the Patrol turning beyond a row of portable site offices. A motorcycle stood near a tea stall, engine running. He swung onto it without ceremony and tore away as the rider shouted behind him.

The Patrol entered an underpass. Sound changed: the city above became a muffled weight, tunnel walls flashing with strips of light. Cars moved in tight lanes. Arjun threaded between them on the motorcycle, feeling heat from a bus engine against his leg. The Patrol's rear window lowered two inches and a hand emerged—not with a weapon but with a small black device that struck the road and scattered metallic shards. A caltrop. Military-adjacent. Not improvised. Infrastructure.

He steadied the motorcycle and closed the gap.

The Patrol exited the underpass, mounted a pavement, and forced its way onto a half-built access ramp. Arjun followed. At the top, the Patrol stopped suddenly. He braked and laid the motorcycle sideways before it could throw him into the bumper. His shoulder struck the pavement. Pain flashed white.

He came up behind a concrete block. Both Patrol doors were open. The vehicle was empty.

The ramp ended beside a pedestrian overbridge linking two unfinished commercial blocks, with workers crossing in groups—in blue uniforms, yellow helmets, and identical dust masks. Arjun

climbed to his feet, blood warming his palm, and ran for the overbridge.

"Vehicle abandoned," Aisha said. "Too many heat signatures. He's mixing with the labour movement."

"Of course he is."

At the overbridge entrance, a man in a linen jacket removed it and handed it to someone walking the opposite way. White trainers disappeared under loose work trousers. A face mask rose. A helmet came down. Farid became one of seventy men. Arjun saw it happen—not the face but the rhythm. Farid's left shoulder dipped half a second before his right foot landed. Most people carry fear in their eyes. Trained men carry it in their gait.

Arjun pushed into the crowd. Bodies pressed close. At the far end of the overbridge, a maintenance door was open. Farid slipped through. Arjun followed, and the door drove into his chest from the other side.

A heavy-set man in a worker's uniform followed through with his shoulder into Arjun's ribs. The fight lasted fewer than twelve seconds and had no choreography in it. The man was strong and close and knew exactly what he was doing: he trapped Arjun's right arm, drove a knee towards his stomach, and reached for something at his belt. Arjun caught the wrist before the blade cleared fabric. For one ugly moment they breathed into each other's faces. Then Arjun drove his forehead into the man's nose. He caught the knife hand against the joint, slammed it into the railing, kicked the blade away, and struck the man once in the throat with the heel of his palm—enough to stop his breath, not to end it.

By then Farid was gone.

Arjun entered the maintenance corridor. Fluorescent lights. Pipes along the ceiling. The corridor forked: stairs down or a service lift whose doors were already closing. Through the narrowing gap, Farid looked back once. Not in fear. In annoyance.

Arjun took the stairs. Three flights. A service basement, vans in numbered bays, a catering man wheeling trays. A lift bell chimed. He moved towards the sound.

A maintenance buggy shot out from behind a parked vehicle, Farid at the wheel in a grey cleaner's shirt, heading for the metro access corridor. Arjun seized the handle of a passing luggage cart and launched himself forward. His hand caught the buggy's rear rail. For three seconds he was dragged behind it—shoes skidding, shoulder burning—before Farid jerked the wheel and slammed him into a parked van.

The buggy disappeared into the metro corridor.

By the time Arjun reached the next junction, commuters were pouring through the access gate. Office workers. Tourists. Security staff. Lives arranged around harmless destinations. Farid had entered the city's bloodstream.

"I lost him," Aisha said quietly.

"He was never meant to be kept."

"Then what was this?"

He looked down. Near his shoe: a phone. Not his. Plain black, cheap, no case. He lifted it with a handkerchief. The screen woke as his fingers touched the edge. One message: a wallet address. Below it, a countdown. 00:04:59. Then 00:04:58.

"It's identity-coded," Aisha said. "Not amount-coded."

Six small icons on the screen: a passport, a bank card, a hospital cross, a fingerprint, a school building, and a coffin. Not money. Lives. Farid had not been carrying funds. He had been carrying permissions—access, legitimacy, and movement. The right to open an account. To cross a border. To exist in one database and vanish from another.

"Can you trace the destination?"

"Fragments only. It's designed to split if touched. Whoever built this assumed the courier would be captured."

"Then why give me the phone?"

"Because they wanted you to understand what you're chasing."

The phone vibrated once. The countdown stopped at 00:03:33. The screen went black.

"It completed early," Aisha said.

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

Outside the metro entrance, Dubai continued to shine. Cars moved. Elevators rose. Men shook hands. The towers remained bright and indifferent. Arjun placed the dead phone in an evidence pouch and looked back towards the service corridors where Farid had dissolved into a crowd.

For the first time since the investigation began, he felt the architecture of Identity Zero pressing against the physical world. Not as code. Not as doctrine.

As footsteps. Vehicles. Decoys. Bruised ribs and broken noses. A courier who could discard his face in a crowd.

Money did not need owners anymore. Only carriers. And carriers could be replaced.





CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Ghost Architect

Dubai Marina

The address on the phone did not belong to a man. It belonged to a pattern. That was Aisha's first conclusion after twelve hours of disassembling the dead device in a room rented under the name of a Romanian import consultant who had never left Bucharest. Twenty-sixth floor. Pale carpets. Disciplined furniture. A view of towers leaning into water. The sterile smell of a space designed to erase whoever had last occupied it. Curtains drawn. Air conditioning too cold. Three laptops on the writing desk, none connected to the hotel network. A signal jammer disguised as a travel adapter blinking quietly beside room-service coffee that had gone cold hours ago.

Arjun stood at the window, shirt sleeves rolled, one hand braced against the glass. His ribs ached when he breathed too deeply. Behind him, Aisha worked in silence, the glow of three screens making her face look simultaneously younger and older. She had tied her hair back imprecisely. Her eyes moved across wallet histories, device logs, and fragments of encrypted metadata without blinking any more than the task required.

The phone lay on the table between them. Dead battery isolated, SIM slot empty, memory scraped. It looked harmless—the sort of device that in any ordinary investigation would have been logged, sealed, and misunderstood for three weeks. Aisha had not

misunderstood it. That, Arjun thought, was more telling than anything the device had contained.

"The address wasn't a normal wallet," she said. "It behaved like one long enough to be read that way. But it was storing authorisations, not value. Synthetic credentials. Linked verifications. Institutional trust markers. Bank onboarding signatures. Travel clearance hooks. Medical database confirmations. Death registry flags."

"Death registry?"

"Someone can be made to die in one jurisdiction whilst remaining alive in another. Or the reverse."

"And the countdown?"

"Theatre. The visible timer was designed to make us believe there was still time to intervene. The actual release was completed before it ended."

"To trigger the split if we touched it."

Arjun looked at the diagram on her screen—nodes, addresses, timed releases. Less a financial map than a nervous system.

"After the release," she continued, "the fragments didn't disappear into laundering chains. They attached themselves to identity events. New phone activations. Dormant bank accounts created and deleted within minutes. Refugee-document queries. Student visa appointments. Insurance claims. One burial certificate in Karachi."

Arjun came closer to the desk.

Aisha enlarged the transactional sequence. The screen showed no face, no name, no confession. Only movement. Clean, obedient, machine-readable movement.

A passport. A hospital cross. A bank card. A fingerprint. A school building. A coffin. Not money. The permissions that made lives legible to the world.

"Whoever built this doesn't treat identity as personal data," Aisha said. "They treat it as infrastructure."

Arjun said nothing. He had understood that already, in theory. Seeing it move was a different experience.

"There's a second layer."

She hesitated. That was unusual. He noticed.

"It's instructional," she said. "Fragments embedded in the wallet logic. Not executable code—more like annotation. Philosophy disguised as metadata."

"Read it."

She scrolled. The first lines were corrupted. The next lines were 'Identity is not a possession of the individual. It is an agreement among institutions.'

He turned fully from the window.

She continued: "The subject believes the name precedes recognition. The system must be trained to understand that recognition precedes the name."

Silence. Only the hum of the air conditioning.

"Source?"

"Tagged to a training archive," she zoomed in.

"CIRCE. Module Four. Identity Nullification."

Arjun had seen it before, but in pieces. A behavioural asset network. Controlled intimacy operations. Compliance conditioning. Women and men trained to become emotional weapons and disposable bridges between criminal architecture and legitimate institutions. CIRCE did not hack computers. It hacked trust.

"There's more," Aisha said. She reconstructed a damaged paragraph from the metadata.

"Identity Zero," she read slowly, "is the state before biography."

Arjun looked at her.

"Before biography," he said.

She nodded, still reading. "Before name, nationality, debt, family, fear. Before institutions write the person into existence."

The phrase disturbed the air.

Aisha scrolled down. "After biography is attached, the subject mistakes the assigned story for selfhood. The objective is not to erase

the person. Erasure creates resistance. The objective is to control the writing.”

Arjun’s gaze hardened.

“The system owns the pen,” he said.

Aisha looked up. “That line is here.”

She turned the laptop towards him.

There it was, clean and uncorrupted.

The system owns the pen.

“A tollgate on personhood,” Arjun said.

“Yes.”

“They don’t create fake people after building biographies,” he said.

“They create institutional acceptance first. The person comes later.”

“A body is assigned to the record.”

“Or a record is assigned to a body. Depending on need.”

Aisha said, “Sometimes no body is required.”

Arjun looked at her.

“That is the cleanest identity,” she continued, her voice low. “One that never needs to eat, sleep, panic, or betray.”

Aisha opened another file. “This was embedded in the same archive fragment.”

On the screen appeared a list of behavioural objectives. Much of it was damaged. But several lines survived.

Detach identity from memory.

Make gratitude conditional upon recognition.

Teach the asset that documentation is mercy.

Replace origin with function.

Love must be operationalised before loyalty can be trusted.

He moved to the desk and studied the annotated metadata directly. The language was not criminal. It was architectural. Precise, systemic, indifferent to the moral weight of what it described. He had read similar prose once before, in a classified project whose vocabulary had been almost identical. The thought arrived cold and unannounced.

"Aisha. Pull up the original Ravel methodology framework—whatever remains in the archive."

She looked at him. "You think this connects."

"I think the language is identical. And language is rarely coincidental at this level."

She opened a parallel window. Fragments of the old Ravel documentation appeared—partially redacted, partially corrupted, but legible enough. Arjun read both screens simultaneously. The CIRCE metadata and the Ravel framework did not merely share vocabulary. They shared grammar. The same structural logic. The same relationship between institutions, trust, and the individual subject.

"Ravel didn't die," he said quietly. "It graduated."

Aisha said, "There's more."

He turned back. She had opened another screen.

"I backtracked structural similarities across the identity fragments. Not exact code. Behaviour. The way they interface with institutions. There's a repeated logic."

"A signature?"

"Not a signature. More like a philosophy of design."

On the screen were six cases:

A banker in Frankfurt had approved accounts for clients who were later found never to have existed.

A customs clearance agent in Colombo whose credentials had been used for three months after his death.

A scholarship student admitted to a university in Prague, whose biometrics matched a missing girl from Moldova and whose face matched no one at all.

A clinic in Kenya that had issued vaccination records for two hundred labour migrants who were never born in the villages listed.

A passport whose renewal in Delhi was rejected as fraudulent, then approved from another terminal forty-six seconds later.

A cremation certificate in Kathmandu used to unlock an inheritance claim in Singapore.

Different countries.

Different systems.

Same wound.

Aisha said, "These are not connected by money flow. They are connected by institutional trust failure. Someone studied how bureaucracies believe themselves."

Arjun stared at the screen. Most investigations began with suspicion. Identity Zero began before suspicion became possible. It entered through the places where institutions assumed their own records were real because another institution had already believed them.

A hospital believed a municipal registry.

A bank believed a passport to be correct.

A passport office believed a police verification was authentic.

A police verification believed an address to be true.

An address was confirmed with a utility bill.

A utility bill rested on the belief that a phone number was correct.

A phone number believed in the certainty of a face.

The chain did not need every link to be corrupt.

It needed only one link to be lonely, underpaid, automated, hurried, afraid, or flattered.

The rest would authenticate the lie.

Arjun said, "That is the architecture: inherited trust

"We need to identify the architect."

Arjun shook his head. "No, he may have made himself irrelevant."

Aisha stared at him. Arjun pointed at the diagram on the wall. "A terrorist cell collapses when its commander is removed. A cartel fractures when its money man turns. A spy ring burns when its handler is exposed. But this is designed like doctrine. Once enough institutions inherit its logic, the author becomes optional."

Aisha folded her arms. "You think the architect is not a person?"

"Identity Zero wants us to believe he is a person."

"Why?"

“Because people can be chased. Systems can be misunderstood.”

“What references do we have?”

Aisha sat again, fingers moving across the keyboard.

“CIRCE training tags. Wallet logic. Six institutional failures. Farid’s courier trail. The phrase from the archive.”

“Search the phrase.”

She ran the phrase through private repositories, leaked conference transcripts, old academic indexing, procurement memos, NGO archives, biometric vendor documentation, intelligence dumps, closed tender annexures, and corrupted training materials. The line returned in fragments. Aisha read them in sequence.

A person is not hidden when unseen but when misrecognised.

Another:

Concealment through multiplicity is superior to concealment through absence.

Another:

The subject disappears most efficiently when institutions confidently locate the wrong subject.

Then she stopped. Arjun’s face remained still, but something cold moved behind his eyes.

“That sentence does not belong to a gangster,” he said. “It belongs to doctrine.”

“Earliest version?”

Aisha filtered by date. “London. Twelve years ago. Behavioural systems seminar. Transcript partial. Speaker list redacted.”

“Hosted by, and the status?”

She read the screen. “The Centre for Civic Identity and Digital Inclusion. Closed seven years ago. No scandal. Funding merger. Its work was absorbed.”

“By whom?”

Aisha searched again. One organisation became three. Three became seven. Seven became vendors, NGOs, contractors, advisory boards, biometric pilots, refugee documentation projects, financial

inclusion initiatives, digital health registries, and election technology pilots.

"It didn't shut down. It distributed," Arjun remarked.

The ghost architect had not vanished. He had become administrative. For years he had believed the enemy would have a command centre, a server farm, a mastermind, a face behind a screen. Men liked enemies that could be raided. Governments liked enemies that could be announced. Courts liked accused persons whose names could fit on a charge sheet. But what charge could be framed against a philosophy that had entered procurement manuals? What arrest warrant could seize a method? What prison could hold a procedure?

Aisha said, "There is a metadata residue on the London transcript. Not enough for attribution. Initials only. A.K."

Neither of them spoke. A.K. could be anyone.

The morning light began to pale the edge of the curtains. In another life, Dubai at dawn might have been beautiful. In this one, it looked like a city built by men who trusted glass too much.

Aisha lowered her voice. "There's another thread attached to CIRCE. Behavioural assets. Controlled intimacy. Female operatives placed near targets who handle identity-linked permissions. Most entries are anonymised. But there are tags. Some geographic. Some functional." She opened a list.

BUDAPEST—CULTURAL COVER

ISTANBUL—LANGUAGE SCHOOL NODE

SINGAPORE—COMPLIANCE LIAISON

DUBAI—FINANCIAL RELAY OBSERVATION

BERLIN—BROKER ACCESS

Arjun's attention fixed on the fourth and fifth entries.

"Dubai and Berlin," he said.

"Recent enough."

Aisha clicked deeper.

Names did not appear. Only asset codes. The system had reduced people to functions so thoroughly that even its own records refused them a biography.

Then one partial identifier surfaced. Not a full name.

A corrupted tag:

M-K / CIRCE / Pattern Variance Noted

Arjun came closer. The file was mostly unreadable. Only a few lines survived.

Asset demonstrates unscheduled hesitation during emotional compliance task.

Handler recommends reinforcement.

Secondary assessment: deviation may be exploitable before correction.

Do not terminate. Observe.

Aisha looked at Arjun.

"Someone inside CIRCE is breaking the pattern."

Until now, CIRCE had been a machine of conditioning. This was the first sign of friction inside it. Arjun looked at the words again. *Pattern Variance Noted*. The phrase was clinical. But beneath it, something alive moved. A person beginning to disobey rarely looked heroic at first. More often, disobedience began as a delay. A message not sent. A door not locked. A target not seduced fully. A question asked half a second too late. A hesitation so small that only a machine would record it.

"Preserve that thread. Do not reach out yet."

Then Arjun's operational phone vibrated on the table. The number was known only to three people. Aisha saw his face and fell silent. Arjun answered. "Yes."

For five seconds he listened. Then his expression altered so slightly that only Aisha noticed.

"When?"

Another pause.

"Send it to the secure drop. No one else sees it."

He ended the call.

Aisha closed the laptop halfway. "What happened?"

Arjun placed the phone down.

His voice was calm. "A body has been found in Berlin. A man carrying Farid's passport."

Aisha stared at him. "But Farid escaped."

"Then who is dead?"

The question was no longer who Farid was.

The question was how many Farids existed.

He said, "Someone the system no longer needed."

The ghost architect had not shown his face.

He had shown something more frightening.

His absence had structure.

Aisha sat back. Outside, Dubai continued its indifferent brilliance. Below the window, the marina shimmered—light on water, endlessly rearranging itself into patterns.

"Then whoever built Identity Zero," she said, "didn't start from nothing."

"No. They started from us."

The room was quiet for some time.

"The ghost architect," Aisha said. "Not a criminal who learnt to think like a state. A state actor who learnt to operate without one."

Arjun looked at the two screens side by side: Ravel's language and CIRCE's doctrine, separated by years and jurisdictions and several layers of deniability, yet unmistakably connected at the root.

"Then the person we're looking for isn't hiding from institutions," he said. "They're one of us. Or were."

Aisha held his gaze for a moment—steady, unhurried, the way she looked at things she had already half known and was waiting for evidence to confirm.

"Then we're not only chasing a system," she said. "We're chasing a decision someone made, once, inside a room very much like this one."

Arjun looked at the dead phone on the table. At the empty wallet address. At the CIRCE annotation and the Ravel echo and the Myanmar compound burning white in thermal satellite light.

"Yes," he said. "And they've been running ever since."

★ ★ ★



INTERLUDE II

Mila Kovács and the Pattern Variance

Mila Kovács learnt observation before she learnt trust. In the apartment where she grew up, silence was never empty. It carried the emotional pressure of adults who had survived too much history to speak plainly. Budapest in the late nineties still felt transitional, as though the city itself had not fully decided what version of itself it wished to become after the collapse of older certainties. Buildings were restored unevenly. Wealth arrived abruptly in some districts and never at all in others. People adapted by becoming inscrutable.

Mila learnt early that survival often depended on recognising mood before language. A tightening jaw. A delayed answer. A door closed too carefully. Patterns. Always patterns.

Her mother believed reinvention was a form of discipline. “Never let people know too much too quickly,” she used to say. “Information changes how they look at you.” Mila imbibed the lesson deeply. At university she discovered that people revealed themselves readily if they believed they were being understood rather than studied. That distinction fascinated her. She drifted through behavioural psychology, linguistics, and digital communications, never remaining long enough in any discipline to become visible inside it. She collected methods rather than credentials.

The recruitment did not resemble recruitment. Research contracts. Consulting invitations. Closed seminars discussing

behavioural modelling and adaptive influence systems. The people involved spoke calmly and intelligently, without ideology. That made them dangerous. One asked a question she remembered years later. “If intimacy could be modelled,” he said lightly over dinner, “would it still be real?”

Mila answered without hesitation. “Most people already perform versions of themselves. You’d only be formalising the process.”

The man smiled. Not because she was correct. Because she was useful.

CIRCE refined what life had already taught her. Observation. Mirroring. Emotional pacing. But the most important lesson came later, from an instructor with beautiful cuffs, dead eyes, and the courtesy of a man who believed cruelty became acceptable when grammatically precise.

“Cognitive Intimacy, Recognition and Compliance Engineering,” he told the recruits. “And the classical reference is intentional. Circé, in Homer, transforms men into animals—the crude reading. More accurately, she reveals the animal appetites beneath the heroic costume. Appetite. Fear. Desire. Loneliness. These are more reliable than ideology.”

He gestured towards a diagram on the screen: INTIMACY → RECOGNITION → TRUST → COMPLIANCE → ACCESS.

“CIRCE does not seduce bodies,” he said. “That is amateur work. CIRCE engineers recognition.”

A lonely customs officer became a clearance channel. A grieving widow became a compliance trigger. A junior clerk became a delay bypass. A minister’s aide became an unsigned note. A frightened migrant became a reusable script. A child’s voice became a key. A woman like Mila became a door that believed it was choosing whom to open for.

CIRCE preferred gradients. Attention, then familiarity. Familiarity, then dependence. Dependence, then shame. Shame, then

instruction. Instruction, then habit. Habit, eventually, required no handler.

The most important lesson: “Never create dependency through affection. Create it through recognition.” Affection faded. Recognition lingered. People did not become attached to operatives because they were attractive. They became attached because, briefly, they felt fully seen.

Mila became exceptionally good at it.

There had been a man in Prague. Not a target initially—merely an access point connected to a financial routing chain. Older. Divorced. Careful with language. The engagement should have lasted three weeks. It lasted four months, not because protocol failed but because he asked her one evening, “Do you ever get tired of performing calm?” He noticed absences, not operational details. The engagement ended two weeks after that. Officially reassigned, CIRCE said. No anomaly detected. Mila could unravel the sanitised language. After Prague, she became colder. More disciplined. Less available internally. CIRCE approved of the change.

Years blurred. Cities blurred. Geneva. Istanbul. Dubai. Tallinn. Everywhere the same architecture beneath different languages: loneliness, fear, pattern recognition, compliance. Mila stopped asking whether the work was moral. Systems of sufficient scale no longer operated within morality; they operated within sustainability. The question was never whether something was cruel. Only whether it functioned.

Then came Bangkok.

She noticed Arjun before he noticed the surveillance tail. Not because he lacked awareness. Because he processed information differently. Most people under observation either accelerated or withdrew. Arjun calibrated. He adjusted pace subtly. Changed routes without theatrics. Used reflections instead of direct confirmation. He behaved like someone who comprehended systems—without surrendering himself to them. That was unusual. And what followed

unsettled her further. Once they spoke, he attempted no dominance, no flirtation disguised as confidence, and no attempt to extract. Only attention. Clean. Measured. Human.

Afterwards, Mila replayed the encounter repeatedly with growing irritation. Not because she had failed to profile him. Because she had. And the profile did not fit comfortably inside CIRCE's logic. He had survived systems without becoming systemic himself. She no longer knew whether she had done the same.

Her first deviation was microscopic. A delayed report. An omitted detail. A moment of hesitation before compliance. Barely measurable. But systems like CIRCE noticed hesitation instinctively. That was the problem with architectures built around observation. Eventually, they observed their own operatives too closely.

Two nights before the instruction concerning Arjun Malhotra reached her, Mila entered the Falk Miksa Street apartment under a legacy access code that no one had revoked. She retrieved the drive from behind the skirting board. It contained the expected package. It also contained a cached behavioural archive she had not been sent to read.

She opened it because the first folder bore her initials.

M.K. / RETENTION PROFILE

The file was not cruel. That was worse. Cruelty could be dismissed as emotion. The file was temperate, structured, observant, and efficient.

Primary utility: controlled-intimacy access; high adaptability; strong affect regulation; low spontaneous disclosure. Retention strengths: professional pride; self-image as a disciplined instrument; absence of durable external attachment. Vulnerabilities: residual identity attachment under full-name use; intolerance for uncontrolled harm to minors; probable aversion to being handled as a replaceable function; heightened response to evidence of self-measurement. Pattern Variance Probability: moderate under exposure to child-subject material or personal disposability indicators. Correction options: reframe as

elite necessity; impose a loyalty test; if variance persists, terminate through reputational inversion or physical disposal.

Mila read the file three times. The file had predicted its own effect. That offended her most. She had always believed she understood rooms faster than the people who sent her into them. CIRCE had let her believe this because the belief improved performance. Pride, when measured, became fuel.

She scrolled further. A subfolder opened:

CHILDVOICE / SAFFRON / LIMITED PREVIEW

She should not have opened it. The transcript appeared.

Didi, don't leave me. Didi, I was good. Didi, why did you go? Didi, they said you forgot.

Mila moved back from the table. Her chair scraped the floor. She had used longing, grief, marital boredom, bureaucratic resentment, fantasies of rescue, memories of mothers, and photographs of children. She had told herself there were rules. Not good rules. Professional ones.

No uncontrolled harm to minors.

And:

No child attachment leverage except in sealed threat-simulation environments.

Those rules had never made CIRCE ethical. They had made it disciplined. Identity Zero had no discipline of that kind. It did not break rules. It absorbed them. The child-voices were not collateral. They were material.

She closed the transcript. The archive had logged her access. A notification appeared:

PATTERN VARIANCE: NOTED.

Then:

M.K. – OBSERVE, DO NOT TERMINATE.

The apartment seemed smaller. Not because she feared death—death had been on the table from the beginning. The fear was more precise. She had thought of herself as an operator inside a machine.

The file showed she was also one of its behaviours. Measured. Predicted. Contained. A function with expensive clothes. A door with the illusion of choosing who knocked.

She disconnected the drive and sat in the dark. The street below continued. A tram slid past, windows bright, faces briefly visible and then gone. Budapest remained elegant in the way old cities often were: built over violence, pretending that continuity was grace.

There was a difference between guilt and continued service. CIRCE had taught her to exploit that difference in others. Now, too late, she found it inside herself.

When the handler called, she answered.

"You accessed restricted material."

"Curiosity."

"That is unlike you."

"Then update the file."

A pause. "You are being assigned to corrective proximity. Indian target. Former signals. Emotional vulnerability through survivor attachment. Forty-eight hours."

"Name?"

"Arjun Malhotra. Associated survivor: Aisha Rahman. High instability. High attachment leverage. Child-voice trigger available if required."

Outside, a tram passed. The system had just made a mistake. Not by sharing information. By assuming that measurement constituted ownership.

"Receipt confirmed," Mila said.

She began to work. Not dramatically. Defection did not begin with courage. It began with inventory. She copied the M.K. retention profile. The child-voice index. The A.R. response references. The corrective proximity order. A partial routing path tied to Saffron Ledger. Enough to prove, not enough to be immediately understood. She hid one shard in the apartment wall, one in a coat she would

abandon, one inside a courier chain designed for art invoices and bored customs men. Old sins had logistical uses.

At 03:12, she drafted the first warning. Neither too complete nor too emotional.

FARID IS A ROLE, NOT A MAN. FOLLOW DEAD IDENTITIES, NOT LIVE MONEY. DO NOT TRUST A.K. INITIALS. THE SYSTEM OWNS THE PEN. FIND WHO TAUGHT IT TO WRITE.

She sent it through a relay that would look like noise unless someone was already listening for impossible grammar. Then she wrote a note for herself: *Reckoning is not redemption*. She placed it in her coat pocket. It was, perhaps, the first honest recognition of her guilt.

The first handler arrived at dawn. He came alone, which meant CIRCE still believed she was observable rather than lost. He entered with the second code and found the apartment apparently empty—coffee cup, old newspaper, unmade bed, and the screen displaying
PATTERN VARIANCE: NOTED.

By then Mila was two streets away, wearing a different coat, carrying three passports and one shard of evidence beneath the insole of her left shoe. The city was waking. Ordinary people performing their daily miracle of not knowing how close they stood to hidden machinery. Mila walked among them. The machine had measured her. Good. Let it believe the measurement was complete.

Behind her, inside CIRCE, a file changed status:

M.K. — PATTERN VARIANCE CONFIRMED. DO NOT TERMINATE. OBSERVE.

That too was a mistake. A system that watched a door too carefully sometimes forgot the window.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mila Breaks Pattern

Budapest

Budapest is a city that embodies divided histories. The Danube does not so much separate Buda from Pest as remember that they were once separate. The Chain Bridge stitches the two halves together with cast iron and stone, but the river keeps its own counsel. Empires have crossed it. Armies have bled beside it. At night, the Parliament glows on the eastern bank, the Chain Bridge holds its lights in patient arcs, and trams move along the embankment with the weary grace of old machinery still trusted by a modern city.

Mila Kovács was again in her corner table at the café near Falk Miksa Street. She had ordered black tea and not touched it. Across from her lay an envelope—cream paper, no markings, too ordinary. Ordinary things were dangerous because they did not ask to be remembered. She had received it twenty-six minutes earlier from a man she had never seen before and would not recognise again. He had approached her outside an antique shop, said in Hungarian that the river was high for this season, slipped the envelope inside the newspaper under her arm, and walked away.

The phrase was wrong. The Danube was not high. It meant the chain had activated.

Mila had entered the café, taken the corner table, and waited exactly seven minutes before opening the envelope. Discipline had

been taught to her before tenderness, before ambition. Inside the envelope was a single sheet. A hotel name in Dubai. A timestamp. A still image from a security feed: Arjun Malhotra, leaving a service corridor with blood on his left hand. Below it, a typed instruction:

SUBJECT HAS ENTERED ARCHITECTURE THREAD.
ASSESS PROXIMITY. RESTORE DISTANCE. DO NOT ENGAGE
DIRECTLY UNLESS REQUIRED.

No signature. CIRCE did not sign orders. It entered them into behaviour.

Mila read the instruction once, then again, then folded the sheet carefully and placed it back in the envelope. Her first response was not fear. It was recognition. Arjun had touched something he was not yet supposed to understand. The architecture thread—the point at which Identity Zero ceased to be a network of crimes and became a design. The tram vibrations distorted her reflection in the café glass, breaking her features. She watched the fragments reassemble.

Her phone vibrated.

CONFIRM RECEIPT.

The correct response was a four-digit code. Her thumb did not move. A waiter approached. Young. Student, probably. Apron slightly stained at the hip. He was not part of anything. That made him briefly precious. “No, thank you,” she said in Hungarian. He nodded and left.

The phone vibrated again.

CONFIRM RECEIPT.

Then:

HANDLER ARRIVAL: 22 MINUTES.

Mila left cash under the untouched tea and walked towards the river. She entered an antique shop on Falk Miksa Street—old wood, dust, porcelain from vanished households, and maps of countries that no longer existed in the forms in which they had been drawn. She selected a map of Pest from 1896 and brought it to the counter. While the shopkeeper wrapped it, she watched the street in the mirror behind him. A black car had slowed near the café. Two men inside.

Handler arrival was running eighteen minutes early. The delay had been classified above routine.

“Is there another exit?” she asked.

The old man looked at her longer than most civilians would. Then sighed. “Courtyard. Left. The gate sticks.”

“Thank you.”

“Do not come back.”

“I won’t.”

She crossed the storeroom, pushed through the gate hard, and emerged into a side lane.

The correct decision was disappearance: discard the phone, burn the route, and reach Vienna by dawn. But the envelope felt heavier than paper. Arjun had entered the architecture thread. Aisha was with him. CIRCE called such people contaminated witnesses. Identity Zero called them unstable variables. Mila understood them as dangerous for a different reason: they made other people remember that choice existed.

At a late-night internet café she assembled a prepaid SIM inside an old handset, composed a message to a dead-drop relay in a defunct academic mailing system that had once, through a chain of forwarding rules, touched European investigative networks, and sent it. Not too complete. Complete warnings looked like traps. She typed:

FARID IS A ROLE. ARCHITECTURE THREAD ACTIVE.
CIRCE VARIANCE FILES BEING CLEANED. BERLIN BODY IS
NOT THE COURIER. FOLLOW DEAD IDENTITIES, NOT LIVE
MONEY. DO NOT TRUST A.K. INITIALS. LOCKER 47. FALK
DISTRICT. MAP OF PEST. TWELVE HOURS ONLY.

She deleted the last instruction and replaced it with:

THE SYSTEM OWNS THE PEN. FIND WHO TAUGHT IT TO
WRITE.

Then she went to the public locker facility near the tram stop and placed the wrapped map—the drive shard hidden inside its paper backing—in locker 47. Not because the number mattered. Because

randomness, when truly random, could still look like a pattern to machines.

She had purchased a cheap coffee from a kiosk and was sitting on a public bench assembling the prepaid handset when the tram arrived. She boarded. Almost empty. A couple speaking German near the rear. An old woman with a shopping bag. A teenage boy with headphones staring at the river as though waiting for it to answer a private question.

Her new prepaid phone vibrated—the device she had not yet activated. Impossible. The message appeared without sender identification: You were told to restore distance. Then: Instead, you created contact. Then: Return voluntarily, and correction will remain internal.

The tram slowed. At the next stop, two men waited on the platform. Men who had learnt to be empty in public spaces. The doors opened. They entered from opposite ends. Mila kept her eyes on her lap. She had no weapon except what the system had made of her. One man sat beside her. “Mila,” he said softly in English.

She looked up as if surprised. He was young. Balkan, perhaps. Smooth skin, clean jaw, eyes without humour. “You missed confirmation.”

“I was shopping.”

“For maps?”

“For nostalgia.”

His hand moved towards her wrist. She let it. His thumb pressed against her pulse. “Your heart is fast.”

“That happens near handsome men.”

He smiled. “Come with us.”

“Where?”

“To correct misunderstanding.”

The second man was two seats away. Mila leant closer to the first and lowered her voice. “Did they tell you why I delayed?”

His eyes changed. “What?” “They didn’t.” His grip tightened.

She whispered, "The Berlin body is wrong."

Half a second of processing. That was all she needed.

She drove her heel onto his instep, twisted her wrist towards his thumb, and rose as he bent forward. Her elbow caught his throat. The teenage boy shouted. She threw the hot coffee into the second man's face. He recoiled. She moved to the emergency handle and pulled.

The tram screamed into braking. Passengers lurched. Metal shrieked. Lights flickered. The first man grabbed her coat and caught fabric, not body. She slipped out of it. In the chaos of the halt she reached the centre doors. The driver shouted. The doors did not open. The second man recovered. Mila lifted the emergency hammer and struck the side window. Once. Twice. It broke outward. Cold air rushed in. The teenage boy stared at her as if she had stepped out of a film he had not agreed to watch.

"I am sorry," Mila said to no one in particular.

Then she climbed through the broken window and dropped onto the gravel beside the tracks. She landed badly, pain shooting up her ankle. She ran.

Behind her, the men shouted. One climbed out after her and was trapped among the passengers and broken glass and the sudden civic chaos that followed. Mila crossed the road between moving headlights, chose the building nearest without a camera above the door, opened the old lock with a flat strip of metal from her sleeve seam, and entered the stairwell. Damp coats. Old plaster. Memory struck so sharply that for one second she was nineteen again in a transit flat outside Kyiv. Then she gathered herself and climbed.

She exited through a service window onto a rear fire escape, crossed into the adjoining building through a laundry balcony where bedsheets hung like surrender flags. Two buildings away she reached a narrow lane behind a bakery and stopped only when her body forced her to. Her breath came hard. Her ankle throbbed. Her coat was gone with the main operational device inside it. The locker receipt remained tucked beneath the lining of her dress.

She leant against the wall and laughed once. Not joy. Not madness. A crack in obedience. Snow began to fall lightly.

Three blocks away, at a late-night internet café, she sent a second message through a different dead path—one linked to a journalist in Prague who had investigated biometric fraud before being sued into silence by a vendor that no longer existed under the same name.

A MAN CAN DIE CARRYING A NAME THAT IS STILL WALKING. FARID IS NOT DEAD. MILA KOVÁCS IS ALSO NOT YET DEAD.

She stared at the last line. *Reckless. Necessary. Names mattered. That was what the architect had understood and had stolen.*

Outside, the snow had thickened into fine white static beneath the streetlights. She stood under an awning and looked at her reflection in the dark glass of a closed pharmacy. No coat. Hair loose. One cheek cut by tram glass. Ankle unstable. Eyes too bright. Not a controlled intimacy asset. Not a function. No longer fully compliant.

Her new phone vibrated. Impossible—she had not activated it again. The message appeared without sender identification: Pattern variance confirmed. Then the screen went dead.

Somewhere in the system, a file had changed status. Perhaps she had been marked for correction or termination. Or for further use. She slipped the dead phone into a drain and walked towards the river.

Behind her, the tramline remained stalled, passengers giving statements, handlers adjusting stories, cameras uploading fragments into systems that would argue with one another by morning. Ahead, the Danube moved black and patient beneath the bridges.

In the language of CIRCE, what she had done were not acts. They were symptoms. In the language she had nearly forgotten, they were choices. And somewhere far from Budapest, if the relay survived long enough, Arjun Malhotra would receive the first human signal from inside the machine.





CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Emotional Contagion

Dubai

Dubai looked cleaner after violence. That was one of the city's more disturbing talents. By noon, the service road had returned to its ordinary function. Construction workers crossed under the flyover with lunch containers. Delivery vans reversed into loading bays. The scraped fencing bore a blue sheet with the contractor's logo. The city had closed over the wound without a seam.

Arjun watched from the rear seat of a hired car changed twice since morning. His left shoulder had stiffened. His ribs protested when the car turned too sharply. A narrow cut across his palm had been sealed by a Pakistani pharmacist with medical adhesive and a lack of questions. Aisha sat beside him, hair still damp from a hurried shower, laptop balanced on her knees. Fatigue had sharpened her features rather than softening them.

On the screen were three open threads. Farid. The dead man in Berlin carrying Farid's passport. The corrupted CIRCE tag: M-K / Pattern Variance Noted. A fourth thread had arrived less than an hour earlier through a dead relay that should have been inactive.

Aisha had read the message twice before showing it to Arjun.

FARID IS A ROLE. ARCHITECTURE THREAD ACTIVE.
CIRCE VARIANCE FILES BEING CLEANED. BERLIN BODY IS
NOT THE COURIER. FOLLOW DEAD IDENTITIES, NOT LIVE

MONEY. DO NOT TRUST A.K. INITIALS. THE SYSTEM OWNS THE PEN. FIND WHO TAUGHT IT TO WRITE.

No sender name. No return route. No guarantee it was not bait. The message knew too much: that Farid was alive, that the Berlin body was not the courier, that the A.K. initials were a lure. It repeated the phrase from the CIRCE archive with the intimacy of someone who had been inside the doctrine or near its origin. It had arrived through a route old enough to suggest human improvisation rather than automated manipulation. Machines were predictable in their deception. Human beings were not.

“Do you think it’s her?” Aisha asked. “M-K.”

“It wants us to think so.”

“She confirmed the Berlin body before public reporting. She warned us about the A.K. initials before we could chase them. She told us to follow dead identities.”

“Yes. Either someone inside CIRCE is breaking pattern, or Identity Zero has begun constructing the idea of defection for us to follow.”

“Both may be true simultaneously,” Aisha said.

Arjun looked out of the window. “Yes.”

Aisha returned to the laptop. “The man in Berlin carrying Farid’s passport had no match in German systems before last week. But his death pathway was pre-seeded. Hospital intake shell. Temporary insurance marker. Rental address. Employment tag. All created within a forty-eight-hour window before the body appeared. When police found him, the documents didn’t prove who he was. They proved who the system needed him to have been.”

“Administrative disposal,” Arjun said.

“There are seventeen possible Farids. Not all activated.”

He looked at the road. “Names without bodies.”

“Bodies with assigned names,” she replied.

The meeting with Nabil Qureshi had been arranged through a Gulf-based investigative journalist. Former compliance officer. He claimed to have seen the Farid pattern before—dead identities used not merely to move money but to test institutional obedience. One meeting. No phones. No aides. No recordings. Aisha brought all.

In the underground parking of the serviced apartment tower, Arjun noted camera positions and blind patches. Aisha looked around. “This is a terrible place to meet.”

In the lift, she stood close enough for her shoulder to brush his sleeve. Neither acknowledged it. Apartment 4207 was halfway down the forty-second floor corridor. The door was ajar.

“That’s not good,” she whispered.

Arjun approached from the side and pushed the door with his knuckles. No voices. No movement. No air-conditioning hum. The living room had been arranged to look untouched. On the dining table lay a laptop with a black screen. Beside it, a printed photograph.

The bedroom door was closed. Arjun opened it. The bedroom was empty. But the wall opposite the bed had been covered with photographs. Not of Arjun. Of Aisha. At airports. In conference corridors. Outside safe houses. In Bangkok. In Geneva. In a hospital room, asleep in a chair, her head tilted towards an IV stand, one small brown hand emerging from the blanket beside her.

Aisha took one step back. Arjun moved in front of her without appearing to. In the centre of the photographs, a single printed line:

SURVIVAL CREATES ATTACHMENT. ATTACHMENT
CREATES ACCESS.

The apartment door closed behind them. Soft, precise. The lights went out. Arjun’s earpiece died. Aisha’s detector gave a brief burst of static and went silent. A low vibration began in the walls, not loud enough to hear clearly but deep enough to disturb balance.

“Arjun”, Aisha whispered.

“I’m here.” His reply was comforting.

A strip of red emergency light glowed under the bedroom door, though no such light had been visible before. A female voice came from the living room speakers. Soft. Familiar enough to be cruel. "Aisha Rahman. Subject demonstrates persistent post-captivity resistance, compensated by attachment transfer to protective male authority." Aisha's hands clenched.

"Do not listen," Arjun said.

The voice continued: "Attachment figure: Arjun Malhotra. Function: stabilising witness. Vulnerability: guilt displacement."

"That's from my file—how do they..." Aisha asked.

"Later."

The bedroom door clicked. A figure emerged from the darkness, low and fast. The first blow caught Arjun across the side of the head. He pivoted with it and drove his elbow backwards into ribs. A grunt. Male. Strong. Another figure moved near Aisha, wearing dark clothes and a respirator mask. She stepped back, struck the edge of the bed, and went to one knee. The first attacker closed again and drove two precise jabs into Arjun's ribs—the injured side. *They knew about his injury.* Pain exploded through his torso. He trapped the third strike, twisted inside the man's reach, and drove him into the wardrobe. The mirror cracked. Their reflections appeared in the fracture.

In the living room, the voice continued. "Fear response suppressed. Anger displaced. Dependency denied."

Aisha's second attacker grabbed her wrist. She went limp first—the man overcommitted—and then drove her knee upward and seized the bedside lamp. Glass broke. The red emergency light caught the fragments falling.

The blade came in low from Arjun's attacker. He caught the wrist and turned his body into the strike. The edge cut across his forearm instead of his abdomen. He slammed his forehead into the respirator. Once. Twice. Plastic cracked. Then the speaker's voice changed. Not female. A child. In Bengali-accented English: "Didi, don't leave me."

Aisha stopped moving.

Arjun understood at once. The attack had never been designed merely to harm them. It was designed to make one of them fail internally. The attacker nearest Aisha reached into his sleeve. Needle. Arjun drove his bleeding forearm into the man's throat and felt the cut open wider. The needle grazed Aisha's sleeve and struck the carpet. Arjun seized the wrist and slammed it against the floor until the syringe rolled free. The other attacker kicked his ribs. He folded.

Aisha saw him fold. Something changed in her. She grabbed the syringe, rose, and drove it into the thigh of the advancing man. Whatever had been meant for her entered him. He collapsed against the bed. The first attacker withdrew.

The lights came on. Too bright. Arjun on one knee, his forearm bleeding. Aisha was standing beside him, face pale, eyes alive with controlled violence. The fire alarm erupted. Sprinklers opened across the ceiling. Water fell over photographs, electronics, and blood.

The remaining attacker ran. Aisha followed as far as the threshold. The corridor was empty—no footsteps, no lift sound, no panic. As if the building had swallowed him. The speaker voice returned beneath the alarm, soft and female again: “Emotional contagion successful.” Then it died.

Aisha stood in the doorway, soaked and shaking with anger. Arjun forced himself upright, one hand on his ribs, the other bleeding.

“Come back,” he said. She did not move.

“Aisha.” She turned.

There were tears in her eyes. She looked humiliated by them—furious that the system had found a voice inside her that she had not given permission to use.

“That child,” she said.

“I know.”

“They used her.”

“They recorded her. Or reconstructed her.”

Arjun came closer. “We leave now.”

“Nabil?”

“Was never coming. This was never a meeting.”

Aisha looked at the living room. The photograph on the dining table had begun to curl under the water. She walked to it and lifted it carefully by the edges. It showed a man lying on the pavement in Berlin. Face blurred. His passport was open beside him. Farid’s name was visible.

On its back was handwritten in black ink:

A death is only useful when properly witnessed.

Aisha handed it to Arjun. She returned to the bedroom wall and tore down all her photographs. She gathered the wet photographs and shoved them into her bag.

Arjun watched without stopping her. Evidence mattered. So did reclaiming one’s own face.

In the corridor, doors had begun opening at last. A man in a bathrobe shouted about sprinklers. A woman cried into her phone. Someone asked whether there was a fire. Building security would arrive in less than a minute, police in five, and private security before both if the building had the right contracts.

Aisha slung the bag over her shoulder.

The attacker on the bedroom floor was still breathing.

Arjun checked his pulse, then pulled off the cracked respirator. The face beneath was young. South Asian. Maybe twenty-five. No distinguishing marks. No fear. Just rage turning slowly into chemical sleep. Aisha looked down at him. If detained, he would be a worker with false documents. A mentally unstable intruder. A dead man in a live body. A nobody. Or worse, someone whose records made Arjun and Aisha look like the intruders.

Not only did Identity Zero create attackers, it created context. Arjun took the man’s glove, his cracked respirator, and the empty syringe casing. Small things. Portable truths.

Then they left through the service stairwell and descended fourteen floors before the building’s public alarm system redirected residents towards the main exits. On the twenty-eighth floor, they

crossed into a maintenance corridor, moved through a laundry service area, and exited into a staff lift that required a keycard Aisha persuaded with a device no larger than a coin.

The silence between them was full of what the apartment had tried to force into the open.

They crossed behind a waste compactor and emerged into the bright sunshine of afternoon. For a moment, sunlight blinded them. Aisha stopped beneath the shadow of an overpass and bent forward, hands on her knees. Arjun stood beside her, bleeding into his sleeve.

When she spoke, her voice was low. "I thought I was past that."

"No one is past what was done to them," Arjun said. "They only become harder to direct with it."

She looked at him. Then: "They called it successful."

"Emotional contagion. They wanted one fear to infect the other. Mine into you. Yours into mine. Make us protect each other badly."

Aisha wiped water from her face. "They were measuring us. Attachment. Response time. Protective reflex. Trauma triggers. How much pressure before we make emotional decisions."

She paused. "The message from M-K. Maybe this is why she said 'restore distance'. She wasn't only warning us about operational proximity. She was warning us about this."

A new message arrived on Arjun's operational phone from an unknown route. Five words only:

NOW YOU UNDERSTAND PROXIMITY.

Aisha read it over his shoulder. "CIRCE?"

"Maybe."

"M-K?"

"No," Arjun said. "This one wants us ashamed." He preserved the packet and deleted the display copy.

"Where do we go?" she asked.

"Somewhere they would consider too public to stage another correction." He looked towards the older district beyond the towers,

where the city's glass discipline gave way to markets, abras, and crowded lanes. "Deira."

They began walking. Behind them, the tower's fire alarm pulsed into the afternoon, a small emergency already being translated into maintenance reports and insurance claims. By evening there would be no record of a targeted psychological ambush in apartment 4207. Only a sprinkler malfunction. An injured guest who had checked out. A maintenance worker who had never existed.

And two investigators who had learnt that Identity Zero could reach beyond databases, beyond money, beyond documents. It could enter a room. Turn off the lights. Use the dead as sound. And make survival feel like betrayal.





CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Aisha's Fear

Deira, Dubai

Deira did not pretend to be clean. That was why Arjun trusted it more. The old district carried its life openly: spice sacks stacked near shopfronts, men arguing over invoices in three languages, porters bent under cartons, gold merchants watching the street from behind glass. The air was thick with cardamom, diesel, frying oil, old wood, and the creek. Nothing here was seamless. That was its only form of honesty.

Arjun and Aisha entered separately, reconvened in the back room of a spice wholesaler whose Malayali owner, Ibrahim, placed a first-aid box on the table and told them they had two hours before his cousin came for the inventory. He left without asking what had happened. The room was narrow, windowless, and lined with cartons marked in Arabic, English, and Hindi. A ceiling fan turned with more sound than effect.

For a few moments, neither spoke. They listened to footsteps in the lane outside. To the creak of the fan. Then Aisha placed her bag on the table and began removing the photographs from apartment 4207. One by one. Wet. Curled at the edges. Her own face returning from paper in fragments. Geneva corridor. Bangkok hotel lobby. Hospital chair. Airport queue. Outside a safe house. A still from a compound corridor she had not known had been recorded.

She laid them out with methodical care. One photograph stopped her. Taken through glass. Aisha asleep in a chair beside a hospital bed. The patient not visible—only one hand emerging from under a blanket. Small. Brown. A child's hand.

Arjun saw the change in her face and looked away.

She held the photograph until the damp paper bent. "They used her voice," she said.

"After I came out, there were recordings," Aisha continued. "Intake interviews. Coercion clips. Compliance tests. The compounds recorded everything because fear was easier to reuse when indexed." She laughed once, briefly and without amusement. "I told myself I deleted them because no survivor should have her terror stored as training material. But that wasn't the real reason."

Arjun waited. The fan creaked overhead.

"I deleted them because I could not bear the thought that one day I might hear her again."

The words seemed to exhaust the room.

"Who was she?"

Outside, a man shouted a price. Another laughed. A scooter horn cut through the lane and vanished.

"Her name was Meher," Aisha said. "Eleven or twelve. They wrote fourteen on the paperwork because fourteen looks less criminal. She had been brought from Cox's Bazar through a chain of promises. Work. Documents. Later, school. She believed everything the first week—not because she was foolish, but because children understand cruelty before they understand organised deceit. She thought if she obeyed enough, someone would eventually behave like the adults in stories."

Arjun's jaw tightened.

"They used her for voice work. Scripts. Pleas. Emergency calls. Fake daughter calls to elderly targets. She had a soft voice. People stayed on the line longer." Aisha smoothed the photograph with two fingers. "I was older. I understood more. That made me useful in a

different way—explaining emotional timing to operators who could imitate grief but not understand it. The system had made pain collaborative. Not merely to harm the victim, but to make the victim participate in the harm's improvement."

"Meher used to sit beside me during blackout hours. When the compound cut network access for punishment or control. No calls. No screens. Just waiting. She would ask me to tell her about cities. Real ones. I told her about Kolkata, though I barely knew about it. About trains with windows and families who argued over food and mothers who shouted because shouting was a way of loving."

Her mouth trembled once. "She asked me once whether the sea in Cox's Bazar would remember her."

Arjun closed his eyes briefly. Aisha saw it.

"Don't," she said. He opened them. "Don't make that face. Memory doesn't purify suffering. Sometimes it is only a room you are forced to re-enter whilst the people who built it remain outside."

"That may be true," he said.

It steadied her more than denial would have.

"What happened to her?" he asked.

Aisha looked at him. Then: "I left her."

The sentence arrived without drama, without self-pity, without request for absolution. Arjun said nothing. Aisha's eyes hardened because she had said the thing at the centre and now had to hold it without flinching.

"The night I escaped, there was no plan to save anyone. A guard had been moved. A door code unchanged. A rainstorm that interfered with one camera. Eleven minutes of misalignment."

"Meher was in the lower room."

"Locked." Aisha said the word as though it still weighed something.

"I had imagined that if the moment came, I would become brave. That the body would know what morality required. But when the door opened, I ran towards the exit. I heard her call once. A single word."

The fan turned. The city continued outside.

"I kept running," Aisha said.

Arjun leant against the wall. "Survival is not consent."

"Is that what you tell yourself?"

"When needed. Though it doesn't work."

She looked at him. Not with anger. With recognition. His guilt had a different shape but was not foreign. He understood what it meant to have stayed too long inside something wrong and called it discipline.

"In the apartment," Aisha said, "when the voice came through the speakers, I knew it was not real. Constructed. Reconstructed. Built from stolen breath. But my body didn't know."

"They don't need to deceive the mind," Arjun said. "They only need to reach whatever part of the body still believes it's back there."

She pressed the photograph flat against the table. "That is emotional contagion. Not weakness. Infection. One remembered fear enters the room, and everything reorganises around it. They used Meher against me to test your response. They used your protective instinct against you. They were measuring how much pressure it takes before we make decisions with the body instead of the mind."

"And how much does it take?"

"More than tonight." Her jaw set. "This time."

She searched the string from apartment 4207 across cached fragments. One response appeared:

SAFFRON LEDGER/CHILDVOICE/ARCHIVAL EMOTION SETS.

Then deeper:

R-CHILD/A.R. RESPONSE PROFILE/M-VOICE BUILD 7.

"A.R. That's me. Build 7." She looked up. "Not a recording. A version. The seventh attempt to reconstruct Meher's voice using my documented response profile as validation."

She got up abruptly. Arjun moved, then stopped. When she turned back, her face had passed through grief and come out somewhere harder.

“They improved her. They iterated on a dead child’s voice until it produced maximum compliance in the specific survivor who had known her. Then they deployed it as a weapon.”

Her hand steadied. “Then we find the archive.”

“Yes.”

“Not only as evidence.”

“No.”

The honesty held between them without requiring elaboration. They both understood the competing imperatives: preserving Saffron as evidence to identify and prosecute; destroying it so it could not be used again. The law wanted the first. Aisha wanted both and neither simultaneously. Proof required preservation. Mercy sometimes required destruction. No clean answer existed. That was the correct moral landscape.

A new packet arrived through the unknown relay. A locker receipt. Budapest. Locker 47.

Below it:

SHE KEPT THE MAP. THEY KEPT THE CHILDREN.

Attached:

SAFFRON_PARTIAL.KEY.

“Is that from M-K?” Arjun asked.

“I don’t know. But the key is incomplete. By itself it opens nothing. But it proves the archive exists and proves someone inside had access.”

Aisha looked at the message again. They kept the children.

“Arjun. If that archive contains Meher—”

“We will find it.”

“And if finding it means choosing between evidence and erasure?”

“Then we choose with full knowledge of what either costs. Without pretending one option is clean.”

She gathered the photographs from the table. All except one. The one of Meher's hand she folded once and placed inside the inner pocket of her shirt, close to her body, where evidence became something more private than proof. Arjun did not comment.

Ibrahim knocked. Two men outside asking about a woman with wet hair. Perhaps three minutes, perhaps one.

He shifted a stack of cartons to reveal a low service hatch. "Perfume shop next door. Then the alley. Then the creek."

They went through. The air beyond smelt of oud and dust. Aisha heard Ibrahim's voice rise immediately into offended, perfectly calibrated deflection: "In this market everyone arrives wet and injured. Buy spices or leave."

She almost smiled, despite everything.

They moved through the darkening lanes carrying a dead child's name, a partial key to an archive of preserved fear, and the clear understanding that Identity Zero no longer merely stole identities. It preserved pain. It refined it. It sent it back. And somewhere inside that obscenity, Aisha's fear had been turned not into obedience but into direction.





CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Compound

Myanmar

Northern Myanmar did not announce its borders cleanly, nor did it invite scrutiny. Decades of conflict had created spaces where authority existed in negotiated fragments, and in those fragments, systems like Identity Zero required absence, not permission. The compound did not look out of place there. It looked inevitable.

The hills rose in dark folds under a low sky. Mist clung to the treetops, moving slowly through the valleys. Narrow roads cut through forested slopes and disappeared behind bamboo and corrugated roofing. Motorbikes carried sacks, men, fuel cans, rice, medicine, and sometimes people who did not look up when vehicles passed. The region had learnt the economy of silence.

Arjun Malhotra watched it from a ridge two kilometres east, lying on his stomach beneath a screen of wet leaves, with binoculars pressed lightly against his eyes. His injured ribs were taped beneath his shirt. The pain became duller during the journey from Dubai but not kinder. Beside him, Aisha adjusted the drone receiver under a camouflage sheet. She had slept three hours in the last forty-eight. The exhaustion showed only when she was still.

Below them, the compound occupied a cleared basin between two wooded slopes, connected to the nearest formal road only by a dirt track wide enough for trucks but narrow enough to vanish beneath the

canopy from above. A perimeter fence ran in hard angular lines. Watchtowers at four corners, their floodlights facing inward as much as outward. Long rectangular buildings arranged with factory efficiency. Not a prison. Not a call centre. Not a military site. All three.

The drone feed showed what binoculars could not: heat signatures, movement cycles, guard rotations, power lines, and generator units. A covered loading bay near the western wall. A smaller building set apart, with no windows and three independent power feeds. "That isolated building," Arjun said. "Redundant cooling. Shielded cabling. No staff movement during shift change. Data core, detention block, or both."

Aisha marked the first patrol cycle. "Six external guards visible. Two at the east gate, two along the southern fence, one in the northwest tower, and one at the loading bay."

"Internal?"

"Too many bodies to read cleanly. Hundreds."

Arjun lowered the binoculars. A truck arrived through the northern track. Men climbed from the rear—too thin, too hesitant, and too many looking at the ground. A woman in a red jacket tried to stand straight as she descended. A guard struck the side of the truck with a stick, not hitting her, merely measuring. Aisha's hands froze over the controls. Arjun saw it. "Stay with the drone," he said quietly.

"I am."

The group was divided at the loading bay. Phones in one crate. Documents in another. One man protested when a guard took something from his pocket. His protest was noted, his face photographed, and he was led separately towards the eastern block. "Orientation," Aisha said.

At 14:10, the first shift change. Building Two released approximately eighty people into the yard, young, wearing identical grey shirts, heads down, hands visible. At 14:17, guards escorted six into the isolated building. At 14:22, generator output increased. At 14:31, a signal burst left the compound through a directional link

aimed south-west. Aisha captured a fragment. "Packet structure resembles the Dubai apartment speaker system."

Then a string appeared in the intercepted local network traffic:
SAFFRON_LEDGER/ARCHIVE_SYNC/PARTIAL

Aisha's breathing stopped for a second. She triangulated the source. "Inside the compound. Isolated building." The air between them tightened. Meher's voice had a geography now. Not certainty. But direction. Aisha looked down at the compound with an expression Arjun had not seen before.

"They kept it here."

"Part of it."

"Enough."

At 15:02, the signal burst repeated. Packet header:
R-CHILD/M-VOICE BUILD 7/FIELD TEST RESULT.

Arjun took the laptop gently before Aisha's hands could shake against the keys.

"I'm fine," she said. Her eyes flashed.

"No. You are functional. That is not the same thing."

For a second she looked as if she might strike him. Then she looked away. The truth did what comfort could not. She drew a slow breath. "Give it back."

He handed it over. She copied the packet.

"They tested Meher's voice in Dubai and synced the result back here. The archive adapts."

"Then we poison the refinement," she said. "Feed it contradictions. False emotional responses. Corrupted profiles. If Saffron Ledger learns from field results, it can be made to distrust its own models."

"Can you do that?"

"Not from here. But maybe inside."

A low whistle came from downslope—two notes, then one. Arjun answered with one. Ko Than, their local guide, emerged from the foliage: short, wiry, weather-beaten, his rifle slung down. Former

militia driver. Former smuggler. Former prisoner of three different armed groups. His English was limited but precise where danger was concerned.

He said, "Road change. North track. More guards tonight. Big car from east. No uniform. No dust. Before dark." No dust meant civilian, diplomatic, or high-level criminal. Only men who did not ask permission arrived clean in places built from mud.

At 16:11, two black SUVs emerged from a concealed eastern approach and stopped at a secondary gate camouflaged into the fence line with netting and brush. They entered without inspection. The first stopped outside the isolated building. A man stepped out. Tall. Grey suit. No tie. He carried the authority of an owner rather than a visitor. The woman supervisor met him, her head lowered slightly in protocol.

Arjun said, "Zoom to maximum."

The drone used a thermal plume from the generator shed to mask its approach. The man turned. For one second, the camera caught his profile. The image blurred. Then sharpened. The offline comparison returned one low-confidence association from a closed biometric-policy archive:

POSSIBLE MATCH: DR. ELIAN VOSS. FORMER ADVISER, CENTRE FOR CIVIC IDENTITY AND DIGITAL INCLUSION. STATUS: UNKNOWN.

"He was supposed to be dead," Aisha whispered. "Boating accident off Malta. Six years ago. Body never recovered." Arjun looked at the name. The Centre. London. The ghost architecture. Not the architect, perhaps. But someone who had walked near the room where the doctrine learnt to speak.

A beam of interference rolled across the compound's upper airspace. The drone feed degraded. Aisha dropped it below the treeline. Ko Than muttered in Burmese. "Now they know birds are not all birds."

Arjun looked at the last frozen image. Dr. Elian Voss. Dead man. Identity adviser. A definitive Centre link, arriving through a hidden gate at a compound where human fear was refined into reusable behavioural weapons.

Aisha said, “This could be the hinge. Voss connects the doctrine to the compound.”

They withdrew downslope before the floodlights swept the ridge, moving through wet undergrowth in silence. At an abandoned pump house swallowed by vines, Aisha extracted a thin line of metadata from the last signal burst. No file, no message—only routing discipline.

“This archive doesn’t sit only in the compound,” she said. “Mirrored nodes. Berlin. Dubai. Singapore. One unlabelled node in India.”

“Where?”

“Not enough data.” She dug deeper. A partial string appeared:
IND/CIV-REG/EMERGENCY FALLBACK

Arjun went still. Civil registry. Emergency fallback. That phrase did not belong to a criminal compound unless the compound had access to state-level identity contingencies. Aisha understood at the same moment. “The kill-switch.”

Ko Than stood at the entrance listening to the forest. “We go soon.”

Aisha saved the string and shut the system down. Then she took out Meher’s photograph and looked at it once. She did not cry. She replaced it close to her body and got up.

Arjun watched her. “Ready?”

They slipped from the pump house just as the compound’s floodlights sliced through the mist, their beams narrowly missing the team’s heels. White light moved over fence, road, and jungle edge. Searching. Measuring. Training itself on the dark. The machine had become visible. Enough to know where it breathed.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Choice to Betray

Budapest

Mila had always been taught that betrayal was not an act. It was like a fever—a room cooled before anyone noticed the window had been opened. A voice softened half a degree before the lie arrived. A hand hovered over a keypad. By the time betrayal became visible, the system had already failed to measure its first movement.

But CIRCE measured everything. That was why Mila knew she had very little time.

She woke in a rented room above a closed photography studio, a knife under the pillow, her ankle bandaged badly, snow light pressing through the curtains. The room had been arranged using an identity she had used once before—a Slovenian documentary assistant with a tax number, two unpaid parking fines, and an allergy to penicillin. The studio owner believed she was in Prague. The bank believed Ljubljana. The phone company believed Vienna.

She sat up slowly. Pain rose from her ankle. The cut on her cheek had dried into a thin red line. Her coat was gone with her main device inside it. On the small table beside the bed lay what remained of her choices: a prepaid handset, two passports, one envelope of cash, a lipstick with a ceramic blade hidden in its casing, a strip of sedative patches, the locker receipt from Falk district, and a half-burnt

photograph of Arjun Malhotra leaving the Dubai service corridor with blood on his hand.

She picked up the photograph. His face had not been visible in the still, only his posture: controlled injury, contained force, a man refusing to limp because someone watching might learn too much. That was what had disturbed her in Bangkok. Not his intelligence—vanity wore that often. What disturbed her was his refusal to participate in the expected transaction. Men looked at Mila in predictable ways. Arjun had looked as though he was recording the weather. Not ignoring her. Not admiring her. Seeing the operation around her before deciding what she was inside it. That kind of attention made concealment work harder.

Her prepaid handset vibrated. No number. No greeting.

Only:

VIENNA / 19:40 / PLATFORM 8.

Then:

CORRECTION WINDOW STILL AVAILABLE.

Mila smiled faintly. CIRCE had elegant vocabulary. Correction meant confinement before disposal. Voluntary return meant permission to walk into the room before the door was locked. She deleted the message and removed the battery.

She washed her face in cold water, changed into dark trousers and a woollen sweater, trimmed her hair with nail scissors, and darkened it with temporary dye. The result was imperfect. That helped. Too perfect meant preparation. 'Imperfect' meant hurry and harmlessness.

Before leaving, she opened the old wardrobe and removed from behind a loose panel at the back a packet she had placed there eighteen months earlier. Inside: a small drive, a keycard, and a folded sheet containing names—not full names, but fragments. Initials, asset tags, dead drops, training phrases. Things too partial to expose the machine but enough to prove it had once touched the places it denied knowing. She had intended to use it every day and chosen not to. Postponement was the most durable form of obedience.

By noon, Budapest had turned bright. The snow had become dirty along the kerbs. Falk Miksa Street was open again, its antique shops restored to daylight discretion. Mila walked past the café without slowing and continued to the public locker facility. Locker 47 was still closed. She stood before it with the receipt in her hand and felt the strangest impulse—to laugh. After years of false passports, dead drops, and human lives converted into procedure, the fate of one fragment now depended on a tourist locker.

She entered the code. The locker clicked. The wrapped map of the Pest district remained untouched. She slid it into her bag. As she stood up, the phone she was not carrying vibrated. From inside the locker. At the back, taped beneath the shelf, a second device had been placed. Its screen lit up:

THANK YOU FOR CONFIRMING ACCESS.

Then:

CORRECTION WINDOW CLOSED.

She walked out of the facility. They had not needed to open the locker. They had only needed to know who did. The shard was either already transmitted through its own proximity field or had remained unexamined because they wanted her to carry it further. Either way, destruction was the safer course. Delivery was the necessary one.

She crossed the street and entered a small church whose door stood open. Wax. Old stone. Candles near a side altar. An elderly woman three rows from the front, lips moving silently. A man in a heavy coat, head bowed. Mila sat near the rear. CIRCE liked churches—not for God but for confession patterns. People who believed they were unobserved became legible.

She opened the map wrapping under cover of her coat. The shard was still inside. Small. Dull. Almost ridiculous. She could walk to the candles and drop it into the flame. Evidence gone. Her last leverage gone. Perhaps enough time remaining to disappear into some rural

room, cash monthly, silence. She had been trained to become anyone. Small enough to survive.

The elderly woman crossed herself. Mila looked at the crucifix above the altar and felt nothing theological. Only the old cruelty of choice. If she destroyed the shard, she might save herself a few more days. If she delivered it, she gave Arjun and Aisha a door into Saffron Ledger—into the archive where fear had been preserved, improved, and sent back wearing voices of the dead.

A training voice from years ago surfaced with uncomfortable precision: Compassion is a breach in operational integrity.

Then her younger, obedient reply: Then remove it.

Mila opened her eyes. “No,” she whispered.

The man in the heavy coat raised his head slightly. Mila stood and left the church. The first betrayal had been delay. The second had been contact. The third would require intention.

By mid-afternoon she had changed routes four times and clothing twice. She bought a tourist guidebook from a kiosk, removed its inner spine, slid the shard into the hollow, and posted it to a false address in Vienna for poste restante collection under the name K. Halász. She used three relay chains to send the collection code to Arjun—an academic system, a cultural-foundation mailing list, a corrupted art-logistics invoice chain. The message was stripped to essentials:

VIENNA POSTE RESTANTE. NAME: K. HALÁSZ. ITEM: CITY GUIDE. THE MAP WAS WATCHED. THE SHARD SURVIVED. SAFFRON KEY IS PARTIAL BUT TRUE. VOSS IS NOT DEAD. DO NOT ENTER MYANMAR BLIND. CIRCE HANDLERS HAVE YOUR EMOTIONAL PROFILES. A.R. CHILDVOICE FIELD TEST RETURNED TO COMPOUND.

She paused. Then typed:

M.K. IS NOT SAFE TO TRUST. BUT M.K. IS NO LONGER FULLY THEIRS.

She sent it. Then she destroyed the device beneath the rear wheel of a delivery truck.

At Keleti station, Mila bought a ticket to Győr. At Platform 6 she saw the first watcher. A middle-aged woman in a grey coat, eyes fixed on departure boards without reading them. At the stairs, the second—a young man with headphones, shoes too clean for the weather. Near the ticket machines, a railway employee who kept touching his left cuff. CIRCE had widened the net.

She walked to the women's restroom. Inside, she climbed onto the toilet seat in the empty stall, forced the ventilation grille open with the lipstick blade, and placed a folded strip of paper sealed in plastic into the maintenance cavity beyond. If she vanished and someone later found the cavity, it might matter. The strip read:

MILA KOVÁCS. CIRCE ASSET CLASS: CONTROLLED INTIMACY/BEHAVIOURAL ACCESS. I WAS USED TO CREATE TRUST WHERE TRUST SHOULD HAVE FAILED. SAFFRON LEDGER EXISTS. THE CHILDVOICES ARE NOT RECORDINGS. THEY ARE MODELS. FIND VOSS.

She replaced the grille. The restroom door opened before she reached it. The woman in the grey coat entered and locked it behind her. Not a handler. An assessor. CIRCE sent handlers for correction. Assessors for decisions.

"You embarrassed a field team," the assessor said.

"They were easily embarrassed."

"You were always susceptible to mirrors," she continued, moving closer. "Targets who reflected restraint. Victims who reflected guilt. Children who reflected what you wished had been saved in you."

Something old recoiled. The assessor noticed. "You see? Still legible."

"And yet here you are," Mila said, "in a public restroom, locking doors like an amateur."

"The instruction is not retrieval."

Not retrieval. Not correction. Termination. The assessor's right hand moved. Mila moved first.

The lipstick blade slid into her palm. She threw a small vial of perfume oil that broke against the assessor's cheek. Distraction. The restroom filled with sharp rose and alcohol. The assessor blinked once. Mila kicked the cleaner's bucket into her shins. Her own ankle screamed with the impact. The assessor staggered but recovered with terrifying speed, her hand coming up with a compact pistol. So they had abandoned quiet correction.

Mila grabbed the mop handle and drove it upward into the woman's wrist as the first shot fired. The mirror behind Mila starred. Mila fell against the sink, tasted blood, and slashed with the blade. The cut opened the assessor's forearm. The second shot hit the soap dispenser. Mila shoved the cleaner's cart and lunged for the door lock. The woman seized her hair and pulled her back. For a moment they were both reflected in the cracked mirror—one trained to erase evidence, the other trained to become it.

"You were never a person, Mila. You were a method."

Mila stopped resisting for half a second. The assessor mistook it for collapse. Mila drove the back of her head into the woman's face. Cartilage broke. The grip loosened. She twisted, seized the pistol wrist, bit the hand hard enough to taste blood, and when the pistol fell beneath the sink, she unlocked the door and stumbled into the station corridor.

People stared. A woman screamed. The assessor emerged behind her, blood from her nose, eyes bright with professional fury. Mila ran, pain shooting through her ankle. The young man with headphones moved to intercept at the underpass stairs. She threw herself sideways into a newspaper kiosk, scattering magazines. He slipped on fallen papers and struck the frame hard. She kept moving.

At the underpass junction she chose a service door marked STAFF ONLY. The old keycard worked. She entered a narrow concrete corridor smelling of dust and cables, descended to a maintenance level, found the gate locked. The keycard failed. Above, footsteps on the stairs. She lifted the fire hose nozzle and turned the valve. Water

exploded upward, catching both pursuers as they descended. They fell against the stair rail. Mila dropped the nozzle, grabbed its metal cap, smashed the gate lock twice. The old metal gave. She slipped through. A shot struck the gate and sparked.

She emerged onto a maintenance walkway beside the tracks as a train began to move from a nearby platform. She ran parallel to its last carriage—five metres, ten—grabbed the rear service handle, and pulled herself onto the exterior step as the train gathered speed. Pain erased thought. Her fingers almost slipped. Then the door mechanism juddered, and she forced herself into the narrow space between carriages.

The station receded. The assessor grew small behind it. Mila leant against cold metal, breathing in sharp, broken pulls. Cheek bleeding. Ankle screaming. She had no idea where the train was going. That seemed fair. For years she had known destinations and not chosen them. Now she had chosen and lost certainty. The train entered darkness.

In Myanmar, the message reached Aisha at the edge of the valley just after dusk, in fragments across delayed relays and one compressed invoice attachment marked as restoration costs for damaged antique maps. She read it beneath the blackout cloth inside the abandoned pump house while Arjun watched Ko Than pace near the entrance.

Arjun crouched beside her when she turned the screen.

“From her?” “Or someone building her.” He almost smiled at his own questions.

Aisha did not. “She knew the field tests returned here. She knew Voss was alive before we confirmed the compound visitor.”

“Which means she is close to CIRCE command flow.”

“Or CIRCE wants us to believe that.”

“Both remain possible.”

Ko Than stepped inside. “Movement. From compound. Not patrol.” Through the pump-house opening, headlights moved along

the hidden eastern road. Two black SUVs leaving. Voss was departing. For a moment, the lead vehicle's rear window lowered. Arjun could not see the face. But he felt the certainty of someone looking back at the compound not as a visitor leaving a site, but as an owner assessing whether a machine had performed to expectation. Then the window rose. The vehicles disappeared into the jungle road.

"We missed him," Aisha said.

"No," Arjun replied. "We found his route."

The valley darkened. The compound lights brightened. Somewhere, a train carried Mila Kovács into uncertainty with blood on her face and betrayal in her name. Somewhere between Budapest, Vienna, Dubai, and Myanmar, Identity Zero had begun to register a problem its manuals had never fully solved. A function had remembered it was human. And in systems built on obedience, one human hesitation could become structural damage.





CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Kill-Switch

Berlin

Berlin had always been honest about fracture. It did not hide its scars beneath beauty. It preserved them in stone, concrete, memorials, plaques, and gaps. The city had been divided so completely that geography itself had once become ideology. Streets ended where politics began. Families waved across walls. Escape routes became legends. Even after reunification, Berlin retained the memory of being watched. That made it a suitable city for betrayal.

At dawn, rain moved across the glass roof of Hauptbahnhof in fine diagonal lines. Trains arrived and departed with German precision. Arjun stood beside a vending machine on the upper concourse, holding a paper cup of coffee. He had arrived under cover as a retired shipping consultant from Muscat, via Doha and Vienna. His ribs still hurt. The cut on his forearm had closed badly. His shoulder had developed a deep ache that worsened with pressure changes.

Aisha was two levels below, near the lockers, wearing a brown coat and plain-lensed glasses, looking exactly like the postgraduate she was not.

The shard from Vienna had reached them thirty-six hours earlier through a librarian in Prague who owed Arjun an old favour—the man had sent a doctoral researcher to collect the city guide under the name K. Halász, who believed she was retrieving archival material for a map

restitution project. Inside the guidebook spine: Mila's shard. Small. Damaged. Real. Aisha had spent eighteen hours extracting what it could still yield. It carried a path, a partial routing key, and one phrase that changed the direction of everything:

CIV-REG EMERGENCY FALLBACK/INDIA/KILLSWITCH
HANDSHAKE

A kill-switch was supposed to shut systems down. This one appeared designed to make identity collapse selectively. Not enough to destroy the state—enough to make people queue, panic, authenticate, re-authenticate, accept emergency protocols without understanding who had written them. A state under identity panic would choose restoration over scrutiny. And restoration, in a system built on inherited trust, could become capture.

The broker called himself Lenz. No first name. No verified face. He had appeared in biometric procurement leaks, a closed digital-health pilot, and a payments audit in Estonia where three witnesses later denied meeting him. Mila's shard contained one weak pointer: a hash linked to emergency fallback protocols and a Berlin dead drop. Everywhere Lenz had been, records became too clean. Aisha had found him through absence.

He appeared at the upper-concourse railing holding a folded red umbrella—clean shoes, white hair, a narrow face that could have belonged to a professor, banker, or war criminal at different points in a European century. He dropped the umbrella into a bin and walked away without looking towards Arjun.

Signal or cancellation. Arjun left the coffee cup on the vending machine and followed at twenty metres. Lenz descended level by level through the station, passed a florist, a bakery kiosk, two policemen, and a school group. At the bottom, he entered the stream of passengers moving towards the U-Bahn connection.

Lenz descended again. Berlin's central station swallowed them layer by layer. The bright glass and steel above gave way to concrete, signage, tiled corridors, platform wind, and the smell of wet wool and

brake dust. The deeper they went, the older the city felt—less a capital, more a mechanism. Lenz paused before a ticket machine without purchasing anything—touching the corner of the screen with two fingers, once, twice. Aisha’s voice in his earpiece: “Local handshake opened. Signature resembles the fallback protocol.”

A train arrived. Doors opened. People got off. People got on. Lenz entered the third carriage from the front. Arjun entered the fourth. Aisha entered the second one. Distance created survival. Sometimes loneliness was a procedure. The train pulled out, sliding into the tunnel with a metallic sigh. Inside the carriage, passengers retreated into their private worlds. Phones. Earbuds. Newspapers. A sleeping man with a suitcase between his knees. A mother feeding a child.

Arjun stood near the door, one hand on the pole, watching reflections in the dark glass opposite. At the second station, two tails boarded: a man in a black puffer jacket and a woman with silver hair and red gloves. Both saw him.

Aisha voice cut through the comms. “We have company.”

“Lenz is moving.”

At Friedrichstraße station, Lenz stepped out. Arjun followed through the adjoining carriage door as the passengers shifted. The puffer jacket stayed behind, but the woman with red gloves exited. Aisha remained on the train. The doors closed, and the train screeched away, sealing her from immediate support. Lenz walked through the station concourse towards the exit, then abruptly descended towards another line. He used the crowd as cover. The woman with red gloves followed too closely.

Arjun slowed. Lenz did not. The woman passed Arjun’s left shoulder. He let her. At the next bend, Lenz stopped before a locked maintenance door marked

BETRIEBSRAUM—KEIN ZUTRITT

(Operations Room—No Entry).

He swiped a card and entered. The woman with red gloves accelerated. Arjun caught her wrist as she reached the door. She spun with a

compact blade already in her other hand. He pinned her elbow against the wall, but the blade nicked his sleeve.

"Not here," he said quietly.

She smiled and bit down on something. He slammed his palm under her jaw, but he was too late. Her body convulsed once. He lowered her gently to the floor, foam gathering at the corner of her mouth. She had consumed a capsule to deny interrogation.

Lenz's door was closing. Arjun slipped through. The corridor beyond was narrow, concrete, and lit by harsh utility lamps, carrying the smell of dust and old electricity. Lenz stood twenty metres ahead, facing him.

"You were supposed to let her follow," Lenz said, his voice was dry and tired.

"She was supposed to survive."

"No. She wasn't."

Neither man moved. Lenz looked at the blade cut on Arjun's sleeve. "Malhotra."

"Lenz."

"That is not my name."

"Farid was not his."

A brief, humourless smile crossed Lenz's face. "Then you understand one of our problems." He reached slowly into his coat. Arjun's hand twitched towards his own weapon. Lenz stopped. "Not a weapon." He removed a small transparent data capsule. "Your analyst must not connect this to anything living."

"My analyst?"

"Your witness. Your attachment liability. Whatever you choose to call her."

Arjun's expression didn't flicker, but inside something sharpened. Lenz noticed. "Good. They were right about that. You are calm until someone names the wound."

A faint sound echoed from deeper in the corridor. Lenz extended the capsule, his posture stiffening. "I do not have long. The kill-switch is not a switch."

"I assumed."

"It is a legitimacy cascade," Lenz said, his voice dropping. "When emergency failure occurs, systems prioritise continuity over truth. They accept fallback authorities, temporary validators, emergency registries, manual overrides—human approvals converted into digital trust." He stepped closer. "But the fallback is pre-poisoned. Identity Zero has inserted dormant validators into civil registry contingencies. Not enough to control the entire state. Just enough to decide which records survive the panic."

"India?"

"Yes. But India is only the demonstration scale."

"Demonstration for whom?"

"For everyone who believes population identity systems can be centralised safely."

Aisha's voice fractured in the earpiece. "Arjun—signal—lost you—multiple entries—" The line died.

The lights went out. Emergency red. A figure came from a side passage, low and fast. Arjun blocked the first strike with his forearm and drove his knee into the man's thigh. Lenz ran—deeper into the maintenance corridor. Arjun followed. More footsteps echoed behind them. The corridor opened onto a service tunnel running parallel to the live tracks. A train roared past beyond a fenced partition, its lit windows flickering through the gaps.

The pressure wave hit Arjun's face. Lenz descended a ladder into a lower access shaft, opened a gate with a key from beneath his watch strap, and led them into a passage of brick and layered graffiti. Berlin beneath Berlin.

"Where are we going?"

"To the old line—the one Berlin pretends is sealed."

Aisha's voice returned: "Two hostile teams converging. Police channels show a medical emergency upstairs. They are sealing."

"Can you map us?"

"Your location doesn't exist on current plans."

Lenz barked a laugh. "Tell her the dead always keep better maps."

They moved through the older tunnel—water pooling around their shoes, cables running along brick walls in untidy bundles, decades of graffiti layered in the darkness. Lenz stumbled, caught himself. The capsule remained tightly in his hand.

"You said dormant validators," Arjun said while moving.

Lenz nodded ahead of him. "Yes."

"Names?"

"Not names. Certificates. Keys. Authority chains."

"Who planted them?"

Lenz stumbled, dragging a hand against the brick to support himself. "Contractors," he said, keeping pace. "NGOs. Emergency management pilots. Digital inclusion projects. Refugee verification pilots. Disaster relief simulations."

"The Centre?"

He glanced back when Arjun said the name. "So you found that."

"Elian Voss."

The name made him stop for one second. "Everyone who worked in identity architecture knows Voss. Most pretend they don't."

"Is he the architect?"

"You still want a throne."

"Then what is he?"

"A priest. Of the doctrine that recognition is power."

The tunnel opened suddenly into a disused platform—low, narrow, tiled in cracked cream and green, old signage half-torn away. Dust lay thick. At the far end, a steel door. A tall man in a grey coat stood before it. No visible weapon.

Lenz whispered, "No."

The man spoke first in German, then English. “You should have stayed dead, Herr Lenz.”

Then he turned to Arjun. “Mr Malhotra. You are becoming expensive.”

“Send an invoice.”

A flicker of amusement crossed the man’s face.

“Humour under pressure. Predictable compensation.” He raised a hand—not a weapon, a transmitter.

Aisha shouted through the earpiece: “Move!”

Every dormant screen on the old platform flared simultaneously. A high-frequency sound ripped through the space—thin, needling, entering bone rather than air. Lenz dropped to one knee. Arjun’s balance faltered. Three attackers entered from behind. The man by the door stepped back calmly. Arjun forced himself through the disorientation and crossed to Lenz. The old man was clutching his chest.

“Capsule,” Arjun said.

One attacker rushed. Arjun blocked a punch, took one across the cheek, and drove the man against a platform column. Something tore in his ribs when he twisted. Using the man’s momentum, Arjun threw him onto the tracks.

The second attacker went for Lenz. Arjun could not reach them in time. A shot cracked—not from the attackers, but from Lenz, who had produced a small pistol and fired once into the floor near the second man’s foot. The man jumped back.

Then the tall man by the door fired. Suppressed. Flat.

Lenz jerked. The capsule skittered across the platform. Arjun and the nearest attacker reached it simultaneously. Driving his injured forearm into the man’s face, Arjun closed his fist around the capsule.

Aisha’s voice cut through: “Emergency exit behind the old advertisement panel, left side. Ninety seconds before transit police lock the grid.”

“Lenz is hit.”

“Can he move?”

Lenz lay on his side, one hand pressed to his abdomen, blood spreading between his fingers. His eyes were sharp despite the grey in his face. “I negotiated poorly.”

“You’re not done.”

“Yes. That is precisely what I am.”

Arjun fired Lenz’s pistol twice into the platform floor to force cover, found the advertisement panel—a faded poster of a woman smiling about a holiday that had expired before half the city changed flags—and kicked until the lower edge shifted. Behind it, a narrow metal door. Locked.

Aisha’s voice barked through the earpiece: “Manual latch, upper right.”

He found it. Jammed. The attackers advanced.

Lenz caught his sleeve, his grip surprisingly tight. “Listen. The kill-switch requires public fear. Without fear, emergency validators remain dormant. So they will create it. A staged identity failure during routine dependence—banking, travel, health, subsidy. Ordinary enough to affect millions. Technical enough to confuse blame. Not one trigger. A cascade. The dead will initiate it.”

He pressed a plain metal ring into Arjun’s palm. Inside the band, etched almost invisibly: K-17.

“The key is not in the data,” Lenz whispered. “It is in the witness.”

His hand fell.

Arjun held him at the threshold for one second. Then Aisha’s voice came, low and urgent: “Arjun. Leave him or lose the capsule.”

He hated her for being right. Only for a second. Then he let Lenz go and entered the stairwell.

He climbed through pain. The door shook once behind him, twice, then stopped. He surfaced into cold rain through a rusted door and crossed a maintenance yard where a black van waited at the fence. Aisha was already at the wheel. He threw himself into the passenger seat, and she drove before the door had even clicked shut.

For three minutes, neither spoke. Rain struck the windscreen in heavy sheets. Sirens rose behind them in the distance and turned away.

Aisha glanced at him. "Capsule?"

He handed her the capsule. "Don't connect it to anything living."

"Good advice from a dead man."

"He said the key is not in the data but in the witness." Arjun opened his palm, revealing the metal band. The ring, K17. She stared at it.

"That is not a data key."

"It's a reference to the dead, according to Lenz."

Aisha stared ahead, the pieces suddenly clicking together. *Follow dead identities, not live money.* Mila's warning aligned perfectly with Lenz's last words. Not corpses. Identity shells prepared for administrative resurrection. Witnesses who existed because the system needed them to have died, or died because the system needed them to have existed

Then the van's dashboard screen flashed to life. A civil registry dependency map bloomed across the monitor. Three lines of code appeared, pulsed and died:

DEPENDENCE TEST COMPLETE.

EMERGENCY FALLBACK READY.

PUBLIC TRIGGER PENDING.

The screen went black.

Aisha's hands tightened on the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. "They reached the vehicle."

"No," Arjun murmured, staring at the darkened console. "They reached the map before the vehicle existed."

The sentence hung heavily in the cold air between them.

Berlin had given them the capsule. It had taken Lenz. It had confirmed Voss. It had shown that the kill-switch was not designed to destroy identity systems from outside, but to make them beg for contaminated rescue from within. The threat was no longer approaching from the edge of failed states and hidden compounds. It

was moving towards home. And home was where systems were trusted most dangerously—not because they worked perfectly, but because millions had no choice but to believe that tomorrow their names would still be found.





CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Systems vs People

Delhi

New Delhi did not merely wake. Even before sunrise, the city was assembling itself out of smoke, prayers, horns, milk packets, security barricades, vendors rinsing steel kettles, and municipal sweepers. Winter smog blurred distances. Trees stood along roads like guards fighting vehicular pollution. From above, the city appeared administrative. From the ground, it felt disorderly. That was its danger.

Delhi trusted continuity. Whatever broke, something would still open in the morning: a counter, a court, a ministry gate—or a biometric scanner that worked after three failed attempts and a sharp slap to its side.

Arjun had always loved that about Delhi. Now, leaning back in the rear of a government vehicle with plain number plates, he watched the streets through tinted glass. He wondered how many people could be made invisible in a place where everyone was always being counted.

The meeting had been arranged by Vikram Sen, an Additional Secretary in a ministry whose formal title had changed twice in eight years whilst its proclivity for control had remained constant. Sen had once worked with Arjun during an internal cyber-resilience review, before the report was buried, sanitised, circulated in parts, denied in whole, and then quietly implemented wherever it increased executive discretion.

Sen was not corrupt. That made him more difficult. Corrupt men could be priced. Careerists could be frightened. Sen belonged to a more dangerous category: intelligent officials who believed that disorder justified almost anything so long as the paperwork was eventually regularised.

The conference room had no windows. Sen was silver-haired, composed, wearing a dark bandhgala. Beside him sat Dr Kavita Rao from the civil identity authority and a senior cyber-coordination officer. Aisha was the only person present without a formal title.

Sen opened the meeting with precision. "You asked for an urgent institutional review of emergency civil-registry fallback protocols."

"I asked for them to be suspended."

"On what basis?"

"Compromise."

"That is an allegation."

"It is a warning."

Arjun placed a thin file on the table—not the capsule, not the ring, only excerpts: the Dubai wallet analysis, the Berlin broker's statement reduced to operational notes, the Myanmar signal string, and the partial CIV-REG EMERGENCY FALLBACK reference. Sen opened the file and read quickly. That concerned Arjun. Men who dismissed evidence could be opposed. Men who understood it and still chose caution were harder to move.

Dr Rao looked up sharply from the page beside Sen. "This is not enough to justify suspension."

"It is enough to justify isolation," Aisha said.

"Ms Rahman, civil identity infrastructure at this scale cannot be switched off like a private server."

"No one said switch it off."

"You said isolate emergency fallback. That would degrade recovery capacity if a public authentication failure occurs."

"That," Aisha said, "is precisely the point."

Rao's expression cooled. "You are suggesting the fallback may be weaponised."

"I am saying it has been pre-poisoned."

"By whom?"

Arjun answered, "Identity Zero."

They remained unimpressed. The first sign of failure. Sen closed the file slowly. "Arjun, unofficial labels are useful in field work. They are less useful in policy rooms."

"It is not a label. It is an architecture."

The cyber officer spoke up. "We have reviewed scattered reports from Geneva and Berlin. With due respect, the threat appears transnational but fragmented."

"Fragmentation is the design."

"Convenient."

Arjun looked at him. "What is convenient?"

"A threat that becomes more dangerous the less directly it can be proven."

Aisha said. "That is how inherited trust works."

Dr. Rao said, "Inherited trust is also how any national-scale system functions. Banks trust identity documents. Hospitals trust registries. Welfare systems trust demographic authentication. Border systems trust travel records. If every institution begins re-verifying every source layer, the state collapses under its own suspicion."

"Yes," Arjun said. "That is what they studied."

Sen looked at him carefully. "Who?"

"The people who understood that a state cannot afford to doubt itself in real time."

Sen didn't react. He looked entirely stunned.

Aisha opened her laptop—not networked—and turned it to show a static diagram:

ROUTINE AUTHENTICATION FAILURE → PUBLIC
PANIC → EMERGENCY CONTINUITY PROTOCOL →

TEMPORARY VALIDATOR ACCEPTANCE → TRUST
CASCADE → RECORD SURVIVAL SELECTION

“Record survival selection?” Rao stared at it.

“During a crisis, some records fail and some survive. Some are restored, some flagged, some locked pending review. Whoever controls the emergency validator layer only needs to influence which identities become dependable during the panic.”

“This is speculative,” the cyber officer said.

“So was the Dubai release before it completed across six jurisdictions. So was Farid before a body died with his passport in Berlin. So was Saffron Ledger before we traced a child-voice field test to a Myanmar compound.”

Sen’s eyes shifted at that. Aisha stopped speaking. Arjun leant back. “You know about Saffron Ledger.”

Sen did not blink. “I know many programme names.”

“That was not an answer,” Arjun said.

“It was the answer I am authorised to give.”

The room cooled. Rao looked at Sen, startled.

“What is Saffron Ledger to you?” Aisha asked.

Sen removed his glasses. “An allegation. A legacy risk. An unauthorised emotional-modelling repository associated with foreign scam compounds.”

“You knew it existed.”

“I knew claims existed.”

“Claims do not produce classification language.”

Arjun said, “When? When did the government first hear the name?”

Sen said, “This conversation is not an inquiry.”

“It is now.”

Sen sighed softly. “Two years ago. Through an intelligence liaison.”

Aisha’s face went cold. “Two years?”

Sen met her gaze. “The information was fragmentary.”

"They were modelling voices of captive children."

"That was not established."

"It is established now."

"What was done?"

"A limited assessment."

"Buried?"

"Reviewed."

"That is often the same thing in this building."

Her hand closed around the edge of the table. "Two years means new girls arriving. New boys. New scripts. New voices. Someone heard the word Saffron, wrote a note, held a meeting, and decided the evidence was not mature enough whilst children were being turned into training material."

Sen's eyes hardened. "You have been outside formal command for too long."

"And you have been inside it long enough to confuse survival with success."

Dr Rao intervened. "Immediate suspension of fallback systems could itself trigger instability. Pensions, rations, health benefits, travel, banking, taxation—all depend on continuity."

Aisha said, "Continuity of a compromised system is not public welfare."

Rao countered, "Neither is panic."

Identity Zero had understood institutions better than revolutionaries did. Institutions would tolerate abuse longer than uncertainty. They would accept private harm to prevent public doubt—not because they loved evil, but because they feared what people might do if the systems claiming to protect them were revealed as negotiable.

Sen leant forward. "You are asking us to take extraordinary action on the basis of partial evidence obtained through foreign field operations, dead brokers, and an unidentified CIRCE defector whom even you admit may not be reliable. That is not how states act."

"No. That is how states survive before files catch up."

The cyber officer offered a compromise, "A silent review of emergency validators without suspension."

"How long?"

"Four to six weeks."

Aisha gave a short, humourless laugh. "The public trigger is pending."

"That phrase came from a compromised vehicle dashboard."

"It came from their map before the vehicle existed." The cyber officer was irritated. "It's meaningless."

"No," Aisha said. "Only inconvenient."

Sen raised a hand. The room obeyed. "We will not suspend the fallback protocols. However, I will authorise a restricted technical review under closed classification. Dr Rao's team will identify anomalous validator chains. Nothing public. Nothing disrupted unless a verified compromise is detected."

"By the time the compromise is verified," Aisha said, "the fallback will already have been invoked."

"Then we will respond."

"You will be restoring the infection."

Sen looked at Arjun. "Control your analyst."

"She is not mine to control."

Sen realised his mistake but did not apologise.

Aisha got up. She placed both hands on the table and leant towards him. "When systems fail, people queue. They do not debate architecture. They stand in heat outside offices with photocopies, affidavits, old cards, names misspelt, fingerprints unreadable, fathers dead, addresses changed, phones lost, numbers linked to someone else. They are told to come tomorrow. They are told the server is down."

No one interrupted her.

"Panic is not television footage. Panic is a widow told her pension is locked because the system cannot find her. Panic is a child refused treatment because an emergency registry marks him duplicate. Panic

is a migrant worker whose wage account freezes because a validator says he is under review. Panic is not what happens when people learn a system is weak. It is what happens when the system continues pretending to be strong whilst failing them.”

Rao looked away. Sen met her gaze unblinking.

“They are counting on you,” Aisha continued, “to choose institutional confidence over human consequence.” Then she sat. The silence that followed was not comfortable. Good. Comfort was how rooms like this killed urgency.

Sen opened the file again. “Leave the capsule.”

“No.”

“It may contain evidence relevant to national infrastructure.”

“It may contain a weapon relevant to national infrastructure.”

“That is why it must be examined in a secure government facility.”

“Lenz specifically warned against connecting it to anything living.”

The argument circled.

Arjun finally said, “I did not decide to act alone. You did.” The line struck harder than intended. For a moment, fatigue showed beneath Sen’s authority. Then the mask returned.

“This meeting is over.”

At the door, Rao said quietly, “Mr Malhotra. Send me the validator-chain indicators.” Sen looked at her sharply. She did not blink. “Not the capsule. Indicators only.”

“Why?” Aisha asked.

“Because if you are wrong, I will prove it. If you are right, I would rather not discover it from a queue outside a district office.”

Rao met Sen’s gaze. “With due respect, sir, a review that begins after permission is not a review.”

The fracture was small. Aisha nodded once. “Indicators in one hour. Offline transfer only. No central upload.”

Rao accepted. Sen did not stop them.

In the corridor, framed photographs of ministers smiling beside machines watched them pass. Aisha stopped before a poster of a rural

woman—face lit with gratitude, thumb raised before a biometric device beneath the slogan: ‘EVERY IDENTITY MATTERS’. She looked at it for a moment. “Only if it behaves,” she said. They walked on.

The safe workspace was a government guest house too obsolete to be trusted by people who trusted modernity. Peeling cream paint, heavy curtains, unreliable plumbing. Aisha worked from derivatives at the dining table under a slow fan—hashes, structures, fragments, the Myanmar signal strings, Lenz’s verbal warnings. The capsule remained sealed. Arjun stood by the window watching the driveway through a narrow gap in the curtain.

“You think Sen will try to seize it?”

“Yes. After he convinces himself he is not seizing it.”

“Very bureaucratic of him,” Arjun murmured.

“It will be called protective custody. Evidence preservation. National security.”

Aisha prepared the stripped indicator packet for Rao—no live code, no capsule payload, only enough to identify poisoned validator patterns if someone inside the authority looked honestly. She transferred it to a blank drive and sealed it. Then her screen flashed. Not connected. No network. A file appeared in the staging directory. She froze.

“What?” Arjun moved instantly.

She did not touch the keyboard. The filename:

K-17_WITNESS_STATUS.

The ring in his jacket felt suddenly heavier.

“That drive was blank. This appeared on the machine.”

“How?”

“Preloaded trigger? Hardware infection? Capsule proximity? I don’t know.” She disconnected power and removed the battery. The screen died.

Arjun took out the ring. K-17. The key is not in the data. It is in the witness. He placed it on the table. Plain metal. Three etched characters. Aisha examined it through a portable magnifier and found

micro-etching inside the band—a sequence along the inner curve, almost decorative unless magnified. She read slowly: “Kav—Kaveri? K-17 could be a person. Seventeen death-linked identity shells. One live witness embedded among them.”

“Lenz said the dead initiate the trigger,” Arjun said.

“Maybe one of the dead is not dead. Or one living witness has been administratively killed.”

Outside, a gardener watered grass. Two crows fought over something invisible. A scooter passed beyond the wall. Ordinary India. Permanent India. A country where identity was not a philosophical abstraction but a daily negotiation with counters, portals, clerks, and the stubborn insistence of people that they existed even when systems hesitated.

Aisha said, “We need to find K-17 before the fallback trigger. Dead identities. Death pathways. Civil registry anomalies. Start with people declared dead in one system but active in another.”

“That’ll produce millions.”

“We narrow by emergency validator proximity.” She paused. “The Myanmar string: **IND/CIV-REG/EMERGENCY FALLBACK**. I assumed a national layer. But what if K-17 is tied to a pilot state? A demonstration jurisdiction? Lenz had said India was only the demonstration scale.”

“Which state?”

“I need offline audit logs. Procurement records. Biometric exception reports. People declared dead during database merges, then revived by manual override.”

“Rao can access some of that.” Arjun picked up the indicator drive. “We give her this. And we give Sen something else to worry about.”

He took out his phone. Aisha understood before he dialled.

“Media?”

“Not public leak. Not yet. Someone who knows how to preserve a question without publishing the answer.”

He called a number from memory. It rang six times. A woman answered.

“Who is this?”

“Someone who owes you an apology. Arjun Malhotra.”

Her voice carried neither warmth nor surprise—she had already anticipated this call.

Arjun said, “Mara Ellison, I need a holding channel.”

“For what?”

“A question: Who gets to decide whether a citizen still exists when the systems go dark?”

Silence. Then Mara Ellison—a British investigative journalist, formerly a war correspondent, now working on surveillance, biometric exclusion, and digital identity systems—spoke more quietly. “That sounds like a question that gets people arrested before it gets answered. Are you asking me to publish?”

“No. To receive, timestamp, and hold. If something happens, you will know where to look.”

“If something happens to whom?”

“To millions.”

Another silence.

“Send nothing yet. Meet me.”

“Where?”

“Not over this line.” The call ended.

Before they could move, three measured knocks at the guest-house door. Then a voice called through the panels, “Mr Malhotra. Government security. We have instructions to escort you.”

“That was fast,” Aisha whispered.

Arjun slipped the capsule pouch beneath the false lining of his bag. The ring went back into his jacket. At the main door, the voice remained polite, “Sir, please open. This is for your protection.”

He smiled without humour. Protective custody had arrived wearing good manners.

The service window above the kitchen sink was small and barred, but the bars were old. They loosened the frame together, Arjun using a kitchen knife as leverage, Aisha wrapping cloth around one bar and twisting with controlled force. The first screw gave; the second snapped. At the main door, wood cracked.

“Now,” Arjun said.

Aisha climbed first through the narrow gap, Arjun passed her the bag, then followed. Pain tore across his ribs. They emerged behind the old servants’ quarters. A white vehicle waited at the far end of the lane. Arjun looked the other way. A vegetable cart blocked the lane. A man on a bicycle argued with a delivery boy.

“Crowd,” Arjun said, steering here towards it. Behind them, a voice barked, “Mr Malhotra!” They entered the traffic of ordinary life—vegetable crates, scooter mirrors, schoolchildren, a woman bargaining over coriander, a dog sleeping in philosophical defiance. Government security could not move through it quickly without creating the scene they had been instructed to avoid. Disorder protected them.

Two hours later, Dr Kavita Rao sat alone in her office, staring at an indicator drive that had arrived in a tiffin carrier—wrapped in foil beneath untouched lemon rice, no note, no signature. She should have called Sen. She should have logged it. Instead she placed it beside an air-gapped forensic terminal used for training exercises no one had updated in three years.

On her desk sat the latest internal assurance report:

Emergency Fallback Architecture: Resilience and Continuity Review.

Green ratings across all categories. Acceptable risk. No critical anomalies. Her own signature at the bottom, staring back with bureaucratic confidence.

She opened the annexures. Validator chains. Disaster recovery drills. Manual override authorities. One table caught her eye: a cluster of records from a district-level simulation conducted eighteen months earlier. Seventeen death-linked identity conflicts. All resolved. All closed. Pilot code: K-17.

Rao's breath hitched. Her office phone rang. The display flashing Sen's extension. She did not answer. A message appeared on her secure terminal before she had connected the drive or touched the keyboard:

PLEASE DO NOT REVIEW UNAUTHORISED MATERIAL
OUTSIDE APPROVED CHANNELS.

She stared at the screen. The message had arrived before she had done anything with the drive.

She looked back at the assurance report. At her signature. At the green ratings. At the table marked K-17. Then, with slow, deliberate care, she stood up and twisted the blinds shut. The system she had spent years defending did not merely contain vulnerabilities. It had begun to anticipate conscience.

And somewhere outside the building, Arjun Malhotra and Aisha Rahman were no longer the only ones running from protection.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER THIRTY

Love as Vulnerability

Delhi

Delhi was most dangerous when it became intimate. Not in the rooms of power, where danger dressed itself in files and lawful phrases. Not at barricades, where rifles and authority were honest about their purpose. Not even in markets, where crowds could hide a fugitive as easily as betray one. The true danger lay in ordinary places that made people forget they were being hunted. A tea stall under a flyover. A bench in a neglected park. The smell of rain on dust. A hand that stayed one second longer than necessary.

Systems did not fear secrecy. They feared attachment that could not be indexed. Arjun understood this in theory. That evening, he understood it in the body.

They had reached a safe flat above a stationery shop near Lajpat Nagar. It belonged to Mrs. Dutta, a retired schoolteacher who had once taught Arjun's younger sister mathematics. She rented rooms without asking for documents because she trusted faces more than paperwork—a trait that was both reckless and, in present circumstances, strategically useful. The flat had two rooms, a kitchen, a balcony crowded with dying plants, and walls painted a pale blue that had surrendered to age. On the dining table sat the still-sealed Berlin capsule, Lenz's ring, three drives, two clean phones, one old radio

receiver, a packet of paracetamol, adhesive bandage and a tiffin carrier emptied of lemon rice and institutional betrayal.

Aisha sat near the window, laptop closed before her. That worried Arjun. When Aisha stopped working, something inside her was either healing or breaking. He had not yet learnt to read her silences.

Outside, evening traffic gathered. Horns rose and fell. A pressure cooker whistled in a neighbouring kitchen. A vendor shouted the price of oranges with the moral force of a closing argument. Ordinary life pressed against the walls. Inside, both of them sat without speaking.

Arjun had cleaned the wound on his forearm badly but sufficiently. His ribs hurt more after the window escape. Pain made sleep harder. Sleep was not presently desirable.

Aisha looked at the ring. “K-17.” She paused. “Rao has the indicators. You think she’ll use them?”

“Yes. Because she did not answer Sen’s call.”

“You’re guessing.”

“I am reading behaviour.”

“That is a polite word for guessing.”

“Most useful intelligence begins as impolite guessing.”

She tried to smile. “Do you ever get tired of noticing?”

“Yes.”

“Then why don’t you stop?”

“Because the things I stop noticing become expensive.”

She turned back towards him. Shadows under her eyes—not merely from exhaustion. Something older had surfaced after Dubai and Myanmar. Now Delhi’s proximity had given it room to breathe.

“Sen. The government. Someone in the chain. They knew about Saffron Ledger two years ago.”

“Claims existed,” Arjun said.

“Don’t use his words.” She rose and began pacing. “Two years. Do you know what two years mean inside a compound?”

“Yes.”

“No, you don’t.”

The words came sharply. Then she stopped. A silence followed—not an apology, but recognition that she had struck where she did not need to. Arjun did not rescue her from it.

After a moment, she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be.”

She returned to the chair but did not sit. Her hand rested on its back. “Two years means new girls arriving. New boys. New scripts. New voices. New fear responses. It means Meher did not end with Meher. It means someone heard the word Saffron, held a meeting, and decided the evidence was not mature enough while children were being turned into training material.”

Arjun said nothing. She was right.

“They’ll do it again,” she said. “Every system that thinks people must wait until evidence becomes institutionally convenient. They will preserve the capsule. Preserve the archive. Preserve the proof until it can be discussed in the right room by people who were never inside it.”

“And you want to burn it.”

“Yes. Not the capsule—Saffron Ledger.”

“If we destroy it before extracting the validator links, we lose the only route to the kill-switch. If we preserve it, it remains a weapon.”

“I know.” She had already argued both sides inside herself and found no acquittal.

Arjun sat down slowly, the pain in his ribs tightening his jaw. Aisha saw it.

“You need a doctor.”

“No.”

“You behave as though your body is merely an inconvenience to the investigation.”

“It usually is.”

“That is stupid.”

“Probably.”

This time she did smile. Only briefly. The smile hurt more than anger would have. It reminded him that beneath the witness, analyst, survivor, and operator, there was still a young woman who had once been meant for an ordinary life before the machine found her. A life in which tired smiles could have belonged to late trains, unpaid bills, bad coffee, friends, mistakes, perhaps love.

The thought was dangerous. He put it away.

Aisha saw him do it. "What did you just hide?"

"Nothing useful," he replied.

"That is not the same as nothing."

She sat opposite him. For a moment the small table between them seemed too narrow for the things they were not saying. The pressure cooker whistled again outside.

"In Dubai, when they used Meher's voice, you moved before thinking."

"Yes."

"In Berlin, when Lenz called me your woman, you changed."

"Yes."

"In the meeting, when Sen said 'control your analyst', you reacted."

"I spoke."

"You reacted."

He looked at her, but she didn't look away. "CIRCE handlers have our emotional profiles. Mila warned us. The Dubai apartment confirmed it. They are not only mapping trauma. They are mapping attachment. Mine to Meher. Yours to guilt. Mine to you. Yours to—" She stopped. The unfinished sentence became the loudest thing in the room.

"Do not turn yourself into a vulnerability because they named attachment."

"That sounds noble. It is also evasive."

"Yes."

The honesty caught her off guard. He looked at his hands—older than he remembered, a thin line of dried blood near one nail. After a

long moment, Arjun looked up. “When I was younger, I believed detachment was discipline. Later I learnt it was also cowardice with better posture.”

Aisha did not move.

“In my line of work, love was treated as exposure. Family, friendship, loyalty, desire—all of it could be pressurised, purchased, threatened, forged. A good officer was supposed to reduce the attack surface.”

“And did you?”

“I tried.”

“Successfully?”

He gave a small, humourless breath. “No.”

She waited. He had not intended to speak further. That no longer seemed to matter.

“There was a woman,” he said.

Aisha’s face changed, but she did not interrupt.

“Years ago. Before Ravel became what it became. A clinical psychologist on a behavioural-risk programme. Nandini. She believed models were dangerous only when the people using them became certain they were benevolent. When Ravel began shifting from compliance assessment to compliance engineering, she warned me. Not dramatically. She simply said, ‘You are helping them learn where consent becomes fatigue.’ I told her she was overstating it.”

“Were you lying?”

“No. That is the part I dislike most. I believed myself.”

“What happened?”

“I chose the work.”

Aisha leant back slowly.

“We were not married. That made leaving easier in the records and harder in the bones. She filed internal objections. Her access was cut. Her reputation was quietly damaged. Mine improved.” He looked towards the balcony. “She died four years later. Officially a road

accident near Pune. Unofficially, nothing. There was never evidence of anything else. But I still wonder.”

“Did you defend her?”

“No.” The word was almost soundless. “I told myself I was staying close to the work to prevent misuse. That if I left, worse men would remain. All the intelligent phrases cowards use.”

Aisha did not soften the silence. Then she asked, “Is that why you came back into this?”

“No. Partly. Guilt is a poor compass. It points backwards and calls it direction.”

“Then what is better?”

“I don’t know.”

That answer seemed to matter more to her than certainty ever could.

She looked at the table. “I left Meher.” The sentence was not new. But here, in this room, after his confession, it changed shape.

“You survived. You ran. And you have been running towards her ever since.”

Aisha’s eyes filled suddenly, violently, but she did not let the tears fall. “That sounds too kind.”

“It may be true anyway.”

“I don’t want truth to become forgiveness.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

“What does it become?”

“Responsibility, if we can bear it.”

She breathed in, unsteadily. For a moment they were only two human beings sitting in a blue room above a stationery shop, telling each other the names of the dead they had failed. Meher. Nandini. The names did not absolve. They remained. That was the point.

Aisha wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm and laughed softly, embarrassed. “I hate crying.”

She stood up and went to the kitchen. The tap coughed before sputtering water. She filled two steel tumblers, drank from one, and

placed the other before him. He took it. Their fingers almost touched. *Almost* was sometimes more dangerous than contact. Both of them noticed. Neither mentioned it.

The old radio receiver on the table crackled. Arjun's posture stiffened before the sound became intelligible. Aisha returned to her chair and opened the channel. Mara Ellison's voice came through, distorted but recognisable. "Your question has raised a storm."

"What kind?"

"The kind that arrives before rains. Two legal notices I have not yet earned. One friendly warning from a former editor. Someone tried to access an old archive of mine relating to biometric exclusion cases."

Aisha leant closer. "Which cases?"

Mara paused. "Who is that?"

"Aisha Rahman."

"I know who you are." Mara continued, "People declared dead in welfare systems while alive in local records. Mostly rural, low-income, administratively inconvenient. My editor killed the story because the numbers were uncertain and the ministry response was aggressively boring."

"K-17?" Aisha asked.

Silence stretched over the channel. Then Mara spoke, her voice tight. "How do you have that?"

"What is it?" Arjun asked.

"A district pilot," Mara explained. "Kaveri-17. It's not officially called that in public documents. It involved seventeen test clusters across identity-linked welfare, health, and civil registry reconciliation. They sold it as a resilience exercise after flood displacements. In Karnataka initially, then mirrored quietly elsewhere."

Mara paused, the line crackling. "One whistleblower claimed the pilot produced death conflicts resolved only by an emergency validator authority. He said one woman remained dead in the central layer but alive in the local layer."

Aisha whispered, "The micro-etching inside the ring... Kaveri."

"The witness," Arjun muttered.

"Maybe. But he disappeared before I could meet him."

"Name?"

"I don't have one. Just a code from his last message."

Arjun looked over at Aisha.

On the radio receiver, Mara Ellison repeated, "K-17."

The room seemed to constrict around them.

Aisha reached for the ring, placing it under the magnifier once more. Her hands were perfectly steady now.

"Mara," Arjun said leaning closer to the receiver, "did the whistleblower mention a public trigger?"

"No. But he wrote something strange."

"What?"

"That the system would not fail where it was weakest. It would fail where people trusted it most."

Aisha opened a notebook and scribbled the line down.

Arjun leant towards the transmitter. "Can you meet?"

"Already moving," Mara replied. "I'll send a location when I'm sure I have shaken my tail."

The radio crackled with static.

Then Mara Ellison added, "Arjun."

"Yes."

"Your question is not safe to hold quietly for long."

"I know."

"No. You don't. Questions have half-lives now. If we do not publish at the right moment, someone else will publish a poisoned version first."

The line went dead.

Aisha sat back, looking down at the fresh ink on the page. She read the bullet points aloud, tracing them with her finger.

"Kaveri-17.

"Pilot cluster."

"One administratively dead witness."

“Emergency validators.”

“Public trigger pending.”

She went to the balcony door, opening it just a few inches. Evening air entered, carrying dust and the smell of frying onions, petrol, and the faint sweetness of night-blooming jasmine from some unseen courtyard. Below, the stationery shop was closing. The owner pulled down the shutter halfway, then stopped to sell one last notebook to a schoolboy. The boy counted coins carefully. The owner took fewer than required, looking away to pretend he had not noticed.

Aisha watched. “This is what they don’t understand.”

“Who?” Arjun asked.

“Systems and Policy people. Men like Voss. Maybe men like you, once. They think identity is recognition by authority. But for most, identity is being remembered by someone who refuses to let the record win.”

She pointed faintly towards the boy and the shopkeeper.

“A shopkeeper who knows that your father died but still gives credit. A nurse who recognises your child though the card has the wrong spelling. A neighbour who says, *no, she is alive, I saw her this morning*. A teacher who remembers your name before the register is corrected.” Her voice dropped. “The human layer keeps repairing what the system breaks. And then the system calls itself resilient.”

Arjun came to stand beside her, maintaining a decent gap. “That human layer is what Identity Zero wants to bypass,” he said.

“No,” Aisha replied. “It wants to harvest it. Trust, memory, care, obligation. Turn them into inputs. That is why love becomes vulnerability.”

Arjun looked out over the lane. “Yes.”

“And yet without it, there is nothing worth protecting.”

He turned towards her. She was still looking outside. That made it easier to be honest. “No, there isn’t.”

For a while, neither moved.

A group of boys in the lane had begun playing cricket with a plastic bat and a taped tennis ball, using a stack of broken tiles as wickets. Every passing scooter interrupted the game, and every interruption was negotiated loudly. The ball struck a parked car once, they scattered, only to return with the solemn courage of repeat offenders. The world persisted in small disobediences.

Aisha turned from the view. "They will use this against us. If they threaten me, you may act unwisely. If they threaten you, I may do the same."

"Yes."

"We need rules."

Arjun looked at her. "What kind?"

"The kind we decide before fear decides for us."

He nodded. She slid the balcony door shut, cutting off the street noise, and returned to the room.

"Rule one," she said. "No exchange of the capsule, shard data, or K-17 indicators for either of us."

"No."

Her face hardened. "Arjun."

"I will not promise that under all circumstances."

"Then you make me a target."

"I make myself honest."

She stared at him. Anger rose. Fear beneath it.

"This is exactly the vulnerability. You cannot protect me by becoming predictable."

"I know." He looked at her.

Outside, muffled by glass, someone appealed for another over. Finally, Arjun said, "I will not compromise the mission to save you."

Aisha watched him. The lie was visible—not entirely but enough to catch. She shook her head. "Again."

He looked away. She stepped around the table, closing the distance until she stood directly before him. "Again."

His jaw tightened. "I will not compromise the mission to save you."

"Still not true."

"It is the best you will get."

"No." Her voice broke. "It is the best they need."

Silence settled between them. When she spoke again, her voice had softened. "I am not asking you not to care. I am asking you not to let them convert care into obedience."

Arjun closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, the years were fully visible. Ravel. Nandini. Geneva. Dubai. Berlin. Meher. All the rooms where he had mistaken control for morality. "Then the rule is this," he said. "If either of us is taken, the other continues until the trigger is stopped. No unilateral surrender. No exchange without independent verification that it blocks the public trigger. No emotional decisions inside imposed countdowns."

Aisha absorbed the words. "That is better."

"Rule two," he added. "If Saffron Ledger is within reach, we extract what is necessary to stop the kill-switch, then destroy the emotional archive."

Aisha's expression shifted. "Evidence?"

"We preserve enough to prove existence and chain. Not enough to let the weapon survive intact."

"Who decides what is enough?"

"We do. Before handing anything to institutions that will preserve it for review."

For the first time that evening, Aisha didn't look quite so lonely. Not relieved exactly. But joined.

"Rule three," she said. "Meher's model does not remain active."

"Yes. Meher's model does not remain active."

Aisha nodded. "And Nandini?" she asked quietly.

Their eyes met.

"What is the rule for her?"

Arjun had no ready answer. He let the silence stretch before he spoke. "I stop pretending guilt is strategy."

Aisha's expression softened. "That is a difficult rule."

The laptop chimed. Both of them turned.

The machine was offline—its battery pulled earlier from the compromised unit—and running only on local files on a separate, clean system. The chime hadn't come from the computer, but the radio receiver beside it. A data burst. Aisha captured it. The packet was small using an old compression method, and routed through a chain that resembled neither Mara Ellison's channel nor Mila's relay.

She decoded the header. Her face went slack.

"What?" Arjun asked.

"It is from Rao."

The file decrypted into plain text.

K-17 CONFIRMED.

PILOT NAME: KAVERI-17.

SEVENTEEN DEATH-LINKED CONFLICTS.

ONE UNRESOLVED LIVE-LOCAL/DEAD-CENTRAL
SUBJECT.

EMERGENCY VALIDATOR CHAIN SHOWS FOREIGN
INSERTION.

SUSPENSION REQUEST BLOCKED.

INTERNAL ACCESS UNDER WATCH.

SEN MAY NOT BE THE BREACH.

TRIGGER VECTOR LIKELY PUBLIC SERVICE
DEPENDENCY. HEALTH OR BANKING.

NEED OFFLINE MEET.

Aisha read the message twice. Arjun nodded slowly, absorbing the implications.

Then a secondary line burned its way onto the screen beneath Rao's text. An insertion.

The blood drained from Aisha's face. Arjun leant closer to read it.

LOVE REQUIRES A RECORD.

Below the words an image began to render. It was grainy, old surveillance footage of a hospital corridor. A woman was walking away from a meeting room, clutching a stack of files tightly against her chest. Nandini.

Arjun did not move. Aisha looked at him.

The image timestamp was four years old. Two days before the accident. Then a second image loaded. A compound dormitory. A child sat on a lower bunk, looking directly towards the camera.

Meher.

Aisha made a sharp sound that wasn't a word. The system had placed them side by side. Nandini. Meher. Two dead women—one adult, one child. Two failures. Two names turned into levers.

Then the final line appeared.

CHOOSE WHICH MEMORY SURVIVES THE TRIGGER.

The screen went black.

For several seconds, the room ceased to be a room. Arjun felt a rage, cold and immediate. Not explosive. Surgical. The kind of rage that made men intelligent enough to destroy themselves efficiently.

Beside him, Aisha had gone entirely white. Not with fear. With recognition. "They are here," she whispered.

"Not physically."

"That is not what I mean."

He understood. They had entered the most private chamber the investigation had left them—not the flat, not the devices, nor the networks.

Memory. The thing they had just tried to reclaim as human had been answered by the machine.

Arjun closed the laptop slowly. No sudden movements. No obedience to provocation. Aisha's breathing was shallow. He wanted to say her name, but he didn't.

Instead, he said, "Rule four."

She looked at him. His voice was steady, though it cost him. “We do not answer when the dead are used as instructions.”

Arjun nodded. The room returned by degrees. The fan. The traffic. The boys shouting below. The blue walls. The sealed capsule. The ring. Their bodies still alive inside a system trying to convert grief into command. Aisha wiped her face once and stood straighter.

“They made a mistake,” she said.

Arjun looked at her. “What?”

“They think love requires a record.” Her voice had changed—no tremor now. “They think if they own the archive, they own the attachment. If they own the image, the voice, the file, they own the grief.”

She picked up Meher’s photograph from her inner pocket and placed it face down on the table, setting her palm over it. “They don’t.”

Arjun looked at the blank screen where Nandini had been. For years, his memory of her had been contaminated by the guilt that he had failed to protect her when defence still mattered. Now Identity Zero had tried to turn even that uncertainty into a switch. He took the ring marked K-17 and placed it beside Meher’s photograph.

“They don’t,” he agreed quietly.

Outside, the cricket game ended in a dispute. An old man shouted from a nearby balcony, ordering everyone to go home. No one obeyed. Aisha looked towards the sound.

“Public trigger,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Health or banking. Kaveri-17.”

“Dead central. Live local,” Arjun added. “The witness.”

“Rao needs to meet offline. Mara Ellison has part of the story.”

“And Mila has already risked exposure.” Arjun nodded.

The strands were no longer separate. Myanmar held the archive. Berlin had given the warning. Delhi held the compromised fallback. Kaveri-17 held the witness. Mila had broken pattern. Rao had begun

to disobey procedure. Mara Ellison held the question, but Aisha and Arjun held the names.

For the first time, Identity Zero did not feel invincible.

That mattered.

Aisha opened a clean notebook and wrote at the top:

RULES BEFORE FEAR

Beneath it, she wrote four lines.

1. Continue if either is taken. No surrender inside imposed countdowns.
2. Extract what stops the trigger. Destroy the emotional archive.
3. Meher's model does not remain active.
4. Do not answer when the dead are used as instructions.

She pushed the notebook towards Arjun.

He added a fifth.

5. Do not let guilt impersonate duty.

Aisha read it. Then she added a sixth.

6. Do not let love become obedience.

They looked at the page together. It was not a tactical plan. It was a defence built from the very raw material the system had tried to weaponise against them. Arjun's burner phone vibrated. A message from an unknown number appeared, containing only a location and a time.

RAO. TOMORROW. 06:10. LODHI GARDEN. NO DEVICES. COME AS IF FOR A WALK.

Aisha read the screen and closed the notebook. Then, for the first time since they had entered the flat, she reached across the table and placed her hand over his. Arjun turned his palm slightly and held hers. Only for a few seconds. Enough to instill assurance, to show care and to bridge the quiet space between them. When she withdrew her hand, neither spoke of it. They did not need to.

Outside, Delhi settled into night. Somewhere, a biometric device would fail. Somewhere, a bank server would reconcile. Somewhere, a hospital clerk would misread a name. Somewhere, a woman declared

dead in one system would sleep beneath a roof where someone still knew she was alive.

Identity Zero believed love required a record. It was wrong. Love required witnesses. And witnesses, unlike records, could choose when to disobey.





INTERLUDE III

Aisha Rahman

She remembered the email first. It had arrived on a Tuesday afternoon, buried between routine notifications and promotional clutter—subject line polite, almost forgettable:

“Customer Support Opportunity–Kuala Lumpur Placement”

She had nearly ignored it. The job description was ordinary. The salary slightly above average. The language professional. There was no urgency, no insistence—only a quiet suggestion that this might be worth considering. That was what made it believable. Aisha had read it twice, then a third time. At twenty-six, she was not desperate. But she was ready. Ready for movement, for change. She replied.

The interview was conducted over video. Two people sat against neutral backgrounds and no visible branding. They asked the right questions: work history, language fluency, comfort with night shifts, and her ability to handle difficult clients.

She answered calmly.

They nodded often. There were no red flags. When they offered her the position, it felt earned. The ticket arrived the next day. Delhi to Kuala Lumpur. Return date: open. Accommodation provided.

“Temporary documentation will be handled on arrival,” the email noted. “Standard process.”

She did not question it. Airports always felt transitional to her—places where identity loosened slightly, where people existed between

versions of themselves. She moved through immigration with quiet efficiency, her documents in order, her thoughts already turning towards the life she was about to begin.

In Kuala Lumpur, a man was waiting, holding a placard with her name printed neatly in black letters. He smiled when he saw her. “Ms Rahman?” She nodded.

“Welcome,” he said. “Long journey?”

“Not too bad,” she replied, stepping out into the heavy, humid heat of a new city.

He took her suitcase without asking. Polite. Efficient. Normal. The car ride was longer than she expected. The city receded gradually—glass towers giving way to quieter roads, then to stretches of land that felt less defined. She watched the transition through the window, noting it without alarm. “The office is outside city?” she asked.

“Temporary training facility,” the man said. “More focused.”

She nodded. But when they arrived, the building did not look like an office.

That was the first deviation. It was nothing dramatic, nothing alarming—just slightly misaligned. Too enclosed. Too self-contained. But by then, she had already stepped inside.

They took her passport at reception. “Standard documentation,” the woman behind the desk said, smiling. “It will be returned after processing.”

Aisha hesitated for a second. Then she handed it over.

Time shifted after that. Gradually. They showed her to a room—shared, functional, clean enough to avoid discomfort. There were other women there, some speaking softly, some not speaking at all.

“You’ll start training tomorrow,” someone said.

She nodded. The first real sign came that night. Her phone did not connect. No signal. She tried again. Nothing.

“Network issue,” one of the women said quietly, without looking up. “Happens.”

Aisha placed the phone on the table. It felt like removal

Training did not resemble training. There were no introductions. No organisational overview. No clear structure. There were only screens, scripts and voices guiding tone: “*Slower.*” “*More empathy.*” “*Pause here.*”

She followed instructions, assuming clarity would come. It did not. On the third day, she asked about her passport. The answer was immediate. “Processing.”

On the fifth day, she asked again. “Delayed.”

On the seventh day, she realised. A missing document. A restricted movement. A door that did not open from outside. Each detail was small enough to dismiss on its own. Together, they were undeniable.

“They didn’t force you?” Arjun had asked her once.

She had shaken her head. “No,” she said. “They just removed every alternative.”

The first call she handled alone stayed with her. Not because of what she said. But because of what she heard. The man on the other end sounded like her father—measured, careful, and slightly uncertain.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “What have I done?”

Aisha followed the script. Her voice was steady, professional, and kind. “We’re here to help you, sir.”

The words came too easily. That was when she realised the final layer of the system. It did not need to break you; it only needed to *reposition* you.

That night, she did not sleep because of what she had become. Days passed in a blur of calls, scripts, corrections and silence. She learnt quickly out of sheer necessity. The better she became, the less she was noticed—and the less she was noticed, the more she could think.

The moment she changed was not dramatic. Just a decision. Quiet. Precise. She would survive long enough to understand the system from within. Escape did not come from courage. It would come from pattern. A delay in instruction. A lapse in supervision. A misalignment between command and execution. A gap—a small, but sufficient.

She moved through it. Later, when she was asked how she had endured, she did not speak of fear, but of structure.

“They think it’s a prison. “It’s not. It’s a system that convinces you there’s nowhere else to go.”

Now, standing in a different room, in a different country, with her passport returned and her freedom technically restored, Aisha Rahman understood something that still unsettled her. Though she had left the compound, the system had not left her. It lived in her patterns now—in the way she listened before speaking, and in the way she measured silence.

And somewhere, she knew, the same process was still running. Refined. Scaled. Perfected.

She looked at Arjun. “They didn’t take me. They designed a path. And I walked into it.”

Similar architectures were still running across the globe—quietly steering thousands into engineered traps, stripping away their alternatives, and turning human survival into institutional crime.





CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Entering the Machine

Lodhi Garden, Delhi

Lodhi Garden at dawn belonged to the living and the dead. Tombs rose in the mist. Stone arches held the grey morning. Parakeets shrieked from the trees. Runners moved along the pathways with disciplined breath. Elderly men in woollen caps walked in pairs, hands clasped behind their backs, discussing politics, blood pressure, and betrayal as though all three were seasonal conditions.

Delhi softened here before the day remembered itself. Arjun Malhotra walked alone past the lake. No phone or earpiece or visible weapon. He wore a plain sweater under a dark jacket. His ribs were taped tightly. Every step made the old injury negotiate with the new.

At 06:07, he passed the tomb's outer wall and saw Dr. Kavita Rao near a bench beneath a neem tree. She wore a new tracksuit and clean running shoes and a scarf pulled high around her neck.

Arjun sat at the opposite end of the bench. Neither looked at the other. For nearly a minute, they watched a stray dog inspect a paper cup with the seriousness of a forensic examination.

Rao spoke first. "You were followed until Khan Market by government security and an unknown second team."

Arjun turned slightly. "And now?"

"I used my driver's mother. She walks here every morning. Eighty-one. No phone. No one suspects old women of counter-surveillance."

Arjun almost smiled. "Useful oversight."

She kept her eyes on the path ahead. "Kaveri-17 is real. You know the code exists. You do not know what it did."

A runner passed them, breath loud in the cold. Rao waited until the footsteps faded. "The pilot began as a reconciliation exercise after flood displacement in parts of Karnataka. The official purpose was simple: resolve identity conflicts caused by migration, death registration delays, duplicate welfare records, and biometric mismatches."

"What was the actual purpose?"

"At first, perhaps the same." She swallowed. "That is how these things survive. They begin usefully enough to silence suspicion."

Arjun looked ahead.

Rao continued, "Seventeen clusters were tested. District-level records, civil death registers, health entitlements, bank-linked welfare, and mobile authentication layers. The pilot evaluated how quickly a person could be restored after being incorrectly marked dead, duplicate, migrated, or ineligible."

"Emergency fallback."

"Yes. Temporary validators allowed local officers to override central conflict flags."

"Who issued the validators?"

"The State integration unit, with technical support from two vendors and one policy consortium."

"The Centre?"

Rao's jaw tightened. "Not by that name. But one of the consortium's legacy advisory papers traces back to the Centre for Civic Identity and Digital Inclusion."

Arjun said nothing. The ghost architect's absence continued to leave footprints. Rao slid a folded paper from her sleeve and tucked it beneath the newspaper lying between them on the bench. Arjun did not touch it.

“One subject remained unresolved,” she said, her voice dropping. “Lakshmi Narayanamma. Sixty-two. Widow. A village near Mandya. Locally alive, but her central death layer was closed. Her bank pension stopped, was restored manually, then flagged again. Health entitlement inactive. A land record mutation was attempted by relatives after her central death record appeared. She disappeared from the local layer four weeks ago.”

Arjun’s face hardened. “Dead?”

“No death record. Transferred by family request to a long-term care facility near Mysuru.” Rao turned to look at him, her eyes wide with fear. “There is no facility at that address.”

A flock of parakeets burst from a tree and crossed the pale sky. For a moment, the garden was all wings and noise.

Rao said, “After I found the anomaly, I tried to pull full audit logs. Access denied, even with my own credentials. Then I received a note through an internal secure channel telling me the matter had been escalated beyond my clearance. No signatures.” Rao’s fingers tightened around her scarf.

“I defended these systems for years. In court affidavits, parliamentary notes, public consultations, internal reviews. Every time someone said exclusion, I said scale. Every time someone said mismatch, I said grievance redressal. Every time someone said death error, I said statistical edge case.”

She gave a short, bitter breath and looked towards the tomb. “The dead are always statistical until they speak. I saw the message before I connected your drive. The system anticipated my intention. Not my action. My intention.”

“Or someone watching you did.”

“Perhaps.” She slid a storage chip under the newspaper with two fingers. “Offline extracts. Partial. I could not pull everything. It contains Kaveri-17 metadata, validator-chain anomalies, Lakshmi’s conflict history, and one routing reference.”

“To where?”

Rao's voice lowered. "Myanmar."

Arjun's body stilled. "The compound?"

"I don't know. The route is masked through health-data disaster recovery, but the timing overlaps with the signal bursts you flagged."

He looked ahead. Aisha had been right. The archive, the kill-switch, the emergency fallback, the human data refinery—separate limbs of the same animal.

Rao spoke quickly now. "There is something else. The public trigger may not begin as a national outage. It may begin with a targeted failure in a trusted public service."

"Health or banking?"

"Either. But I found a scheduled resilience drill. Three days from now. Officially, it runs across selected digital health platforms, authentication nodes and pension-linked bank verification systems. A quiet test. No public notice. Because they want to study response behaviour under controlled degradation."

Arjun almost laughed. Controlled degradation. The perfect bureaucratic phrase for rehearsing panic. "Who authorised it?"

Rao looked away. "Sen's office approved the review. But the drill design came from the technical advisory layer. No name. Only an external consultant code."

"Which code?"

She said it softly. "E.V."

The garden seemed colder.

Rao continued, "I do not know whether Sen knows what he signed. I do not know whether he is compromised, cautious, or trapped. But if the drill runs, and if the emergency validator chain activates—"

"Then the poison enters as recovery."

A group of laughing college students passed nearby, taking photographs against the morning light. One of them posed dramatically beside an ancient wall. Another told him he looked stupid. All of them laughed harder.

Life continued beside architecture designed to endanger it. Rao got up. "I have to leave."

Arjun did not move. "Why come to me?" he asked.

She looked down at him. "Because inside the system, every objection is routed back into the system."

"And outside?"

"Outside, it may become unlawful. But readiness is not required."

Aisha's words. Arjun looked at her sharply.

Rao adjusted her scarf and began walking away. After five steps, she stopped. "Mr Malhotra. Lakshmi Narayanamma's local village record had one handwritten note uploaded as an image. It was from a panchayat officer who refused to close her file despite the central death flag." It said, *'She came this morning. She argued about her pension. Dead people do not argue this loudly.'*

For the first time, Arjun smiled.

Rao walked away into the morning. Arjun remained on the bench until the old woman with no phone passed him and collected the newspaper without looking at him.

The paper, the chip, and Rao's courage vanished beneath her shawl. Old women, he thought, remained the most underutilised intelligence network in civilisation.

By afternoon, Aisha had confirmed enough to make sleep impossible. The storage chip contained no live payload, no obvious malware, and no complete records. Rao had been careful. The extracts were partial, manually selected, and ugly in the way truthful data usually was. Nothing had the symmetry of a fabricated leak.

Lakshmi Narayanamma appeared in seventeen places and disappeared in the eighteenth.

Local ration record: active.

Local health worker note: active.

Pension bank link: suspended.

Central death registry: closed.

Land mutation attempt: pending.

Mobile number: reassigned.

Hospital entitlement: denied.

Emergency validator override: applied.

Override reversal: unexplained.

Transfer to care facility: processed.

Care facility: non-existent.

Final routing note: *Reconciliation escalated to external validation mirror.*

Mirror endpoint: obscured.

Timing: simultaneous with Myanmar Saffron signal burst.

Aisha sat at Mrs Dutta's dining table, staring at the chain. It was less like data and more like a kidnapping map.

"They took her because she disproved the model," Aisha said.

Arjun stood near the balcony. "Or because she was the only living contradiction inside K-17."

"A woman the central system says is dead, whom the local human layer insists is alive."

"The witness."

Aisha opened another file.

"Look at this."

It was the handwritten note from the panchayat officer. A crooked scan. Large handwriting. Impatient. Alive.

The subject appeared physically before undersigned at 09:20 hrs and objected loudly to the stoppage of pension. Central death entry disputed. Local verification confirms living. Do not close.

Below that, a second note in another hand: *Escalate.*

A third: *Resolved.*

A fourth, system-generated: *Subject transferred.*

Aisha leant back. "They don't just kill people. They resolve them."

Arjun looked at the screen. *Resolved.*

His temporary phone buzzed once. Aisha looked up. He checked it.

Mara Ellison.

I HAVE K-17 WHISTLEBLOWER MATERIAL. MEET IMPOSSIBLE. SENDING HUMAN COURIER. DO NOT TRUST ANYONE WHO ARRIVES ON TIME.

Aisha read it over his shoulder. "Comforting."

A second message arrived.

ALSO: YOUR QUESTION HAS BEEN POISONED. SOMEONE IS PREPARING A PUBLIC STORY BLAMING FOREIGN CYBER INTERFERENCE FOR UPCOMING IDENTITY DISRUPTION. NARRATIVE SEEDED.

Arjun's face hardened. "Pre-bunking." "They publish the explanation before the event. When the trigger happens, the public already has a container for fear."

"Foreign cyber interference," Aisha said. "What if we expose the validator poison afterwards?"

"We will be accused of amplifying the foreign attack."

"Or undermining national recovery." Aisha closed her eyes briefly. "They've written the story before the crime."

"That is how you control response."

Another message arrived from Mara Ellison.

ONE NAME FROM OLD NOTES: LAKSHMI N. IF SHE IS ALIVE, SHE IS THE STORY. IF SHE IS DEAD, SHE IS STILL THE STORY.

Aisha said, "Mara Ellison found her independently."

Mrs Dutta knocked and entered carrying tea. She was in her late seventies, sharp-eyed, and moved with authority. "You both look like failed exam results," she said.

Aisha blinked. Arjun took the tray. "Thanks ma'am."

Mrs Dutta looked at him over her spectacles. "Arjun. You are bleeding through the bandage."

"It is old blood."

"Blood is not *achar*. Old does not make it acceptable."

Aisha smiled slyly. Mrs Dutta turned to her.

“And you. Drink tea. Whatever revolution you are conducting can wait for four minutes. Revolutions fail from low blood sugar also.” Aisha accepted the cup.

Then Mrs Dutta’s face softened. “There were two men downstairs asking whether a niece from Kolkata was staying here.”

Arjun’s hand tightened on the cup. “When?”

“Ten minutes ago.”

“What did you say?”

“That I have many nieces and they don’t visit enough.”

“Did they leave?”

“One bought a notebook.”

Aisha rose. Mrs Dutta sighed. “I assume this means you will not finish the tea.”

Arjun placed the cup down. “I’m sorry.”

“You always were. It did not improve your mathematics.” She handed him a small paper bag. “Back stairs. Go through the roof. Sharma-ji’s terrace connects to the next block. His dog is harmless if you speak to it in Punjabi.”

Aisha stared at her. Mrs Dutta shrugged. “You think old houses were built for privacy? They were built for gossip. Gossip requires routes.”

“This is serious,” Arjun said.

Her eyes sharpened. “So am I.”

For a moment, the teacher and former intelligence officer looked at each other. Then she said, quieter, “Whatever you are doing, do not let them make you forget the person in the problem.”

Arjun thought of Lakshmi Narayanamma.

Aisha thought of Meher.

Neither said anything. They left through the back.

On the roof, Delhi opened in its chaotic honesty—water tanks, satellite dishes, drying clothes, pigeons, illegal extensions, children’s kites caught in wires, and terraces linked by planks, pipes, and neighbourly trespass. Sharma-ji’s dog barked once until Arjun said,

“Oye, *bas*,” in Punjabi. The dog reconsidered its political position and sat down.

They crossed three roofs, descended through a half-built staircase, and emerged into a lane behind a sweet shop. Aisha’s phone—the clean one—vibrated.

Unknown route. The message was from Mila.

Or from someone wearing her risk.

VOSS MOVING CORE AFTER DRILL. MYANMAR ENTRY WINDOW BEFORE TRANSFER. SUPERVISOR NODE IS NOT PRIMARY. ISOLATED BUILDING HAS ARCHIVE MIRROR AND RESPONSE ENGINE. DO NOT TRUST RESCUE SIGNALS FROM INSIDE. SOME ARE GENERATED. IF YOU HEAR CHILDREN, VERIFY PHYSICALLY. M.K.

Arjun read it twice. “She knows what Saffron does. She knows we are considering entry. She may be giving us the window. Or placing us inside it.”

Aisha slipped the phone away. “But Voss moving the core after the drill makes sense. Trigger, observe, transfer.”

“Then Myanmar cannot wait nor can India.”

The conflict had split itself into two urgent fronts. Stop the trigger. Enter the machine. Find Lakshmi. Poison the archive. Destroy Meher’s model. Expose Voss. Survive long enough for any of it to matter.

His phone buzzed again. Mara Ellison.

COURIER DELAYED. GOOD SIGN. LOCATION SHIFTED: NIZAMUDDIN DARGAH OUTER LANE, 19:30. LOOK FOR MAN CARRYING BROKEN HARMONIUM CASE. HE WILL NOT KNOW WHAT HE CARRIES.

Aisha read it. “Mara’s material tonight. Rao’s data today. Mila’s window for Myanmar before the drill. We don’t have time for clean sequencing.”

“So we do both. We retrieve Mara’s material. Get K-17 witness lead. Send Rao enough to block or corrupt the drill locally. Then we

move to Myanmar. We leave Rao and Mara with enough to hold the question publicly if the drill starts. We carry the archive route. If Saffron Ledger holds the response engine, I need to be there.”

Arjun nodded. “Rao is important. And Mara Ellison for public insurance.” He paused. “And Lakshmi?”

Aisha’s face tightened. “We find where she was transferred before we leave. If reachable, we extract her. If not, we make her impossible to erase.”

Arjun studied her. This was risky. It was also the first plan that accepted the truth: Identity Zero had designed the battlefield to punish sequential thinking. Data, people, trigger, archive—all moved together. Their answer would have to be imperfect simultaneity.

Then both phones vibrated at once. Different devices. Different routes. Same message.

PUBLIC TRIGGER ADVANCED.

HEALTH AUTHENTICATION FAILURE IN 18 HRS.

MYANMAR TRANSFER IN 20 HOURS.

No signature. No threat. Just timing. The machine had begun compressing choices.

Arjun said, “Let’s verify first and then act.”

Her hands were steady as she opened a portable receiver and began searching for corroboration through offline channels. Arjun watched the lane, the rooftops, the moving crowds.

Mara Ellison’s courier had delivered more than expected. Inside the broken harmonium case had been photocopied notes, two memory cards, and one handwritten statement from a former district data operator who claimed Lakshmi Narayanamma had been marked for “external reconciliation” after refusing to remain dead. The statement was incomplete, unsigned, and terrifying. It named a contractor liaison connected to Kaveri-17.

Initials: E.V.

Voss had been everywhere.

Myanmar

The route into Myanmar began in rain. Steady, humid rain that turned soil to paste, leaves to slick blades, and every footstep into a negotiation. It blurred distance and amplified small sounds. Water dripped from branches, rolled down collars, gathered at the edges of packs, and found every weakness in cloth, skin, and patience.

Arjun preferred it. Rain complicated cameras.

Ko Than met them at the abandoned pump house without a greeting. He looked at Aisha, then at Arjun, then at the two local porters carrying equipment cases under plastic sheeting. His expression communicated: they were late, underprepared, and likely to die.

He said, "The visitor is leaving tomorrow before noon. More guards move tonight. Trucks are ready. Machine is moving."

The compound lay beyond the slope, invisible beneath mist and foliage, but its presence carried through the valley. A generator hummed. An occasional engine sounded. Floodlights diffused through the rain like pale wounds in the dark.

Aisha set down her pack and checked the equipment.

Only Ko Than, two porters who would not cross the inner ridge, a drone too risky to use continuously, a partial map, a corrupted Saffron key, Rao's K-17 indicators, Mara Ellison's whistleblower material sealed and duplicated, and the rules written before fear.

Rao, for her part, had done what institutions rarely forgave: she had acted before the file matured. She had inserted a silent friction patch into three validator chains—not enough to suspend the drill, but enough to slow automatic fallback acceptance if the health-authentication failure triggered. Her last message had been short:

I CAN DELAY. NOT STOP. FIND PROOF OR FIND THE WITNESS.

Proof lay in the compound. Perhaps the witness too.

Aisha zipped the pack and looked at Arjun. "Ready?"

He thought of Mrs Dutta, Rao on the bench, Mara Ellison's voice, Nandini's image, Meher's photograph, Lakshmi's handwritten note, and Mila's warning.

They began the descent. The east approach was worse than the map suggested. The slope fell away in uneven shelves, thick with bamboo, thorns, wet roots, and black rock. Leeches found them within the first fifteen minutes. Mosquitoes gathered where the rain weakened. Twice, Ko Than stopped them with one raised hand and redirected their line around ground that looked ordinary but held old warning signs invisible to outsiders—a disturbed patch of mud, a vine tied too neatly, and a silence where insects should have been loud. They moved slower after that.

Arjun's ribs hurt badly now. The rain had soaked the tape beneath his shirt. Each downward step sent pain through his side. He kept it out of his gait as far as possible.

After an hour, the compound's lights became visible through trees. White beams swept across fence, yard, and road. The rain made them visible before they arrived, giving the jungle brief bones of light. Somewhere below, a truck reversed with a beeping sound absurdly similar to any construction site in any city.

They reached the abandoned pump line just before midnight. It ran along the slope like a rusted vein, half-buried, half-exposed, leading towards the service ditch southeast of the compound.

Ko Than crouched beside it and pointed. "Follow. No talking now."

The porters remained behind with the heavier equipment. From this point onward, only three entered the approach: Arjun, Aisha, Ko Than.

Aisha carried the signal kit and intrusion tools. Arjun carried the compact weapon he hoped not to use, two restraints, a medical pouch, and the evidence drives. Ko Than carried a rifle, a knife, and the expression of a man personally offended by optimism.

They moved beside the pipe. Twenty minutes later, they reached the first sensor. A small black node strapped beneath a root, angled towards the ditch. Aisha froze.

Arjun followed her gaze. "Motion?" he whispered.

"Hybrid," she breathed. "Low-power. Rain masking helps, but not enough. Need to disable it."

Aisha opened a pouch and removed a thin probe connected to a palm-sized device. She did not cut the sensor. Instead she made it believe the rain had become slightly heavier, the temperature slightly lower, the field slightly noisier. The node blinked once. Then settled.

They continued. The second sensor was easier. The third was not a sensor but a camera hidden inside a broken junction housing, pointed at the place where a careful infiltrator would step to avoid mud. Arjun admired it. Aisha looped a ten-second rain pattern into its buffer. They crossed.

At 00:47, they reached the service ditch. The compound fence rose thirty metres ahead—high enough to delay desperate people. Razor wire lined the top. Floodlight swept every nineteen seconds. Two guards were visible beyond the inner path, walking in opposite directions, bored but not careless.

The ditch ran under the fence through a culvert blocked by a metal grate. The grate was new. Ko Than looked at Arjun. Aisha moved closer, examining the lock, then the hinges.

"Electronic alarm on grate," she whispered.

"Can we bypass?"

"The lock casing is crude. The alarm loop is not."

She connected a bridge clip, waited for the diagnostic pulse, copied its rhythm, then cut the loop and fed it back to itself. For eight seconds, nothing happened. Then the small light on her device turned green.

Arjun lifted the grate slowly. No sound except rain. They crawled through one by one. Smell of mud, rust, and trapped rot. It narrowed halfway. Arjun's ribs screamed as he twisted through. Aisha moved

ahead, her breath controlled. Ko Than followed, rifle wrapped in cloth.

They emerged inside the perimeter behind a stack of discarded pipe sections. The compound was larger from within. Heat. Light. damp concrete. diesel. sweat. disinfectant. stale rice. electrical hum. distant coughing. keyboard clatter from one of the long buildings. A muffled shout. A generator's throat clearing again and again.

Arjun crouched in shadow. Aisha looked at the isolated building seventy metres away. No windows. Three power feeds. Two guards at the entrance. One camera over the door. A service trench running behind it. The archive mirror. The response engine. Perhaps Saffron. Perhaps a trap built in Saffron's shape.

Ko Than pointed to the left. "Shift path."

Along the southern side of the compound, a group of workers in grey shirts moved between buildings under guard. Heads down. Hands visible. Rain on their hair. Some were barefoot, some in plastic sandals. One woman limped. One young man carried a plastic bucket with both hands as though it had become the centre of his existence.

Aisha's eyes searched faces despite herself. Arjun touched her sleeve lightly. She nodded once. They moved when the floodlight turned. Past the pipe stack. Across a strip of mud. Behind a generator shed. The noise there was enormous. Useful. It shook the chest and swallowed small mistakes. Diesel fumes burnt Arjun's throat.

Aisha opened the signal kit beneath the shed's shadow and looked for the tap point and data cable.

Arjun pointed to the cable run entering the ground. "Cable there." The trench was covered by metal plates in sections, but rain had flooded parts of it. It ran behind the isolated building, past the guard blind zone, and towards a junction box near the eastern wall.

Aisha studied the route. "If I tap from the junction, I may reach the response engine without entering the building."

They waited through two patrol cycles. Then moved.

The trench water was cold and filthy. They entered at the generator shed and crawled beneath the first plate, bodies half-submerged, packs scraping metal overhead. The space was too tight for speed. At the junction box, they surfaced in a pocket of darkness between the isolated building and a stack of fuel drums. The guards at the front could not see them. The rear camera swept above their heads, angled strictly for standing bodies.

Aisha opened the junction panel. Inside, cables had been labelled in English. She connected the passive tap and waited. Her screen remained black. Then lines appeared in structured bursts: command packets, archive sync, response profiles, and validator echoes. Saffron.

"I'm in the mirror," Aisha whispered.

Arjun watched the guard path. She inserted the partial key from Mila's shard. The system did not open. It listened. Aisha frowned. "It recognises the shard."

The screen displayed a prompt. Only three icons: a child, a passport, a ring.

"Aisha." Arjun felt the ring in his pocket like a burn.

The system was asking for the emotional archive, identity permission, and the witness key. Meher. Farid. K-17. Saffron Ledger and the kill-switch were not separate; they were mutually validating.

Aisha's murmured. "It wants a witness key."

Arjun took out Lenz's ring. He placed it near her scanner. She magnified the inner band. The micro-etching aligned with the prompt. The system responded. A new line appeared:

K-17 WITNESS STATUS: UNRESOLVED
RECONCILIATION REQUIRED BEFORE FALLBACK
ACTIVATION

Aisha and Arjun looked at each other. Lakshmi was not merely evidence. She was a lock. As long as K-17 remained unresolved, the emergency fallback chain was incomplete. The public trigger could still create panic, but the poisoned validators could not fully legitimise themselves without resolving the living contradiction.

“Where is she?” Arjun whispered.

Aisha extracted the next routing layer. The system resisted. She fed it corrupted emotional-response data from the Dubai ambush—not raw, not Meher, but a false profile she had prepared after recognising Saffron’s adaptive logic. Fear where calm should be. Calm where fear was expected. Attachment markers scrambled. Response latency impossible. For the first time, Saffron hesitated. The prompt flickered. Then a location string appeared.

HOLDING: MEDICAL ANNEX / BLOCK E / SUBJECT L.N.

Aisha’s eyes widened. “She’s here.”

The witness was inside the machine!

Arjun looked towards Block E—the eastern building with intermittent movement and heat spikes. Medical annex. Or punishment block. Or both.

Ko Than, crouched beside them, followed his gaze. Aisha copied the location string and injected the poison routine into the response engine. The system accepted part of it, rejected part, and then accepted the rejected part under a different label. That worried her. “It’s learning around me.”

“How long before it knows?”

“I need thirty seconds.”

They got twelve. A guard at the rear corner stopped. He turned his flashlight towards the fuel drums. The flashlight beam moved closer.

Aisha’s screen displayed:

FIELD RESPONSE MODEL CORRUPTION: 43%

Then:

WARNING – ANOMALOUS INPUT

She whispered, “Come on.”

The guard stepped nearer. Arjun picked up a small stone from the mud and threw it lightly towards the far side of the trench. It landed with a wet sound. The guard turned. Ko Than moved silently behind him. He struck the guard at the base of the neck with the rifle stock

and caught him before he fell. Arjun helped lower the body into shadow. Breathing. Unconscious.

Aisha's screen flashed:

CORRUPTION SEEDED

ADAPTIVE CLEANSE IN 02:00:00

"Two hours," she whispered. "I bought two hours."

She disconnected the tap. Too late. The isolated building alarm did not sound. Instead, every light in the compound dimmed once. Then returned.

Ko Than cursed softly. "They know?"

Aisha closed the junction panel. "They suspect."

Arjun looked towards Block E. "Block E has enough guards inside."

Aisha packed the kit. "We need Lakshmi. And if children's voices call, we verify physically."

They moved along the rear of the isolated building, crossed behind a water tank, and reached the shadow of Block E. The building held a sharp stench. Antiseptic. Urine. Damp bedding. Medication. A side door stood locked with a keypad. Aisha opened the panel and worked quickly. The keypad accepted a maintenance override copied from the junction traffic. The door unlocked with a soft click.

Inside, the corridor was dim and narrow. Beds lined both sides behind partial partitions. Holding beds. Restraint points. IV stands. Cameras in the corners. Some occupied. Some empty. A fan turned slowly overhead, pushing the smell around rather than clearing it.

A woman coughed behind a curtain. A man muttered in a language Arjun did not recognise. Aisha's face tightened. No children's voices. Only adult suffering.

At the far end, a workstation glowed. They moved bed by bed. Aisha checked the tablet mounted near the workstation. Patient IDs. No names. Functions.

DUPLICATE-RECON. VOICE-SOURCE

COMPLIANCE-FAIL. DEATH-CONFLICT

She stopped at the last. Bed 12. Behind a blue curtain. Arjun lifted it. An elderly woman lay on the bed. Thin, grey hair tied back and wrists loosely restrained. Her eyes were open. Not fully drugged, but not clear either. A monitoring tag was taped to her neck. She looked at Arjun, then Aisha. Her voice came dry and furious in Kannada. Aisha did not understand the words. Arjun understood enough. The old woman was demanding to know who they were and why everyone in this place was incompetent.

Aisha almost laughed. It came out as a breath.

“Lakshmi Narayanamma,” Arjun said softly.

The woman’s eyes sharpened at her name.

Ko Than looked terrified. “She is shouting.”

“Good,” Arjun said. Dead people did not argue loudly.

Aisha removed the restraints. Arjun checked the tag. The moment he touched it, the workstation screen changed:

K-17 WITNESS CONTACT DETECTED

Aisha’s head snapped up. “Oh no.”

The corridor speakers clicked. Then a child began to cry. A small voice from somewhere ahead called out, “Didi...”

Aisha froze. Arjun looked at her. “Verify physically.”

She closed her eyes. Opened them. “Physical first.”

The voice came again. “Didi, please.”

Lakshmi began shouting at the speaker in Kannada, furious and alive, as if scolding ghosts for poor manners.

That saved them. Aisha moved towards the workstation, opened the casing and yanked the audio output cable free. The child’s voice died mid-sob.

Arjun lifted Lakshmi gently. She slapped his shoulder. He nearly smiled. “She wants her slippers,” he said.

Aisha looked down. A pair of rubber slippers sat beneath the bed. She put them on Lakshmi’s feet.

Then the real alarm began. Doors locking. One after another. Soft clicks down the corridor. Ko Than moved to the door. “Men coming. Too many.”

Aisha grabbed a tablet from the workstation and shoved it into her pack. Arjun supported Lakshmi, who continued speaking angrily. The side door they had used was locked. Aisha tried the keypad. Denied. The corridor lights turned red. A calm recorded voice spoke in Burmese, then English:

MEDICAL CONTAINMENT PROTOCOL ACTIVE. PLEASE REMAIN IN PLACE.

Ko Than looked at Arjun. Aisha scanned the corridor. “Laundry chute.”

She pointed to a service hatch near the back. It was a utility disposal, leading outside or to waste handling. Ko Than opened it. A foul smell emerged. “No.”

Arjun looked at Lakshmi. She looked at the hatch, and objected loudly.

“But we are leaving,” Arjun said.

The first guards entered the corridor. Two at the far end. Weapons raised. Compact carbines. Ko Than fired once. The sound was enormous. One guard dropped behind the partition, hit or hiding. The other fired back. A monitor shattered near Arjun’s head. Violence had arrived. Rare, impactful, irreversible.

Arjun pushed Lakshmi through the hatch feet first. Aisha crawled after her. Ko Than fired twice more, controlled, forcing the guards down. Arjun entered last. A round struck the metal frame beside his hand.

The utility passage dropped sharply into darkness. He slid, shoulder scraping, ribs screaming, boots striking wet metal. The passage spat him into a waste service bay outside Block E, where Aisha was already helping Lakshmi stand beside overflowing bins and rainwater drains. Ko Than emerged behind him. Above, voices shouted. Floodlights swept towards them.

Aisha pointed east. "Fence route?"

"No," Arjun said. "They will expect the culvert."

Ko Than pointed northwest. "Loading bay. Trucks."

They moved towards the loading bay. The compound had become alert without yet becoming fully chaotic. That was their narrow grace. Systems took time to translate anomaly into command. Guards ran towards Block E. Floodlights searched the inner fence. An alarm finally rose, low and pulsing. The long operator buildings remained lit. Faces appeared behind barred windows.

Young faces. Tired faces. Watching. Aisha saw them.

So did Arjun. They could not stop. Not yet.

At the loading bay, two trucks stood with engines running. Men shouted. Crates were being loaded in haste from the isolated building—black equipment cases, sealed storage racks, portable servers. Transfer had begun early.

Aisha looked at the cases. "Saffron core."

"We can't take it all. Can you mark it?"

She pulled a small transmitter from her pack. "Better. I can infect the locator chain." She ran low, keeping behind crates, and slapped the device under one storage rack as porters lifted it. The rack's indicator blinked once. Then blended into the truck's own telemetry. "Done."

A guard turned. Saw her. Raised his weapon. Arjun moved. He struck the guard from behind with his pistol's butt, hard enough to drop him. Another guard shouted. Ko Than fired into the floodlight above them.

Darkness burst over the loading bay. Amidst the chaos, Arjun pushed Lakshmi into the rear of the second truck between stacks of laundry sacks and plastic containers. Aisha climbed in. Ko Than pulled the canvas cover down from the inside.

Arjun was about to follow when he saw the man beside the first SUV. Tall. Grey suit. No tie. Voss. Only thirty metres away, lit by the floodlight, watching the loading operation. Then he entered the SUV.

Aisha hissed from the truck, “Arjun!”

He climbed in. The truck jerked forward. The compound was too busy preserving its core. A system under pressure protected its function first. People second.

The truck rolled towards the western gate. Under the canvas, Lakshmi muttered angrily. Aisha crouched beside her, gripping the stolen tablet. Ko Than held his rifle and listened. At the gate, the truck stopped. Voices. A guard slapped the side panel. Another voice shouted from behind—urgent, commanding. The guard at the gate moved away. The truck rolled forward, into mud, into jungle road, into rain.

Aisha exhaled slowly. All were quiet. Then, the compound’s floodlights swept the road. A siren rose. The truck accelerated. Ko Than looked through a tear in the canvas. “They follow soon.”

Arjun checked the pistol.

The screen of Aisha’s tablet awakened by itself, reading:

K-17 WITNESS REMOVED. FALLBACK INCOMPLETE.
ADAPTIVE RESPONSE INITIATED.

Aisha whispered, “We stopped one lock.”

Arjun looked back towards the compound. “No. We made the machine choose another door.”

The truck hit a rut, throwing them hard against the laundry sacks. Lakshmi cursed. Aisha laughed once, breathless and shaken. Outside, the jungle swallowed the road. Behind them, the machine had become visible.





CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Human Servers

Myanmar — Outside the Compound

The truck did not escape. It merely left the compound.

The road west was mud-beaten into obedience through repeated use. Rain struck the canvas cover, collected in sagging folds, and spilt through gaps over laundry sacks, weapons, bodies, and fear. The engine growled through each rut. Arjun crouched near the rear flap, one hand braced against the panel, the other wrapped around the pistol. Aisha sat opposite, soaked hair stuck to her cheek, the stolen tablet balanced on her knees. Lakshmi Narayanamma lay half-reclined against the laundry sacks, wrapped in a torn plastic sheet. Her wrists bore red marks from restraints. Her eyes, however, remained violently alive.

She said something in Kannada, slow and furious. Aisha looked at Arjun. “What now?”

Arjun smiled. “She wants to know whether we are kidnappers or idiots.”

Ko Than crouched near the front partition, listening through the noise. He had persuaded the driver not by negotiation but by placing a knife against the man’s thigh. Behind them, the compound’s alarms faded and returned with the bends of the road.

“Two trucks. Maybe bikes,” Ko Than said, lifting two fingers. “Close after the next slope.”

“We need to get off this road,” Aisha said.

Arjun opened the rear flap by two inches. The jungle outside was a wet blur. If they stayed in the truck, the pursuers would catch them before the river crossing. If they jumped now, Lakshmi might break something. If they stopped, they would be surrounded. The choices were poor and realistic.

Aisha’s tablet flashed. “The compound is broadcasting containment orders. Local militia. Private security. Internal handlers. Foreign intrusion. Medical abduction. Data theft.” She scrolled further and froze. “Internal operator floors are in lockdown. Behavioural reset in progress.”

The stolen tablet still carried a supervisory credential that hadn’t been revoked. A fragment of internal video came through: rows of young people at long desks under white fluorescent light. Headsets. Monitors. Grey shirts. Guards at the doors. Screens flashing red. On a large board, changing scripts:

RESET PROTOCOL: RETURN TO ASSIGNED ROLE.

UNAUTHORISED MEMORY DISCUSSION PROHIBITED.

EXTERNAL RESCUE CLAIMS ARE DECEPTION. PERSONAL NAMES ARE TO BE DISCARDED DURING LOCKDOWN.

A young man in the third row removed his headset and got up. A guard struck him across the back of the head with a baton. He fell against the desk. Fear spread like instruction. Shoulders tightened. Eyes lowered. Hands returned to keyboards.

Aisha’s voice was very quiet. “Human servers. Not metaphorically. Scripts, voice samples, social engineering responses, live corrections. They are not just workers. They are processing nodes with fear attached.”

On the feed, the instruction board changed again:

REPEAT: I AM MY FUNCTION.

Some operators began saying it aloud. The sound came through the tablet’s damaged speaker, tiny and almost unreal. Lakshmi stopped

muttering. Even without understanding the language, she understood captivity when it spoke in rhythm.

Aisha killed the audio. Her hand was trembling.

Ko Than crawled back. "Roadblock ahead. One kilometre. Militia checkpoint."

"Stop before the bend," Arjun said.

The truck rolled to a halt beside a bend where bamboo leant over the road like a roof. Arjun jumped first, landing in mud. Aisha helped Lakshmi to the edge, and Arjun brought her down carefully. Ko Than jumped last. The truck moved before the canvas flap fully settled. The jungle closed around them.

Ko Than led them through wet grass and low branches, moving parallel to the road but lower down the slope. Arjun supported Lakshmi on one side; Aisha took the other. Behind them, the pursuing engines slowed at the checkpoint. Voices shouted. A shot cracked at the truck's tyres. More shouting.

Ko Than smiled in the dark. "Now they argue as to who failed."

The bamboo thinned into a narrow gully where rainwater ran brown over stones. They followed it downhill. The sound of the road faded behind them, replaced by water, insects, and distant engines moving in confused circles.

Aisha kept glancing at the tablet. Building Two had changed. A disturbance had begun near the rear exits. One person standing. Another refusing a headset. A woman helping the young man who had been struck. Guards shouting at too many people to command any single one. The instruction board flickered:

ROLE ERROR. FUNCTION UNVERIFIED. NAME
CONFLICT DETECTED.

The operators stared. Some did not understand. Some did. Then: PERSONAL NAME ENTRY REQUIRED FOR RESET.

Aisha's face altered. "I didn't do that. Could it be Mila? Someone inside CIRCE knows the language of conditioning—someone knew which question would break the reset."

A young woman near the front removed her headset slowly, placed it on the desk with deliberate care. The person beside her did the same. Then three more. Then a whole row. The floor turned from obedience into noise. A compound-wide alert appeared:

HUMAN ASSET DESTABILISATION—BUILDING TWO.
BUILDING THREE NON-COMPLIANT.

“The corruption is spreading through their behavioural reset but uncontrolled,” Aisha said. A controlled hesitation could help people escape. Uncontrolled panic could get them killed.

Ko Than looked back. “Bad sound. Militia containment. When workers fight.”

Aisha looked at the tablet again. Yard camera. Operators forced into rain. Some running. Some beaten back. A group near the laundry shed overturned a cart and used it as a barricade with the instinctive stupidity and bravery of people discovering resistance without instructions. A guard fired into the air. The crowd dropped. Then Building Three’s side door opened from inside. Dozens spilt out. The compound’s order broke.

“The human assets are the cover now,” Aisha said. “Voss will use their panic to move the core.” She turned to Ko Than. “Is there a drainage route? Anything larger than the culvert?”

“North drainage channel. To creek. Usually locked inside. The outside grate may be old. From here, forty minutes through gully.”

“Okay,” Arjun said.

They reached the north drainage outlet beyond a shallow stream. The grate was old, but a new chain secured it. Ko Than placed the bolt cutter’s jaws on the chain. Nothing. Arjun gripped one handle with him despite the pain in his ribs. Together they pressed. The metal resisted, then gave with a muffled snap. Aisha caught the chain before it struck the grate.

She leant into the opening, whispering first in English, “Can anyone hear me?” Silence. Then Hindi, “*Sun sakte ho?* This way. Drainage exit. Come quietly.”

Voices inside stopped. Then one asked, "Who?"

"Not CIRCE. Not guard. Exit. Move now."

The first person emerged three minutes later—a young man with a bruised face, soaked grey shirt, and eyes too large for his skull. He froze at the opening, staring at Aisha as if she might be another test.

Then Lakshmi shoved past Arjun, stepped close to the grate, and began shouting at him in Kannada. He did not understand a word. It worked anyway. He crawled out. Then a girl from Laos. Then six more. Then too many to count quickly.

They emerged coughing, slipping, stinking of wastewater and fear, clutching the wrong things: a photograph, a notebook page, a torn headset. One man carried an unconscious boy. A woman had blood running down the side of her head. A teenager kept repeating a number under his breath as if afraid he would disappear without it.

Aisha directed them into the reeds where Ko Than marked a narrow track towards the creek. Arjun remained near the grate, helping people out one by one. His injured side screamed every time he pulled weight. The compound floodlights shifted north.

"Three minutes," Aisha said.

A child's voice called out from inside the channel: "Please wait!"

Aisha froze.

"Physical," Arjun said.

She closed her eyes once, then opened them. The voice came again—ragged, breathless, real. A boy emerged, perhaps thirteen, dragging a smaller child by the hand. Aisha pulled them through the opening.

The first shots hit mud beyond the grate. Arjun fired once towards the floodlight—not at a body but at brightness. It shattered.

Ko Than shouted from the reeds, "Move!"

Aisha grabbed Lakshmi. A burst of gunfire struck the metal grate sending sparks flying. Arjun pulled the last visible woman through, then looked back into the channel. Voices echoed from inside. Guards

had entered the tunnel from the compound side. A shot fired deep in the tunnel, its blast magnified by the concrete.

People surged towards the exit. Arjun reached in and caught one hand, then another. A third hand—small—reached. Then vanished.

Aisha grabbed his shoulder. “We have to close. If they fire through the channel, they kill everyone at the exit.”

Another shot inside. Arjun reached out again. No hand. Only darkness and echo. Together they swung the grate partly closed—not locking it but narrowing the line of fire. People inside could still push out. Guards could not shoot cleanly through. It was the best available cruelty. They ran.

By the time Arjun and Aisha reached the creek, perhaps forty escapees crouched among reeds and mud—shaking, bleeding, silent or sobbing. Ko Than looked at the numbers and shook his head. “Boats cannot carry all.”

Arjun stood in the rain, and instructed, “Children first. Then the injured who cannot walk. Lakshmi. Anyone with evidence or knowledge of routes. The rest move on foot with Ko Than’s markers to the second crossing.”

The young man from Building Two stepped forward. “I know the north fence path. Kitchen workers use. I can take a walking group.”

Aisha looked at him. “What is your name?”

He flinched, then, almost defiantly: “Rafiq.”

“Rafiq, can you lead them?”

“I was map team before script floor. I remember roads.”

She handed him a small covered light and one of Ko Than’s marked cloth strips. Lakshmi was placed in the first boat. Two children beside her. Ko Than took the engine.

A flare rose behind them, unfolding white light over the reeds. Everyone froze. Ko Than opened the engine fully. The first boat surged forward, overloaded, low in the water.

Aisha shoved the stolen tablet into Arjun's bag. "Arjun, the tablet has Saffron corruption logs, K-17 witness removal, and Voss transfer telemetry. It has to cross."

She looked at him. "I will take the walking group with Rafiq."

"That is not the plan."

"The plan died when the flare went up."

Another burst of gunfire hit the water. The escapees screamed and dropped. Arjun grabbed her arm. She dropped his hand, turned, and ran towards Rafiq.

Arjun had no choice. He got into the second boat with three children, the unconscious boy, and the man clutching a notebook to his chest. On the bank, Aisha stood beside Rafiq in the flare's light. Then darkness took her. The creek carried Arjun away.

He reached the opposite bank where Ko Than had already unloaded the first group. Lakshmi shouted when she saw him arrive without Aisha. Ko Than looked past him. "Where is the woman?"

"Walking group."

Ko Than's face darkened. He grabbed Arjun's shoulders. "No. You go back, you die. She die maybe. You die sure."

Then the radio crackled. Aisha's voice came through, broken and breathless. "Crossing not possible. Taking ridge path. Twenty-eight with me. Rafiq leading. Two injured. Pursuit behind but confused."

Ko Than hissed, "Old teak trail, west then south."

Arjun relayed it. Aisha's line filled with static. A child cried near her. She said, away from the radio, "Keep moving. Names later. Feet now." Then to Arjun: "Do not come back."

He closed his eyes for one second. "Understood." The word tasted like betrayal. The radio cut.

Inside the compound, Dr Elian Voss watched Building Two burn without expression. On the command screen before him, the site map pulsed with alerts:

HUMAN ASSET DESTABILISATION.

K-17 WITNESS REMOVED.

SAFFRON MIRROR CORRUPTED.

ARCHIVE TRANSFER PARTIAL.

FALLBACK COMPLETION DELAYED.

Delay irritated him more than loss. Loss could be modelled. Delay introduced human arrogance into systems that had almost freed themselves from it.

"We can restore containment within two hours," the regional supervisor said.

Voss looked at the screen. "You can restore containment. Not order." He adjusted his cuff. "Move the core. Not to Dubai."

The supervisor's composure cracked. "Protocol specifies Dubai mirror after field compromise."

"Protocol was written before K-17 was removed."

"Then where?"

"India."

"Before fallback activation?"

"Because of fallback activation," Voss said. He paused. "If health authentication fails, people will demand restoration. The contaminated validator chain will offer continuity."

"The public trigger," she said slowly. She looked towards the feeds showing escapees at the drainage channel. "And the missing witness?"

Voss enlarged the image: Aisha Rahman, lit briefly by a flare before vanishing into reeds. Recognition was not emotional. It was merely useful.

"A contradiction must either be recovered, discredited, or made exemplary. For now—prepare the India narrative. Foreign interference. Humanitarian rescue fabrication. Data theft. Circulate through friendly channels before the authentication failure begins."

"And Malhotra?"

Something like interest entered Voss's face. "Mr Malhotra still believes systems are corrupted by people. He is wrong. People are corrupted by systems that outlive their guilt."

On-screen, Building Three's feed went black. Another small failure. Another delay. Voss's mouth tightened.

"Move the core within the hour."

"And the remaining human assets?"

"Reclassify as expendable after transfer."

On the western bank, Arjun moved with the first group towards the temporary hide site. The escapees moved badly. They flinched at branches. They stopped when no one ordered them. They looked back too often.

The man with the notebook stumbled near Arjun, who caught him by the arm. The man clutched the notebook tighter to his chest. "What is it?" Arjun asked.

The man looked blankly and then answered in English, "Names." He opened it to pages filled with dense columns. Asset codes. Real names. Countries. Languages. Assigned functions. Punishment marks. Transfer dates. It was incomplete, but human. "I worked floor allocation. I wrote when the system changed names. Secret. Maybe stupid."

"No," Arjun said, his voice firm. "Not stupid."

The man's lips trembled. "If no name, no family find."

Arjun closed the notebook gently and pushed it back. "Keep it dry."

They reached the hide site—a cluster of abandoned charcoal huts beneath a rock overhang. Ko Than's people waited there with tarps, water, and rice packets. The Saffron core locator pinged once from a road east of the compound, then vanished. Voss had moved. The health-authentication trigger remained seventeen hours away.

Suddenly, the radio crackled. Static. Then Aisha's voice broke through. "Marker two reached. Twenty-six with me. Lost two to panic. Not confirmed captured." Her breathing was hard. "Rafiq is useful." A male voice shouted directions in the background. "We found the old teak trail. One child feverish. One ankle fracture."

"Lakshmi?" she asked softly.

"Alive. Angry. Tablet intact. Notebook recovered with names."

"Names! Then they are not only functions anymore."

"No," Arjun said. For a second, neither spoke. The radio carried rain between them.

Then Aisha said, "Do not let them move the story before we move the people. They will call this abduction. Data theft. Foreign interference. They will make the escaped people illegal before they can become witnesses. Mara Ellison needs names. Rao needs Lakshmi. India trigger needs proof before panic."

"You focus on reaching the crossing," Arjun said.

"I am focusing." Static swelled on the line. Then, quiet but clear: "You too."

The line died.

Inside the hut, Lakshmi began shouting at one of Ko Than's men who had offered her rice without salt. The escaped children huddled beneath tarps. The man with the notebook sat apart, holding it inside his shirt to keep it dry. A teenage girl whispered her name to herself, as if memorising it before sleep could steal it.

Human servers, Arjun thought. *No. Humans.*

Above the valley, the compound's alarms continued under rain. Behind the alarms, Voss was moving the core. Ahead, India waited with millions of people whose identities were about to be made negotiable by a system offering continuity. Arjun took out the ring marked K-17 and looked at it under the weak hut light.

Lakshmi Narayanamma had argued herself back from administrative death. Aisha had opened a drain instead of obeying escape. Rafiq had typed his name into a hostile machine. Mila, somewhere between betrayal and erasure, had taught the reset to ask for names. Rao had closed her blinds. Mara Ellison had held a question.

Tiny acts. Insufficient acts. Human acts.

Identity Zero had built itself on the belief that people could be reduced to functions under pressure. Tonight, for the first time, the machine had seen what happened when functions remembered names.

It had not collapsed. Not yet.

But it had hesitated. And in that hesitation, people had begun to run.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Mila's Reckoning

Singapore

Mila Kovács reached Singapore with the passport of a Croatian art consultant who existed cleanly enough to pass through automated immigration. Her hair was darker. The bruising along her cheek had been sealed with make-up. The limp had been reduced by painkillers. Singapore was useful because it disliked disorder. Glass towers rose over roads that behaved. Cameras watched. Elevators arrived on time. Mila could make out why systems admired Singapore. It made control look like cleanliness.

She arrived at Changi just before midnight, carrying nothing that mattered in the visible luggage. The shard was gone. The message had travelled. The betrayal had begun to multiply beyond her hands. CIRCE did not forgive multiplication.

At the taxi stand she joined a queue behind a family from Melbourne. Every person in the taxi queue was assessed and discarded. Every reflection in the glass read. No one followed visibly. That meant either she had escaped the first net, or the second was already around her. She gave the Robertson Quay address, then changed it two minutes later.

"Can you take me to Tanjong Pagar first? I need to collect a key."

The driver glanced at her in the mirror. He shrugged.

The safe office occupied the fifth floor of a narrow commercial building between a dental clinic and a shipping consultancy, registered to a compliance-training firm that had not trained anyone in three years. Its rent paid through a Hong Kong account. CIRCE had used it twice in her time: once to debrief an Indonesian banker who believed he had fallen in love, once to prepare a Malaysian intermediary for disappearance. Mila had not been meant to remember either. She remembered both. That was becoming a problem for everyone.

She asked the taxi to wait. The building lobby smelt faintly of disinfectant and stale air-conditioning. A security guard sat behind the desk watching a football replay on his phone. He barely glanced at her. The access card still worked. That surprised her. Again, unsafe.

The lift opened on the fifth floor to a corridor too quiet for the number of offices it contained. Most doors were dark. A red exit sign hummed at the far end. Somewhere behind a partition, a printer clicked and reset itself, though no one had printed anything.

Mila walked to Unit 5B.

The door lock accepted the card. Inside, the office was exactly as it should have been. That was the first wrong thing. No dust. No smell of neglect. Someone had kept it alive. Three desks. One conference table. A wall map of Southeast Asia. A framed certificate from a professional standards body that had never heard of the company displaying it.

Mila closed the door behind her and did not turn on the lights. The city outside gave enough.

At the far desk lay a file. Cream folder. No markings. Too ordinary. She opened it. Inside: a photograph. Aisha Rahman, lit by flare-light in the Myanmar rain, turning towards the drainage channel with escaped operators behind her. Below it, a typed line:

SURVIVOR HAS ASSUMED CONTAGION ROLE.

A second photograph showed Arjun Malhotra on the western bank, holding the K-17 ring under a hut lamp:

PROTECTIVE FIGURE REMAINS NON-COMPLIANT.

A third photograph depicted Lakshmi Narayanamma, half-wrapped in plastic, shouting at someone beyond frame. No typed line. Only a handwritten note in blue ink:

This one is becoming inconvenient.

Mila touched the edge of the photograph. There were moments when evil revealed itself not by cruelty, but by irritation. It hated those it could not classify cleanly.

A voice behind her spoke. "You came faster than expected."

Mila placed the photograph down and turned as if she had known the room contained another person all along. The assessor from Keleti station stepped out from behind the glass partition. Grey suit. Hair tied low. No jewellery except a thin silver ring. The broken nose had been repaired only enough to remain symmetrical at a distance.

"You should have rested," Mila said.

The assessor smiled faintly. "You should have returned."

"I dislike repetition."

"You were always charming when cornered."

"I was always trained to be."

A second figure near the entrance. Male. Tall. Dark shirt. Empty hands. Empty face. Two visible. Perhaps more outside.

The assessor gestured towards the chair. "Sit."

"No."

"It was not a request."

"It never is."

"Do you know how much damage you caused?" "Enough to justify this conversation."

"More than that."

"Good."

Irritation crossed the assessor's face. It was small. It pleased Mila.

"Do not mistake disruption for victory. The Myanmar event has already been absorbed. Armed intrusion. Data theft. Foreign intelligence interference. By morning, every witness will require authentication before being believed."

Mila looked at Lakshmi's photograph. "That may be harder with the old woman."

"She can be made incoherent." The sentence sat in the room.

"Why am I here?" Mila asked.

"Because you still believe you are deciding something." "Aren't I?"

"No. You are experiencing the psychological residue of delayed obedience. It feels like choice because correction has not yet completed."

Mila laughed softly. The assessor did not enjoy it.

"You people really do hate poetry unless you wrote it in a manual."

"Mila," she said, almost gently, "you were one of our better instruments. You understood desire without surrendering to it. You understood guilt without drowning in it. You could enter loneliness like a room and rearrange the furniture before the target noticed. That is rare." "Flattery is correction now?"

"Recognition is efficient."

"Dr Voss sent you?" Mila asked.

The assessor's expression changed by less than a breath. "Dr Voss is occupied."

"With India." The man at the door looked at her too quickly.

Mila smiled.

"Thank you."

The assessor's eyes hardened.

"You know fragments. That makes you feel larger than you are."

"Fragments cut."

"Fragments also mislead."

The assessor stepped closer. "You will record a correction statement. Confirming that communications attributed to M.K. were fabricated by Arjun Malhotra's network using stolen CIRCE archives. You will identify him as the source of the Myanmar destabilisation. You will state that Aisha Rahman's trauma profile has made her vulnerable to manipulation. You will say Lakshmi Narayanamma was transferred for medical care."

Mila stared at her. Then she began to laugh. Not loudly. Worse. Honestly.

"You want me to authenticate the lie."

"You are already authenticated inside the story. A beautiful defector. A compromised intimacy asset. A survivor manipulated by a guilt-ridden former intelligence officer. Truth does not lose because it lacks facts. It loses because lies arrive with better casting."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then your existing file will be corrected posthumously."

Mila nodded thoughtfully. "You have improved since Keleti."

The man at the door did not wait for permission. He caught Mila's right wrist, twisted it behind her back, and drove her against the conference table. The assessor placed a small recorder near Mila's face. "Begin."

Mila breathed against the table surface. For years, she had spoken sentences written by others and made them sound like confession. She had said *I love you* as access, *I understand* as extraction, *I'm afraid* as bait, *forgive me* as closure. Language had been her work. Now they wanted her voice to become a corridor through which the machine could walk into public belief.

"State your name." Mila said nothing. The man twisted her wrist higher. Pain flashed white. "State your name."

A function would calculate survival. An asset would delay, negotiate, redirect. A person, she was discovering, could do something far less efficient. She could refuse the premise.

Mila opened her eyes. "My name," she said slowly, "is Mila Kovács." The assessor relaxed slightly. That was her mistake.

Mila continued. "I was recruited by CIRCE as a controlled intimacy asset. I was trained to create trust where trust should have failed. I was used to compromise officials, brokers, investigators, and lonely men who mistook attention for mercy."

"Stop recording." The man reached for the device. Mila moved. Not away from pain. Through it. She dropped her body weight, letting

the twisted wrist dislocate partially rather than resisting. The sudden slack surprised him. Her free hand seized the glass paperweight from the table and drove it backwards into his knee. He grunted and folded. Her trapped wrist tore free.

The assessor lunged for the recorder. Mila kicked a chair into her path and grabbed the folder. The man recovered faster than she hoped. He struck her across the ribs. She hit the partition hard enough to crack frosted glass. Her injured ankle failed. She went down on one knee.

The assessor drew a compact pistol. Not at Mila. At the recorder. She fired once. The recorder shattered.

Mila smiled through blood. "That was rude."

The assessor turned the pistol. "Final correction approved."

Before she could fire, the office lights went out. Not Mila. Not CIRCE. Something else. Emergency lights glowed red. A voice came from the office speaker system—male, calm, Indian. "Unit 5B. This is building security. Please remain where you are. Police have been notified of a weapons discharge."

Mila recognised the lie immediately. Police response in Singapore would not be announced through a dead office speaker within seconds. Someone had entered the building system. A message appeared on the dark wall screen:

M.K.—LEFT STAIRWELL. NOW.

The assessor fired at the screen. Mila threw the folder at the assessor's face, rolled behind the conference table, kicked it hard into the assessor's legs, and reached beneath the third desk where memory told her a document safe had been installed. Still there. She pulled out the emergency exit key and threw herself towards the left door.

A bullet struck the doorframe near her shoulder. Splinters cut her cheek. Mila entered the stairwell and slammed the door.

She descended. Her ankle screamed. Her wrist had gone hot and numb. Above, the stairwell door opened. The man followed, limping but moving.

On the fourth-floor landing, the door opened from the other side. A young man in a janitor's uniform held a mop bucket. He whispered: "Aisha says names are doors." He shoved a maintenance access card into her hand. "Down one more. Service lift. Hurry."

"Who are you?"

He looked terrified by the question. "No one. Please go."

No one. The most common name inside systems. Mila ran. Above, the man fired. The janitor screamed.

The sound hit something older than training. The safer act was descent. The human act was return. For one second, she stood between them. Betrayal was not an act. It was a temperature. The room cooled. Then burnt.

Mila turned back up the stairs.

The janitor had collapsed against the wall, clutching his arm. The CIRCE man stood over him, weapon raised. Mila hit him from behind with a metal fire extinguisher. First blow to the shoulder. Second to the head. He dropped. Mila snatched his fallen pistol as the assessor appeared above. A shot cracked over them as she pulled the janitor down by his collar.

"Move." She dragged him through the fourth-floor door into a hallway of dark offices. A service lift override panel showed an active countdown:

OVERRIDE TIME: 00:45.

Mila almost laughed. Aisha was not in Singapore. Aisha was in a jungle. Which meant this was not Aisha—or it was Aisha's earlier contagion reaching farther than intended. Or someone else had begun using her language.

The service lift opened. Inside, stood a woman wearing a courier jacket and holding a first-aid pack.

"Get in."

Mila raised the pistol. "Who sent you?"

The courier did not flinch. "Mara Ellison says you are difficult to keep alive."

That sounded like a journalist's vanity. Probably true. Mila pushed the janitor into the lift. The doors closed just as the assessor reached the corridor.

Mila held the pistol on the courier. "Mara Ellison is in India."

"No," the courier said. "Mara Ellison is everywhere she has made enemies."

The courier opened the first-aid pack and pressed gauze against the janitor's wound. "You should help him."

"I am pointing a gun at you."

"You can multitask."

Mila lowered the weapon slightly and pressed the gauze harder. The janitor gasped.

"Sorry," she said.

He looked at her, shocked by the apology.

At basement level, a white delivery van waited in the loading dock. The courier helped the janitor inside, and Mila entered after them. The van moved before the rear door had fully closed. For several blocks, no one spoke. The janitor cried silently. Mila sat opposite him, the pistol in her lap and the folder against her chest.

She opened the folder. Some pages were wet with her blood. Some remained intact: operational narratives, India narrative schedule, health authentication failure media brief. And one page marked:

SUBJECT: M.K.

STATUS RECLASSIFICATION OPTIONS: [] RECOVER [] DISCREDIT [] TERMINATE. None had been checked. A handwritten note: *Allow temporary continuation. She is drawing out unauthorised human alignments.*

Mila read it twice. The assessor had not been the only one playing her. Voss had allowed her movement because betrayal created networks. Networks revealed sympathisers. Sympathisers could be mapped. Her defection had become bait. The thought should have humiliated her. Instead, it clarified the next move.

"Where are we going?"

"First safe point."

"No. I need a broadcast."

"That is not what Mara Ellison instructed."

"Mara Ellison instructed you to keep me alive?"

"Yes."

"Then help me become too public to erase cleanly." "That is not safety."

"No," Mila said. "It is leverage."

The janitor whispered: "Please. Hospital." Mila looked at him. He had said he was no one. He had risked himself because a sentence had reached him through some fragile human chain. A function would discard him now. A person could not.

"What is your name?"

"Daniel."

"Daniel what?"

"Daniel Lim."

"Good. Daniel Lim needs a hospital that will not file the wrong police report in the first ten minutes."

The courier said, "I can arrange that."

"And a journalist?"

"Mara Ellison can arrange that."

"No." Mila looked at the folder. "Not only Mara Ellison."

The courier absorbed the thought slowly.

"You want multiple channels."

"I want a contradiction too wide to close."

The courier followed her gaze through the rear window. A motorcycle had been behind them for three turns. The rider wore a black rain jacket, visor down. One hand moved beneath the fabric.

"Down," Mila said.

The courier pushed Daniel flat. The motorcycle came alongside. Mila opened the rear door. A gush of wind rushed in with the city noise. She fired at the motorcycle's front tyre. The shot cracked across

the underpass. The tyre burst. The motorcycle struck the side barrier in a scream of metal and sparks.

“Are you insane?” the courier shouted.

“Less than before.”

The van swerved into traffic. Now Singapore had a scene. Scenes created witnesses. Witnesses complicated erasure.

The courier slammed her fist against the partition.

“Change route! Now!”

The driver obeyed. Mila shut the rear door and placed the gun aside. Daniel stared at her with open terror.

“I am sorry,” she said.

The van reached an older medical clinic near Little India. The courier handed Mila a small tablet.

“Mara Ellison says you have four minutes.”

The screen opened to a secure recording interface. No live broadcast—a holding file, time-stamped, mirrored to dead-man channels across three jurisdictions. Mila looked at her reflection in the dark portion of the screen. Blood on cheek. Hair wet. Wrist swelling. Eyes too bright. Not controlled. Not beautiful. Not useful in the old way. Good.

For a moment, perhaps because of blood loss, perhaps because pain had begun to loosen the locks inside her, Mila saw Arjun Malhotra standing across the van from her.

Not the Arjun of the file photographs. Not the former signals officer with tired eyes and a weapon in his hand. Not the man who had looked at her as if she were both danger and witness.

Another Arjun.

Impossible Arjun.

A man in an ordinary room, without pursuit, without suspicion, without the invisible architecture of handlers and targets between them. He was looking at her not as an asset, not as a method, not even as a threat, but as a woman who had arrived late into her own life.

The vision hurt more than the wound.

She almost laughed at herself.

CIRCE had trained her to enter loneliness in others. It had not trained her for the humiliation of discovering her own.

There had been men she had touched, men she had ruined, men who had mistaken her attention for rescue. Arjun Malhotra was none of them. That was the cruelty. He had not desired her enough to be used. He had not despised her enough to be simple. He had left her, instead, with the one thing she did not know how to process.

A clean refusal to possess her.

The van jolted.

The vision broke.

Arjun vanished.

Only the courier remained. Daniel Lim was bleeding. The folder lay open on her lap. Somewhere, Aisha Rahman was still alive because people had chosen to believe her against the system.

Mila closed her eyes once.

No, she thought. *Not love*.

Love was too generous a word for something born inside wreckage.

But perhaps, before the architecture had taught her to become useful, she might have wanted a man like that to know her name without needing it as leverage.

When she opened her eyes, the weakness had passed. So had the dream. What remained was not longing. It was decision.

She pressed record.

“My name is Mila Kovács. I was recruited, trained, and deployed by CIRCE, a behavioural access network used by Identity Zero and associated actors to compromise institutional trust. I am not safe to trust without verification. That is why this statement must be checked against documents being mirrored with it.”

She held up the first page before the camera.

“CIRCE prepared a correction statement to blame Arjun Malhotra and Aisha Rahman for the Myanmar compound destabilisation. That statement is false. The compound was not

medical care. It was a human data refinery. Its operators were captive or coerced persons used as behavioural, linguistic, and emotional processing nodes.”

“The archive called Saffron Ledger contains models built from fear, trauma, and voices, including children’s voices. These are not merely recordings. They are adaptive models.”

“Dr Elian Voss is alive. He is connected to the Centre for Civic Identity and Digital Inclusion legacy network and to emergency identity fallback architectures. A public health-authentication failure is being prepared or exploited to activate contaminated validator chains in India.”

The courier stared at her. Mila did not break gaze with the lens.

“Lakshmi Narayanamma, connected to Kaveri-17, is alive. Her existence obstructs the fallback chain because she remains a living contradiction to a central death record. If she is discredited, disappeared, or medically incapacitated, the chain may be resolved against her.”

She paused. For the first time, emotion approached the surface. Not fear. Recognition of scale.

“Names are not functions. People are not infrastructure. If this statement is used after my death, verify Daniel Lim, wounded in Singapore while helping me leave Unit 5B, Tanjong Pagar. He is not part of CIRCE. Do not let him become another correction.”

Daniel began to cry again. Mila looked into the camera. “I was a method. I am trying to become a witness.”

She stopped recording.

They reached the clinic. Daniel was carried inside through the rear entrance. The courier went with him. Mila remained in the van, breathing through pain, watching rain bead on the rear window. A phone lit up on the seat beside her:

STATEMENT RECEIVED.

Then:

RECKONING IS NOT REDEMPTION.

Not CIRCE language. Not Aisha. Not Mara Ellison. Voss, perhaps. Or someone closer to the doctrine. She typed with her left hand, every letter painful:

I KNOW.

The reply came instantly:

THEN WHY CONTINUE?

Mila looked through the clinic window. Daniel was on a bed now, the courier holding his uninjured hand while a doctor worked. Someone laughed softly at something ordinary. A nurse carried tea. Outside, rain washed the road without cleaning it.

Mila typed:

BECAUSE FUNCTIONS DO NOT APOLOGISE.

No reply came. That pleased her.

Then the clinic's rear lights flickered. Once. Twice. The assessor had found the clinic faster than expected. Or perhaps Voss had allowed this point too.

She entered the clinic, took the mirrored statement drive, and placed it in the courier's palm. "Mara Ellison gets this. Arjun and Aisha get a copy. Rao if she survives her conscience."

"You are not coming?"

Mila looked once at Daniel. "Daniel Lim," she said. "Remember your name loudly." Then she turned and walked into the pharmacy storage.

Behind her, the clinic lights went out.

She broke the rear lock with a fire extinguisher and stepped into the alley. Two men at the far end. One woman at the other. Disposal officers, not correction. Three directions closed. One door behind. A pistol with two rounds, the lipstick blade, and the knowledge that the first shots in Singapore had already made the night too public to remain elegant.

The next thirty seconds were not graceful enough to deserve memory. A body struck a wall. A shot went wide. Someone cursed in Russian. Mila cut a forearm, slipped on wet pavement, lost the pistol,

drove her knee into a groin, took a blow to the head, heard her own breath become animal, and reached the fire escape ladder by touch rather than sight. A hand caught her injured ankle. She kicked down until the grip loosened. She climbed.

On the roof, Singapore spread around her in ordered lights, indifferent and exact. Her body wanted to stop. She did not permit it. Down through a residential corridor. A child's bicycle outside one door. A pair of shoes. A pot of basil. Life, unbearably specific. She exited into a lane where kitchen workers smoked under awnings and did not want trouble enough to study her. Trouble often survives by borrowing indifference.

She leant against the wall and allowed herself to breathe. Wrist swelling badly. Blood at her neck. Ankle nearly useless. Her borrowed phone vibrated through Mara Ellison's route:

STATEMENT MIRRORED.

DANIEL VISIBLE. MOVE IF YOU CAN.

Then, after a pause:

A.R. RECEIVED SUMMARY. SHE SAYS: NAMES ARE DOORS. DO NOT CLOSE YOURS.

Mila read the words once. Then again. For reasons she did not trust, her eyes burned. At the far end of the lane, a bus stopped. Public. Cameras. Witnesses. Routes. She limped towards it. As she reached the doors, the phone lit with a final message from an unknown sender:

MILA KOVÁCS: TERMINATION AUTHORISED.

She looked at the words. For the first time, the message used her full name. Not asset code. Not function. Name. She smiled faintly. A system that named you before killing you had already admitted a kind of defeat.

She boarded the bus. Paid in cash. Sat near the rear. Singapore moved past in rain and glass. Mila held her injured wrist against her chest and looked at her reflection in the dark window. Broken. Visible. Uncorrected. Not redeemed. But no longer theirs.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Digital Emergency

India

India failed first as a rumour. Not as a catastrophe. Not as a siren, blackout, or spectacular collapse.

At 07:42, a pensioner in Mandya was told the health authentication portal was temporarily slow.

At 07:51, a clinic outside Mysuru asked patients to wait because biometric verification was returning duplicate-response errors.

At 08:03, a district hospital in Uttar Pradesh shifted three patients to manual intake after the system insisted their linked records belonged to different persons.

At 08:17, a bank branch in Assam froze pension withdrawals pending identity reconciliation.

At 08:29, a private diagnostic chain in Delhi began asking patients for additional documents because emergency-health validation was not confirming beneficiary status.

By 09:00, the phrase had entered WhatsApp. *Server down*. India understood server down. Server down arrived without apology and demanded patience from those least able to afford it.

At 09:12, someone posted that health IDs were being hacked.

At 09:19, that pension accounts were being suspended.

At 09:31, a message circulated claiming foreign cybercriminals had entered hospital systems through vaccine databases.

At 09:44, a news portal published an unattributed piece quoting senior sources about a hostile external actor disrupting India's public digital infrastructure.

By 10:00, the event had acquired a nationality.

By 10:30, enemies.

By 11:00, a solution.

That was how Arjun knew the trigger had truly begun. The explanation had arrived too early.

The temporary operations room had been built inside an abandoned coaching centre above a closed printing shop in Karol Bagh. The signboard outside still promised success in banking, railways, and government examinations. Inside, walls covered with faded slogans—HARD WORK NEVER FAILS, YOUR FUTURE STARTS NOW—now served as a backdrop to laptops, radio receivers, battery packs, printed maps, and people who had not slept enough to trust their tempers.

Aisha stood before a whiteboard, writing faster than anyone else in the room could think. Not because she was calm. Because she was not allowing fear to choose the order of tasks.

TRIGGER VECTOR: HEALTH AUTHENTICATION/PENSION-LINKED BANKING.

PUBLIC EFFECT: QUEUES/DENIALS/DUPLICATES/DEAD FLAGS/MANUAL OVERRIDES.

SYSTEM EFFECT: EMERGENCY FALLBACK PRESSURE.

And underlined twice:

DO NOT LET RESTORATION BECOME CAPTURE.

Rao sat at one of the desks, hair tied back badly, jacket discarded, eyes fixed on a local terminal running extracted audit reports. She had not returned to her office after Lodhi Garden. Officially unwell. Unofficially, she was now committing enough disciplinary offences to require careful categorisation.

Mara Ellison sat near the doorway with two phones, one old recorder, and a notebook whose pages were filled with names, timings,

and questions sharpened into weapons. She had arrived wearing a cotton kurta, dark glasses, and the expression of someone who had already prepared three obituaries, including possibly her own.

Lakshmi Narayanamma sat against the inner wall wrapped in a shawl, drinking tea with imperial suspicion. She had arrived in Delhi through a chain of favours that would never survive scrutiny. Ko Than's people had moved her across the first layer. A regional humanitarian contact across the second. A retired doctor with no social media profile had signed a paper saying she required urgent geriatric evaluation. A cargo route had completed what diplomacy could not. Now she sat beneath a poster saying 'PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT', very much alive, very angry, and entirely uninterested in the metaphysics of civil identity.

Rafiq sat beside her, still passionately holding the notebook from Building Two under his arm.

Arjun stood at the window, watching the street through a torn curtain. He had returned to India twelve hours after Lakshmi, carrying the tablet from Myanmar, the partial Saffron logs, the K-17 ring, and the knowledge that Aisha's walking group had reached the second crossing alive but reduced. Twenty-six had begun with her. Twenty-two had reached safety. Three were missing in the jungle. One had died from blood loss before dawn. Aisha had said all four names aloud before speaking of data. That was why Arjun trusted her with the machine.

On the street below, Karol Bagh behaved like a city with no idea history was being contested above a printing shop. Scooters squeezed past cycle rickshaws. A man sold belts from a cart. A delivery boy sat on his bike eating *bread pakora* using an old newspaper as a plate. Life continued because life had never been granted the luxury of stopping for systems.

Rao read from her screen. "Fallback pressure is rising in three pilot-linked clusters. Health-auth nodes are failing biometric match, then reverting to manual emergency validators."

“Whose validators?”

“Local first. Then state mirror. Then external advisory layer if conflict persists.”

“Block external.”

“I inserted friction.”

“How much?”

“Enough to slow. Not enough to stop without triggering a formal continuity alert.”

“What happens if formal continuity alert triggers?” “Central emergency restoration protocol.”

“Contaminated?”

“Likely.”

Arjun turned from the window.

“How long before that?”

Rao checked another feed. “Depends on public volume. If denial rates cross threshold and regional administrators request emergency override—”

“They will,” Mara Ellison said.

She held up her phone. “Videos are already circulating. An old man denied medicine in Mandya. A woman shouting in a bank in Guwahati. A hospital clerk saying ‘dead record’ to a man standing in front of him. These things travel faster than official caution.”

“Can you verify?”

“Some. Not all. Enough to be dangerous either way.”

Rao looked stricken. “That is exactly what they need. Public pressure to restore.”

Mara Ellison’s eyes remained cold. “And if the public does not see what is happening, they will suffer quietly while restoration happens anyway.”

That was the fracture again. Exposure versus panic. Proof versus weapon. People versus systems.

Aisha turned to the whiteboard and wrote: CONTROLLED DISCLOSURE? Then she crossed out CONTROLLED. "Nothing is controlled now," she said.

Arjun moved towards the table. "We need a public anchor before their narrative hardens."

"Lakshmi, "Mara Ellison suggested.

Lakshmi looked up at the sound of her name, narrowed her eyes, and said something in Kannada.

Rao translated softly. "She is asking whether this is about her pension again."

"It is," Arjun said.

Rao repeated it. Lakshmi began speaking rapidly, with the rhythm of a person who had been waiting years for an audience foolish enough to ask.

Rao translated in fragments. "She went to the office six times. First they said fingerprints not matching. Then account frozen. Then death entry. She told them that if she were dead, they should conduct her funeral properly and stop wasting her morning. Then they said, 'Bring proof of life.' She says being angry in person should be proof enough."

Mara Ellison's pen moved. Aisha looked at Lakshmi.

"Can she speak on video?"

Rao translated.

Lakshmi listened, then asked a question.

Rao hesitated.

"What?"

"She wants to know whether speaking will get her pension released."

The room went silent. There it was. Not doctrine. Not geopolitics. Not emergency architecture. A woman wanted her pension. Everything else had been built on top of that simple theft.

Aisha crouched before Lakshmi. Rao began to translate, but Aisha held up a hand. She spoke slowly, knowing Lakshmi would not understand the words but might understand the face.

“We will try. But this is bigger than a pension.”

Lakshmi stared at her. Then replied without hesitation. Rao’s eyes flickered as she translated. “She says everything is bigger than a pension until old women ask for it.”

Mara Ellison smiled for the first time. “Good. Put that on camera.”

“No live broadcast yet,” Arjun said. “If we publish without corroborating validator poison, they discredit her as one pension grievance in a cyberattack.”

Aisha nodded reluctantly. “We need three anchors: Lakshmi alive, K-17 records, and the Saffron connection to the fallback mechanism.”

“Saffron connection appears only as routing shadows,” Rao noted.

Aisha said, “Then we make the absence visible. We show that the system explicitly requested K-17 witness status inside a Myanmar compound before the fallback activation occurred here in India.”

Mara Ellison tapped her pen. “I can publish a question, not an accusation. Why did a Myanmar compound linked to coerced cyber operations contain live routing references to India’s emergency civil identity fallback protocols before today’s authentication failures?”

Rao closed her eyes. “That will set the building on fire.”

“It is already burning,” Mara Ellison said. “You are still inside pretending the smoke is under review.”

Aisha’s receiver chimed. A new packet was routing through Mila’s mirrored statement channel. She read the decrypted lines aloud to the room:

CIRCE CORRUPTION REPORT: INDIA NARRATIVE MATRIX
CONFIRMED.

PRIMARY BRIEF: FOREIGN CYBER INTERFERENCE
TARGETING VULNERABLE HEALTH NODES.

SECONDARY BRIEF: TRAFFICKED PERSONS DEPLOYED AS
FALSE WITNESSES.

TERTIARY BRIEF: ROGUE INTIMACY ASSET FABRICATED
CONFESSION UNDER COERCION.

“They are preparing to burn Mila,” Aisha said.

“They already are,” Arjun replied.

Another attachment appeared: Mila’s recorded statement summary. Aisha read silently. Her face moved once at the line: *I was a method. I am trying to become a witness.* Then she looked at Arjun. “She named Voss. Saffron. CIRCE. Lakshmi. The health trigger.”

“Can we use it?” Arjun asked.

“If we use a confession from a compromised CIRCE asset before independent corroboration,” Mara Ellison said, her voice measured, “they make the whole story about her credibility.”

Aisha nodded. “So we hold Mila as secondary. Lakshmi first. Data second. Mila third.”

Arjun turned to the boy. “The names notebook.”

Rafiq looked up. His hand tightened on it.

Aisha moved closer to him. “Rafiq, may Mara Ellison photograph some pages? Not all. Enough to prove the compound had real people, names, and assigned functions.”

He looked at Mara Ellison. Journalists had been used in compound scripts too. Fake reporters. Fake rescue campaigns. Trust was not a natural condition after captivity.

“What will happen to the names?” he asked.

Mara Ellison answered before Aisha could intervene. “If published carelessly, some families may be endangered. So I will not publish all names. I will preserve them. I will verify through safe channels. I will show enough to prove the list exists.”

Rafiq watched her closely. “You promise?”

She did not answer quickly. *Good*, Arjun thought. *Promises made too fast were usually meant for the speaker.*

Finally, she spoke. “I promise to treat names as people, not evidence.”

Rafiq looked at Aisha. She nodded gently. Only then did he open the notebook. Mara Ellison photographed three pages with an old

camera not connected to any network. Lakshmi watched the lens, then said something in Kannada.

Rao translated, faintly amused despite herself: “She says the young man writes better than most clerks.”

Rafiq looked down, embarrassed. Aisha smiled at him.

Then the first hospital death appeared. A video. A father outside a district hospital in Rajasthan, holding a prescription and shouting that his daughter’s treatment had been delayed because the authentication system said her health entitlement was under duplicate review. Within minutes, four versions existed: foreign hackers, government failure, hospital corruption, and migrant identity fraud. Truth had not yet arrived. Blame had.

Rao covered her mouth. “This is what they wanted.”

Aisha shook her head. “This is what they were willing to use.”

Arjun asked, “Where is the actual trigger cluster?”

Rao returned to the terminal, her fingers flying across the keys.

“Initial failures were distributed, but the threshold cascade is being pushed through Karnataka health-auth and pension-linked bank reconciliation.”

“Kaveri region?” Aisha asked.

“Yes.”

“Lakshmi’s cluster.”

“Yes.”

Arjun leant in. “Can you stop that locally?”

“Not alone.”

“Who can?”

Rao hesitated, staring at the flashing red alerts on her screen. “A state-level systems administrator. Someone with emergency authority to freeze external validator escalation.”

“Name?” Arjun demanded.

“Anita Hegde. Bengaluru. Honest. Difficult.”

“Reach her.”

“I tried. Her official channels are monitored.”

“Personal?”

Rao looked uncomfortable, shifting in her chair. “We are not friends.”

Aisha almost laughed, a sharp, humourless sound. “Now is a good time to become one.”

Rao made the call from a borrowed phone, routing the signal through Mara Ellison’s device. It rang out. No answer. She tried again, the silence stretching in the room. Still no answer. On the third attempt, the line clicked.

A woman answered sharply in Kannada.

Rao spoke quickly, her tone shifting from stiffly official to urgent, then pleading within thirty seconds. Then she stopped and listened.

Her face paled. She slowly lowered the phone. “She says she was removed from the incident bridge ten minutes ago. Credentials revoked pending review.”

“By whom?” Arjun asked.

“External advisory escalation.”

Aisha closed her eyes briefly. Voss. Not directly. Never directly. But his architecture left its fingerprints everywhere.

“Hegde says she has local backup access if she is physically inside the state data centre annex,” Rao reported, her voice tight. “But she’s already outside the building, and security has strict instructions not to admit her.”

Aisha’s fingers flew across her keyboard. “I can generate an offline validator-freeze package from Rao’s indicators. Hegde can inject it locally if she can just get console access.”

Rao stared at her. “Will it stop the cascade?”

“No. But it may prevent external advisory escalation from becoming authoritative in the Kaveri cluster.”

“That buys time.”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

Aisha paused, looking up from the screen. "Depends how angry Hegde is."

Rao spoke rapidly into the phone again, relaying the plan, then looked up and gave a sharp nod.

"Very good," Aisha said, a cold smile touching her lips. "Anger walks."

Lakshmi, hearing the word through tone rather than language, nodded in approval.

At 12:16, the Government issued its first statement.

It was calm. That made it dangerous.

The press release cited "intermittent authentication delays" affecting certain health and benefit-linked services in limited geographies. Essential public services remained operational. Citizens were advised not to give credence to unverified rumours. Relevant agencies were monitoring potential malicious external activity. Emergency continuity protocols were available and would be deployed if required to ensure no beneficiary was denied services.

Aisha read the last line aloud, her voice trailing off. "Emergency continuity protocols. Available. If required." She looked up, coldness settling in her chest. The poisoned door had been placed in public view as reassurance.

Mara Ellison stood up, smoothing down her kurta. "It's time." She turned her gaze to Arjun.

"What will you publish?" Arjun asked.

"Not everything. Three pieces. First, a holding post with verified denial of services videos and a question about the emergency validators. Next, Lakshmi's recorded testimony. She paused, looking at Arjun. "Third is the dead man's switch. An evidence brief shared with multiple newsrooms and legal contacts simultaneously automated to drop if I disappear—or if they invoke emergency continuity."

"Legal contacts?" Rao asked, her brow furrowing.

Mara Ellison turned to look at her. "You still believe courts are slower than systems."

"They are," Rao insisted.

"Not always," Mara replied flatly. "Sometimes one judge asking for a file is faster than an entire ministry admitting it exists."

Arjun almost smiled. The lawyer in the nation always woke during crisis.

Aisha inserted a drive into an offline laptop and began packaging the local freeze tool. The software was engineered to halt unauthorized changes to a computer's configuration, locking the data sets tightly against administrative tampering

Rao watched over her shoulder. "You are marking false-negative validator chains?"

"Yes."

"That will create a massive manual verification burden."

"Better manual burden than a contaminated restoration."

"Manual burden means queues," Rao pressed.

Aisha stopped typing. She turned her head to look at Rao. "Queues with honest uncertainty are better than clean erasure."

Rao absorbed the words, staring at the screen for a moment, then nodded.

The freeze package was compiled. Aisha transferred it to a small drive.

"How does Hegde get it?" Arjun asked.

Mara Ellison said, "Courier."

"Who?"

Mara Ellison looked towards the door. As if summoned by narrative impatience, someone knocked.

Everyone froze.

Three knocks. Then two. Then one.

Mara Ellison relaxed slightly. "Late," she murmured. "Good."

Arjun moved to the door and opened it with one hand inside his jacket.

The courier slipped inside. He was a man with a musician's beard and a broken harmonium case. He had been followed badly on his way over but had smoothly redirected a trailing white car away from Patel Nagar by reporting a staged scooter accident to a traffic constable on the main road.

Aisha handed the drive directly to him. "Bengaluru. Anita Hegde. Data centre annex. Physically. No upload. No phone photo."

Lakshmi watched the harmonium case. Through Rao, she asked whether the man could actually play it. He nodded. Lakshmi gestured sharply that this remained to be proven.

The man looked down at the tiny drive in his palm. "I was told this was a document."

"It is," Aisha said.

"What kind?"

"The kind that may prevent dead people from making decisions for living ones."

He considered that for a second, then carefully placed the drive inside the padded lining of the harmonium case. "I will take the train," he said.

"Too slow," Rao objected.

"Flights are watched," Mara Ellison countered.

Aisha checked the time on her screen. "Train plus a relay from midway won't work. We need a local injection within six hours."

The courier looked at them calmly. "I know a man leaving for Bengaluru by cargo van in one hour."

Mara Ellison looked at him. "You always know a man."

"I am a musician," the courier replied, hoisting the strap of the broken harmonium case over his shoulder. "We survive by knowing men with vans."

He turned and left.

The panic matured by afternoon.

Hospitals did not collapse. That would have been too easy to understand. Instead, they frayed.

A clinic in Mandya shifted to paper intake but refused benefits until authentication returned. A district hospital in Rajasthan denied that delay had affected emergency care, while angry relatives shouted outside its gate. A pension queue in Assam turned into a scuffle after rumours spread that accounts marked “dead conflict” would lose arrears. A banking correspondent in Bihar shut his kiosk because villagers accused him of stealing biometric data. In Delhi, private hospitals quietly began asking for secondary ID proof even where policy did not require it.

The state did what states do when machines hesitate.

It asked people for more paper.

Identity Zero had understood that too.

Every additional paper became another opportunity for mismatch. Every mismatch increased pressure for central restoration. Every restoration request pushed the fallback closer to activation.

Rao tracked the threshold on her screen. “External validator requests rising.”

“How many?” Arjun asked.

“Too many. But the friction patch is slowing acceptance.”

“Can Sen stop the invocation?”

“If he chooses to act.”

“Will he?”

Rao did not answer.

Aisha looked at the central monitor. The K-17 status had changed. Not from their side, but from somewhere deep inside the contaminated chain.

K-17 WITNESS: DISPUTED

Then:

LOCAL TESTIMONY UNRELIABLE.

Lakshmi’s record was being attacked.

Rao whispered, “They are discrediting her.”

“How?” Mara Ellison asked.

Rao opened linked notes. “Medical incapacity flag. Cognitive instability. Possible coercion. External abduction. Transfer irregularity.”

Aisha’s eyes hardened. “They are writing the lie around her before she speaks.”

Mara Ellison asserted, “Then she speaks now.”

Arjun said, “Subtitles?”

“Rao translates live,” Mara replied. We record full. Publish an excerpt. Archive full.”

Rao looked terrified. “I will be identifiable.”

Mara Ellison looked her in the eye. “You already are.”

They set up the camera offline. Lakshmi agreed after throwing a brief tantrum, leaving Rao sitting just outside the camera's frame.

Mara Ellison asked her first question in Kannada, speaking slowly. “Please state your name.”

Lakshmi responded. “Lakshmi Narayanamma.”

“Are you alive?”

Lakshmi’s answer was long. She spoke for eight minutes. She spoke of her pension being stopped without explanation. Of being told her fingerprint did not match fingers she had used since birth. Of standing in crowded offices while younger men looked at screens instead of looking at her face. Of being told to her face that she was dead. She described relatives attempting to take land the moment the record opened a door for their greed and of being taken for “care” by men she did not trust. She recounted waking in a strange place where no one spoke to her properly, and finally escaping alongside people who looked more frightened than criminals and hungrier than patients.

She said, “If your machine says I am dead, then your machine is the liar. Why are you asking the liar about me?”

By the end of it, Rao was crying silently. She wiped her face angrily, embarrassed by the evidence of her own tears. Aisha reached out, touching her shoulder once in silent support.

Mara Ellison copied the recording to three separate drives before assembling the first publication package.

Headline:

THE WOMAN A SYSTEM MARKED DEAD: QUESTIONS
OVER IDENTITY FAILURES AS HEALTH AUTHENTICATION
GLITCH SPREADS

Subheading:

Records reviewed by this reporter raise urgent questions about emergency validator protocols, a disputed Kaveri-17 pilot, and possible external contamination of public-service identity systems.

Beneath the text, Mara embedded Lakshmi's video excerpt alongside the burning question about Myanmar. She added still images of the physical notebook—carefully framing out any identifying names—and included a short reference to Mila's statement, characterising it as a corroborating account from a former behavioural-access operative under independent review.

She intentionally left Saffron Ledger's name out of the first piece.

At 15:07, Mara Ellison hit send, publishing it simultaneously across six platforms.

She also sent sealed evidence packets to four editors, two lawyers, one retired judge, three international cyber researchers, and one person she described only as "too vain not to open it".

Within twenty minutes, people began sharing Lakshmi's clip. They reshared it because they deeply understood the horror of being told by an automated system that their own physical presence required proof.

By 16:00, the hashtag had taken root:

#AskTheLiarMachine

The state issued its counter-statement at 16:35.

A spokesperson labelled the report "premature and potentially irresponsible." Citizens were urged to remain calm. No beneficiary would be denied essential services, and the localized technical glitch was already being handled. Reports linking service delays to foreign compounds or identity pilots were dismissed as entirely speculative. The woman in the video, the statement concluded, appeared to be merely the subject of an ongoing, routine verification process.

Then the second narrative wave struck.

Coordinated anonymous accounts began populating the feeds, claiming Lakshmi was an opposition plant. Others spun conspiracies that she was a victim of foreign human trafficking being weaponized against India. Some asserted the video was an outright AI-generated deepfake. Others claimed the real woman had died years ago, and the person in the clip was a hired actor.

Aisha watched the timeline mutate in real time. "They are trying every contradiction."

Arjun nodded grimly. "Flood the zone with noise."

Rao looked up from his screen. "Can we authenticate her identity publicly?"

"Yes," Aisha said, turning to her. "But we do it human-first this time, not machine. The panchayat officer who wrote the original physical note—is he reachable?"

Rao scanned her file. "Possibly."

"Call him."

Rao hesitated for a beat, then dialled.

The officer answered on the second attempt.

Rao spoke in Kannada, her tone gentle at first, then sharpening with urgency as she pressed for confirmation. She asked whether he remembered a woman named Lakshmi Narayanamma. The man's

reaction on the other end was a burst of sound, loud enough for everyone in the quiet room to hear through the receiver.

Rao's expression shifted. "He says, 'How can I forget? She fought with me for forty minutes and accused my office chair of being lazy.'"

Lakshmi looked immensely pleased.

Aisha leant closer, "Will he record a statement?"

Rao relayed the question. "The man refused. He is scared."

Suddenly, Lakshmi lunged forward and snatched the phone clean out of Rao's hand. Everyone in the room froze.

She barked into the receiver with terrifying, matriarchal authority. Within seconds, the defensive bureaucrat on the other end began responding meekly, like a scolded schoolboy.

Watching her go to work, Rao slowly covered her mouth in shock.

"What is she saying?" Mara Ellison asked.

Rao whispered, "She is telling him if he lets them call her dead again, she will come to the office and sit on his table until he loses his job from shame."

The officer agreed to record. Within thirty minutes, Mara Ellison had a second video: the panchayat officer confirming he had seen Lakshmi alive—repeatedly, loudly, and administratively inconveniently—after the central system marked her dead.

The hashtag shifted. Now it was not only Lakshmi.

People began posting their own stories.

Dead in one database, alive in another.

Fingerprints failing.

Names misspelled.

Parents reversed.

Pension stopped.

Hospital denied.

Scholarship frozen.

Bank accounts locked.

Public panic widened, but so did public memory.

Identity Zero had wanted fear. It had not anticipated people comparing notes. That grassroots coordination became the first structural breach in its architecture.

Aisha saw it and wrote in stark capital letters on the board:

HUMAN LAYER ACTIVATED.

“It means,” she said, turning back to the room, “the system is no longer the only witness.”

At 17:20, Anita Hegde reached the Bengaluru data centre annex.

She did not enter officially.

The cargo van driver delivered the drive to a tea stall behind the annex, where Hegde was waiting in a helmet and a raincoat. She entered through a maintenance gate using an old access card. It should have expired three years earlier, but had survived because someone in procurement had never closed the legacy vendor list.

Bureaucratic negligence, for once, served life.

At 17:42, she reached a local console.

At 17:49, she inserted Aisha’s freeze package.

At 17:50, the Kaveri cluster stopped accepting external advisory escalation.

At 17:51, the central system noticed.

At 17:52, Hegde’s credentials were terminated again.

At 17:53, the local manual verification layer activated under district authority.

At 17:54, pension-linked banks in three pilot clusters began receiving instructions to honour locally certified proof-of-life cases pending review.

At 17:56, emergency fallback completion failed.

The operations room in Delhi erupted in joy.

Rao put both hands over her face.

Aisha watched the logs. “Fallback incomplete,” she said.

“For now,” Arjun replied.

The monitor displayed:

K-17 RESOLUTION FAILED.

EXTERNAL VALIDATOR AUTHORITY REJECTED.

LOCAL HUMAN VERIFICATION ACTIVE.

The machine had been forced to accept that someone standing before another person mattered more than a poisoned chain of recognition.

Then the lights went out. Not only in the coaching centre. The street below went pitch black. Fans ground to a halt. The ambient roar of traffic altered instantly. Someone shouted from a neighbouring building.

Aisha's battery backups kicked in with a sharp hum. The monitors flickered back to life. Arjun moved quickly to the window, peering out into the darkness. Across Karol Bagh, blocks of power had failed unevenly. It was not citywide, nor was it random. It was selective.

Mara Ellison looked at her phones. "Network instability."

Rao checked her terminal, her fingers dancing nervously. "Central continuity alert just escalated outside Kaveri."

Aisha's face turned stern. "They lost the Kaveri chain, so they are shifting the trigger."

"Where?" Arjun asked.

Rao scanned the cascading errors. "Delhi health exchange. Uttar Pradesh pension bridge. The Maharashtra hospital authentication mirror." "Multiple smaller cascades."

"Yes," Aisha said, looking up at Arjun. "We stopped one door."

He remembered saying those exact words in the truck. "They are opening others."

Mara Ellison's phone rang. She answered it, listened, and went pale.

"What?" Arjun demanded.

"One of the editors who received our evidence packet has just been raided," Mara said, her voice hollow. "Tax irregularities."

"Already?"

"Pre-drafted, clearly."

Suddenly, Rao's secure device buzzed. She checked the notification and closed her eyes in defeat. "I have been suspended pending inquiry."

Aisha's laptop flashed violently. An unknown packet had breached the firewall, opening itself without user command. The screen filled with a geometric rendering of the K-17 ring, which dissolved into Lakshmi's face from the video.

Then a line:

LOCAL WITNESS ACCEPTED.

NATIONAL CONFIDENCE DEGRADED.

ADAPTIVE PATHWAY SELECTED.

Below the text, a digital clock began to tick down:

03:00:00

Aisha whispered, "To what?"

The system's final answer materialised on the screen:

PUBLIC RESTORATION ADDRESS.

Rao inhaled sharply. "A government address?"

"Maybe," Arjun muttered.

Mara Ellison stared at the countdown. "Or forged."

Arjun looked at the darkened street. He watched people switching on their phone torches, shopkeepers stepping out onto the pavements, and a lone man directing traffic because the signal had failed and someone had to.

A public restoration address. It was the perfect move.

If the state appeared before the public offering emergency restoration, contaminated protocols could be introduced as a comfort, under the guise of reassurance. If the address was forged, the panic would deepen. If it was both real and contaminated, truth itself would become entirely procedural.

Sen called Arjun's temporary phone. Everyone looked at it. Arjun answered.

Sen's voice came through the speaker. "Where are you?"

"Safe enough."

“Nothing is safe enough.”

“That is new honesty.”

“Listen to me,” Sen pressed, his voice tight. “The emergency address is being drafted. I am not in control of the technical annex.”

“Who is?”

There was a long pause on the line. “External advisory group.”

“E.V.?”

Sen said nothing. That was answer enough.

Arjun’s voice hardened. “Stop the address.”

“I cannot stop the Prime Minister’s Office from reassuring the country during a massive digital-service disruption.”

“Then strip the technical annex.”

“I tried.”

“And?”

“My authority has been procedurally bypassed.”

Aisha leant closer as Arjun put the call on speaker.

Sen continued, “There is a proposed emergency continuity framework to be announced as temporary relief. Health, pension, banking, identity reconciliation. It will sound reasonable.”

“It is poisoned,” Aisha said.

The tone of Sen’s voice changed instantly. “Ms. Rahman?”

“Yes.”

“I need proof I can place before someone who still has authority.”

“You had proof,” she countered.

“I had fragments. Now I need something that survives the accusation that all of you are part of the attack.”

Mara Ellison let out a sharp, humourless laugh. “There it is.”

Sen ignored her.

Arjun said, “K-17 failed. Local human verification blocked external validator acceptance.”

“I saw.”

“Then use it.”

"It proves an anomaly," Sen argued. It does not prove a coordinated national contamination."

Aisha said, "The Myanmar tablet logs link the Saffron response engine directly to K-17 witness status before the fallback triggered."

Sen caught his breath. "Can I use them publicly?"

"No," Aisha said flatly. "Then I cannot use them at the level required."

Rao stepped closer to the phone. "Vikram."

The speaker fell completely silent for a moment. Then Sen said quietly, "Kavita."

"I am suspended."

"I know."

"Then stop speaking to me like procedure remains intact."

Following another tense silence, Rao continued, her voice shaking but firm. "The advisory annex is compromised. Kaveri-17 was externally influenced. Lakshmi Narayanamma is alive. The local layer resisted because a human officer refused to close her file. If the address announces centralised emergency restoration through external validator chains, you will not be reassuring the country. You will be laundering capture through panic."

Sen breathed audibly through the receiver. "I need a file."

"You need courage," Rao said.

No one in the darkened room moved.

"Send me what you can," Sen said quietly. "Ten minutes."

The line cut with a sharp click. Rao looked as though she might collapse on the spot. Aisha caught the back of her chair and pushed it forward. "Sit."

Rao sank into it.

Across the table, Mara Ellison was already typing furiously.

"What are you doing?" Arjun asked, stepping over.

"Preparing the second piece."

"Wait."

“No,” Mara said without looking up from her screen. “This is the moment. If Sen fails, the public needs the question before the address hits the airwaves. If Sen succeeds, the public question protects him from being quietly overruled by his superiors.”

Aisha nodded in agreement. “Publish the validator issue.”

“With Saffron?” Mara asked.

“Not full. Say foreign compound logs reviewed by multiple sources indicate pre-existing knowledge of K-17 witness status.”

“Multiple sources?”

“Me, Arjun, Rao, Mila.”

Arjun frowned. “Mila is radioactive.”

“Then call it a recorded statement under review,” Aisha replied flatly.

Mara Ellison typed. The power remained out. Battery fans hummed in the heavy air. Lakshmi watched all of them, unimpressed by modern crisis. Rafiq sat beside the notebook, whispering names to two other survivors over an encrypted recorder, preserving their testimonies before automated systems could classify them as unstable.

Outside, people began gathering in the narrow lane. They asked one another whether their phones still worked, whether the district hospitals were open, whether the banks would close, and whether the terrifying news online was true.

Down the street, a child cried because the dark frightened him. His mother told him gently that the lights would soon return.

Arjun hoped she was right.

On the corner of Aisha’s terminal, the countdown reached:

02:41:17

Aisha packaged the strongest evidence for Sen: the K-17 cryptographic failure logs, Lakshmi’s full video file, the panchayat officer’s recorded statement, Hegde’s physical freeze confirmation from the annex, the Myanmar response engine prompt asking for K-17 witness status, and Mila’s excerpt naming the planned narrative.

Rao added a signed note. Not official but personal.

“I was responsible for aspects of assurance review. I now believe emergency validator chains have been externally contaminated. Do not invoke central restoration without independent isolation.

—Kavita Rao”

Aisha sent the package through Sen’s requested offline relay. It disappeared into the dark.

At 19:10, the first official preview of the restoration address leaked. Mara Ellison received it through one of her editor channels. The draft was elegant, calming, and catastrophic. It acknowledged the widespread disruption, condemned malicious attempts to create panic, and praised frontline officials. It firmly assured citizens that no one would be denied essential services.

Then came the paragraph that mattered:

“To ensure continuity, the Government will activate a temporary Emergency Identity Restoration Framework enabling trusted validator authorities to reconcile health, pension, banking, and civil-benefit records pending full technical review. Citizens are advised to cooperate with local authentication camps and updated verification protocols.”

Aisha read the text off the screen and went entirely still. “That’s it.”

Rao looked physically sick. “If announced, administrators will comply. Implementation begins the exact moment it hits the airwaves. Districts will start accepting emergency validator outputs. Banks will follow. Hospitals will follow. Once accepted, reversing becomes harm.”

Mara Ellison published her second piece at 19:16.

Headline:

EXPERTS WARN EMERGENCY IDENTITY RESTORATION MAY WORSEN AUTHENTICATION CRISIS; KAVERI-17 WITNESS CASE RAISES QUESTIONS.

Within minutes, the notification feeds erupted. she was called irresponsible, foreign-funded, anti-national, brave, sensationalist,

compromised, necessary, and wrong—mostly by people who had read only the headline. That was still movement.

At 19:32, Sen called again. Arjun answered immediately.

Sen's voice was low, competing with a dull, echoing commotion in the background. "The annex is being contested."

"By whom?" Arjun asked.

"Enough people."

"Will the paragraph be removed from the address?"

"I don't know."

"Not good enough, Vikram."

"I am aware," Sen said, and the line fell into chaotic background noise.

Behind Sen, voices argued in a muffled blur. Someone snapped, "Continuity cannot wait". Someone else countered shapely, "Legal exposure".

Another voice cut through, calm, unfamiliar and cold. "Public confidence requires decisive restoration."

Aisha looked up sharply, her eyes widening. She whispered a single name: "Voss?"

Arjun listened, every muscle in his body tightening.

The calm voice continued in the background of the call. "Local anomalies must not obstruct national resilience."

Arjun's face changed. He leant forward and put the phone on speaker. "Sen," he said loudly, "who is in the room with you?"

Sen did not answer. On the other end, the calm voice stopped speaking to the room.

Then, after a heavy, calculated pause, the speaker moved closer to Sen's phone. "Mr Malhotra."

The room in Karol Bagh went dead still.

Voss's voice was exactly as Arjun remembered from the tunnel reports and the encrypted compound feeds: educated, controlled, entirely devoid of the vanity of shouting.

"Dr. Voss," Arjun said.

Aisha's hands curled into tight fists at her sides. Rao looked as though a ghost had entered the room through a gap in protocol.

Voss said, "You have caused a great deal of unnecessary suffering today."

Mara Ellison whispered, "Record." She already was.

Arjun kept his tone flat, "That is an interesting accusation coming from a man moving a fear archive."

"Archives do not frighten people," Voss replied smoothly. "Interpretations do."

"Tell that to Meher."

Aisha closed her eyes tightly at the name. Voss paused for a fraction of a second.

"Ah," he said, his voice dripping with clinical detached warmth. "The child model. Ms Rahman has always been incredibly generous with her wounds."

Arjun's voice dropped an octave, dangerous and low. "Careful."

"There it is. Protective response. Still so entirely predictable."

Aisha stepped forward, pushing past Arjun towards the phone. "No," she said.

Arjun looked at her, but she kept her eyes locked on the device, speaking directly into the microphone. "You don't understand protection."

Voss let out a soft sigh. "I understand it more honestly than most, Ms. Rahman. Protection is merely the first lie authority tells affection. Parents protect children by controlling movement. States protect citizens by controlling recognition. Lovers protect each other by controlling truth. The pattern is old."

Aisha's voice remained perfectly steady. "Protection without consent is captivity."

"Consent is often a luxury produced by stability," Voss countered.

"No," Aisha insisted. "Consent is the exact thing that your systems keep trying to bypass because you are terrified that people may refuse."

A faint sound came through the speaker. Perhaps Voss breathing. Perhaps amusement.

"You are remarkably articulate," Voss murmured, "for someone whose fear profile suggested immediate fragmentation under childvoice activation.

"The room recoiled.

Aisha did not. "That model failed."

"Did it?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you speaking to me instead of stopping the address?"

Aisha went silent. Voss had not called to boast. He had called to consume time.

Arjun cut the line cleanly.

Rao stared at the quiet phone "He is there."

"Or routed there," Mara Ellison added darkly.

"Either way," Aisha said, turning back to the terminal, her fingers already over the keys. "The address is the weapon."

Countdown:

00:46:09

Arjun looked at Rao. "Can Sen still block?"

"Maybe."

"Who outranks the advisory annex?"

Rao hesitated, calculating institutional hierarchy under pressure. "Political authority. Cabinet-level. A court intervention. Massive public scandal. Or outright technical impossibility."

Mara Ellison adjusted her sleeve, "We can provide public scandal."

"I can try technical impossibility," Aisha said.

Arjun turned to her. "How?"

"If emergency restoration framework depends on validator confidence scores," Aisha explained rapidly, "we can flood that score with unresolved human-verification conflicts."

Rao understood the trajectory instantly. “You want to create more Lakshmis.”

“Not create. Surface,” Aisha corrected. “Pull every unresolved local-alive central-conflict record into priority queue before the restoration announcement lands. We force the system to admit it has too many contradictions for trusted validator automation.”

“That could overload the district grievance systems,” Rao objected, her institutional instincts flaring.

“They are already overloaded,” Aisha countered flatly.

“It could expose vulnerable people.”

“Only if we publish identities. We won’t. We surface counts, not names.”

Rao thought fast, her eyes tracking the falling digits of the countdown. “If the number is high enough, the structural legal risk increases. Automated emergency restoration becomes indefensible without immediate manual review.”

“How high?” Arjun asked.

“Thousands.”

Aisha pulled up the active log file directory. “There are thousands.”

Rao whispered, “Yes.”

Arjun said, “Do it.”

Aisha began building the heavy query from Rao’s extracts, Hegde’s Kaveri freeze indicators, and the locally mirrored grievance metadata. She avoided any live central intrusion—that would be both unlawful and instantly traceable. Instead, she targeted the system’s own pending conflict queues that had been replicated across district reporting nodes during the initial trigger.

The terminal window began populating the targeted streams:

DEAD-ALIVE CONFLICTS.

DUPLICATE-LIFE CONFLICTS.

PENSION-DEATH MISMATCHES.

HEALTH ENTITLEMENT CONTRADICTIONS.

LOCAL OFFICER OBJECTIONS.
MANUAL NOTES IGNORED.
HUMAN LAYER VERSUS CENTRAL LAYER.

The numbers began appearing.

127

128

1,982

5,611

9,438

Rao stared at the climbing totals, her face going entirely pale in the glow of the monitor. "These are not all wrongful."

"No," Aisha said. "But enough are unresolved to defeat automatic trust."

"Can you package?"

"Yes."

Mara Ellison watched the numbers climb on the glowing display. "This is the story."

"No names," Aisha said sharply, her hands flying across the keyboard.

"No names," Mara agreed.

At 20:02, they routed the contradiction count packet directly to Sen, Hegde, three editors, two lawyers, and the retired judge.

At 20:07, a lawyer moved an application for urgent electronic mentioning before a High Court duty bench. Relying heavily on Mara Ellison's published material, Rao's signed note, and anonymised contradiction counts, the application sought an immediate restraint against automated emergency identity restoration without manual safeguards.

The administrative machinery fractured in real time.

At 20:11, someone in the Government attempted to publicly deny the contradiction packet as a fabrication.

At 20:13, three separate district officers independently confirmed portions of the data.

At 20:18, the leaked restoration paragraph completely disappeared from the updated draft of the address.

At 20:21, it returned in a heavily softened, ambiguous form.

At 20:25, Sen called.

Arjun picked up instantly. Sen's voice through the speaker sounded older by years, stripped of its usual bureaucratic armour.

"The address will not announce emergency validator activation," Sen said.

No one in the darkened room spoke. The silence was absolute.

Sen continued, "It will announce manual safeguards, local proof-of-life acceptance, and a comprehensive technical review. The temporary restoration framework is deferred."

Rao gripped the edge of the desk.

Aisha closed her eyes.

Arjun said, "Deferred is not stopped."

"No," Sen replied. "But not tonight."

The line went dead. On Aisha's screen, the countdown froze.

00:08:44

The numbers blinked once, dissolved, and changed.

PUBLIC RESTORATION PATHWAY DELAYED.

ADAPTIVE RESPONSE REQUIRED.

Mara Ellison stared at the console. "What does that mean?"

Aisha didn't answer. She looked down at the Myanmar tablet resting on the table. The Saffron locator, which had remained silent for hours, suddenly pulsed once.

Not Myanmar.

Not Dubai.

Not Singapore.

India.

A rogue node had just come alive within the country.

Aisha whispered, "They moved part of the core."

Rao looked at the coordinates forming on the screen.

“Where?”

The location resolved slowly. It was not exact at first—a broad geographical region, then a specific cluster, and finally a city: Bengaluru. Aisha and Rao looked at each other in sudden realisation.

“Hegde,” Rao breathed. “The data centre annex.”

Then the screen flashed a final clinical alert:

MANUAL HUMAN VERIFICATION NODE TARGETED.

Arjun straightened instantly, his eyes narrowing. “They’re going after Hegde.”

Rao was already dialling her phone. No answer. She tried a second time, listening frantically to the empty ringing. Still no answer. The room’s temporary relief vanished into pure dread.

Suddenly, the space erupted into motion. Aisha grabbed the encrypted freeze logs. Mara Ellison snatched up her bag. Rafiq rose quickly, his physical notebook pressed tightly to his chest as if guarding a treasure.

Lakshmi began speaking angrily, her voice cutting through the panic. Rao translated automatically, her own voice breaking under the strain: “She says if another woman has to argue with the machine, we should go help her argue properly.”

Arjun looked down at the dark, silent street below. The national trigger had been delayed, but not stopped. The machine had been denied one clean door, so it had chosen a human hinge instead. That was its defining weakness and its ultimate brilliance—people made systems work, and therefore, people could be threatened.

Aisha turned to look at Arjun. “Bengaluru?”

“Yes.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes.”

Mara Ellison quickly checked her phone screen. “Flights are entirely disrupted. Rail transport is impossible.”

Rao stepped forward. “I can get us on an official aircraft if Sen still has enough guilt.”

Arjun looked at her in surprise. Rao almost smiled, a grim, cynical expression touching her lips. “Guilt is a poor compass, Arjun. But occasionally, it pays for fuel.”

Aisha picked up Meher’s photograph from inside her notebook and placed it back near her heart. Then she took the K-17 ring and handed it to Lakshmi.

Rao translated. “Keep this safe.”

Lakshmi examined the ring, entirely unimpressed by its size. Then she slipped it into the knot of her sari blouse as if hiding money from unreliable relatives.

Aisha smiled faintly. “Good.”

Outside, power returned to the lane in erratic flickers. One shop lit up. Then another. People cheered down the street—not because the crisis had ended, but because light had returned to the immediate room of life.

That was how civilisation survived most disasters. Not by understanding them. By finding enough light to continue.

Arjun took one last look at the whiteboard.

DO NOT LET RESTORATION BECOME CAPTURE.

The sentence remained true. But another had to be added. He picked up the marker and wrote in bold strokes beneath it:

PROTECT THE HUMAN HINGE.

Then they moved.

Behind them, Delhi continued to argue with darkness. Ahead, the machine had chosen Bengaluru. And somewhere inside that next decision, Identity Zero was learning the true cost of forcing people to prove they were alive.





CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Moral Split

Airborne — Delhi to Bengaluru

The small government aircraft lifted from Delhi after midnight without appearing on any public passenger schedule. The cabin smelt of vinyl and stale air conditioning. No one spoke for the first ten minutes. Too much now depended on the order in which things were said.

Arjun sat near the rear with one arm across his ribs. Aisha sat opposite him, with her laptop closed, Meher's photograph tucked securely inside her notebook. Rao spoke occasionally into a secured handset. Mara wrote beneath a dim reading light with her recorder switched off. Lakshmi Narayanamma had refused to remain behind.

The refusal had required no translation. When Rao explained that the flight was going to Bengaluru because a woman inside the system might be in danger, Lakshmi got up, adjusted her shawl, and pointed to the door. The argument that she was elderly, exhausted, and medically fragile had failed against her expression. She now sat beside Rafiq near the front, the K-17 ring hidden in her sari blouse, a steel tiffin on her lap. Rafiq's notebook remained under his arm. Names travelled with him. That mattered more than documents.

Rao's handset buzzed. "Hegde is missing. She reached the annex, injected the freeze package. Local logs confirm. After that, security

footage shows her leaving through the maintenance gate at 18:12. Then nothing.”

“Taken?”

“Likely. By someone using state security’s shape.”

Mara wrote that down.

Rao noticed. “Do not quote that.”

Aisha leant forward. “Can we trace Hegde through the freeze package?”

“No beacon,” Rao replied. We agreed no live trackers.”

“So we have no trace.”

“We have integrity.”

Arjun stared out into the dark. “That is not a location.”

Mara looked up. “Stop. This is what the system wants now. Not disagreement—moral exhaustion. It wants every choice to injure someone so that later all of you can be accused of choosing wrongly.”

“Today you chose to delay national capture by surfacing thousands of unresolved identity conflicts. That may have increased public panic. You chose to make Lakshmi visible. That made her harder to erase but easier to attack. You chose to send Hegde the tool. It slowed the fallback but may have exposed her. You chose not to publish Saffron fully. That preserved credibility but delayed the truth about the archive. Every option carried harm.”

“That does not absolve us,” Aisha said.

“I did not say it does. I am saying guilt will now try to make each of you stupid.”

Arjun looked at her.

The sentence landed exactly where it needed to.

Mara continued, her voice steady against cabin hum. “I have watched wars up close. Not the heroic kind people write about badly. Real wars. The moment that breaks good people is often not violence. It is the first time they understand that every available act will damage someone innocent. After that, they either become paralysed or they begin calling damage strategy.”

Rao stared at the floor.

Aisha closed her laptop slowly, the sudden lack of screen glare throwing her face into shadow.

“And the third option?” Arjun asked.

Mara looked at him directly. “To keep naming the damage.”

The engine hum filled the cabin. Below them, invisible in darkness, India continued moving through its digital emergency—hospital clerks, bank queues, district officers, rumour networks, television studios, WhatsApp groups, data centres, ministries, police stations, families searching for documents, people alive enough to be denied by systems and tired enough to accept whatever restoration arrived first.

Aisha looked towards Lakshmi.

“She should not be here.”

Lakshmi looked back, understood the tone if not the sentence, and said something sharp in response.

Rao translated dryly, “She says young people discuss old people too much in front of them.”

Aisha looked away, her face looking younger for a brief moment than her exhaustion usually allowed. “Maybe she should have been taken somewhere safe.”

“Safe is no longer a place,” Arjun said.

“That is convenient when we have failed to provide one.”

“We did not fail to provide one,” Arjun countered flatly. “It was removed from the available world.”

She turned on him, her eyes flashing in the dim reading light. “That is exactly the kind of sentence that makes cruelty sound inevitable.”

He absorbed that too. Then, calmly, he replied, “Yes. It is.”

The sheer honesty of the admission stopped her.

Arjun leant forward despite the sharp pain in his ribs. “I do not know how to keep Lakshmi safe without making her invisible. I do not know how to keep Hegde alive without exposing the fact that she

mattered. I do not know how to destroy Saffron without losing evidence. I do not know how to stop the trigger without risking panic. If I pretend there is a clean path, I become useful to Voss.”

Aisha’s anger did not vanish, but it changed the target. “Then what are we doing?”

“Choosing contaminated options with open eyes.”

“That sounds like surrender.”

“No,” Arjun said, his voice dropping to a steady whisper. “Surrender is letting the system name the contamination for us.”

Rafiq spoke from the front. “In the compound, they made us choose sometimes. If one person made a mistake, the whole row was punished. If the row said who made the mistake, only that person was punished. Many times we said nothing. Sometimes someone pointed. Guards liked both choices.” His fingers pressed into the notebook. “They make you ashamed before you resist. That is how they keep people. Not only locked doors.”

No one spoke. Lakshmi took out a piece of paratha from her tiffin and placed it in Rafiq’s hand without ceremony. He stared at it, frozen. She gestured impatiently that he should eat before the strange aircraft failed completely.

Mara turned on her recorder. She did not do it secretly. Rafiq saw the glowing red light.

“May I?” she asked.

He hesitated, then nodded. “Say that again, if you can.”

Rafiq looked down at the paratha in his hand, then repeated slowly: “They make you ashamed before you resist.”

Mara wrote the line down in her notes even though the recorder had already captured it. Some sentences deserved the dignity of ink.

Bengaluru’s lights spread below under a low ceiling of clouds. Rao’s handset buzzed again. Rao listened intently for a moment, then turned to the cabin.

“Hegde is alive,” Rao announced. “Sedated, head injury, not critical. She is at a private emergency facility under a false admission name. She had a fall—or that is what the hospital had been told.”

Relief entered the cabin too quickly meeting the caution halfway.

“Where?” Arjun demanded.

Rao hesitated. “Indiranagar.”

Arjun’s eyes narrowed. “Too convenient?”

“Everything is too convenient,” Aisha muttered.

Mara leant forward. “Can the doctor keep her off the system?”

“For now,” Rao replied. “But if a formal medico-legal case is triggered, police channels enter automatically.”

Aisha closed her notebook tightly. “We need to reach her before anyone else writes her story.”

The aircraft landed at a military apron. Two vehicles waited in the shadows—not official escort vehicles. Sen’s guilt had paid for the aircraft, but not for visible protection. That was wise. Or cowardly. Increasingly, those things differed only by their final outcome.

As they disembarked, the humid night wrapped around them. Bengaluru smelt of rain, jet fuel, wet dust, and distant trees. The city felt less like a capital of technology than a place where old neighbourhoods and new systems had agreed to misunderstand each other profitably.

Arjun divided them before the cars even moved.

Rao and Mara were dispatched to Indiranagar to reach Hegde. He, Aisha, Lakshmi, and Rafiq to a safe flat in Jayanagar above a closed diagnostic lab whose faded board that still promised blood tests and full-body packages. The irony was not comforting.

Lakshmi placed the K-17 ring on the table the moment they arrived. She looked at Aisha and spoke sharply. Aisha shook her head, gesturing that she didn’t understand the language. Lakshmi repeated her words more slowly, clearly suggesting that the problem lay with Aisha’s intelligence rather than the Kannada tongue.

Then, without further argument, she firmly closed Aisha's fingers over the cold metal ring.

The meaning required no translation: *I have carried it. Now you carry it.*

"Thank you," Aisha said softly.

Lakshmi nodded, as if proper administrative procedure had finally been followed, then leant back against the wall and closed her eyes.

At 03:40, Sen arrived alone. No escort. No official vehicle. A man walking too carefully through a sleeping lane, carrying only a file and the accumulated ruin of his own authority. He looked older than he had in Delhi. The bandhgala was gone. He wore a plain shirt, sleeves rolled.

"I did not order Hegde's removal," he said.

"Your name was used."

"I don't know by whom."

"Not good enough," Arjun replied.

"No. But true."

He opened his file: approval routing notes, emergency address drafts, and an authorisation trail. His digital clearance had been used to approve Hegde's custody while he was physically trapped in the emergency address meeting. In the advisory chain, the initials read: E.V.

"Voss was present remotely under a technical advisory identity cleared six months ago," Sen explained. On paper, Dr Elias Verma."

"E.V. travels well," Arjun said dryly.

Sen's mouth twisted in a bitter line. "I thought he was a civil identity resilience expert with European institutional experience and disaster-recovery credentials. I did not know he was Elian Voss. I should have known enough to doubt him."

He looked at Lakshmi, who had woken at the sound of an official's voice and was already glaring at him from the corner. He folded his hands respectfully. "Namaste."

She did not return the gesture. She had seen far too many officials in her life.

Sen turned back to the room. "Is she willing to appear before a court?"

Aisha stiffened instantly.

Sen raised a hand to calm her. "Not media. Not interrogation. A protected statement. In camera if possible. Before the system can declare her unstable, coerced, or administratively unresolved."

Aisha asked, "Why court?"

"Because administration has been entered. Media has been contested. Technical systems are compromised. Political authority is calculating. A court is not pure, but it can force files into rooms where denial becomes harder."

Mara's earlier line returned to Arjun's mind like an echo: *Sometimes one judge asking for a file was faster than a ministry admitting it existed.*

"There is another reason," Sen continued. He reached into the folder and removed one final page from the file. "A transfer order. Not for Hegde. Not for Lakshmi. It is for the Saffron-linked seized materials, expected to be 'coordinated' with the emergency identity advisory investigation.

He placed the sheet on the table, pointing to the text. "Destination: a secure digital evidence facility outside Bengaluru."

Aisha read the facility name. Her face went entirely pale.

"What?" Arjun asked, stepping forward.

She pointed trembling fingers at the address on the page. "It is near the data centre annex."

Sen said, "That facility came online three months ago under disaster-recovery classification. Voss recommended it."

Aisha whispered, "The core."

"Maybe," Sen replied.

"The Saffron core moved to India."

"Possibly part of it."

Arjun looked down at the transfer document, his eyes locking onto the stamped departure window.

06:00.

Two hours away.

Sen said, "If that facility receives the core under lawful seizure cover, it becomes evidence. Once evidence, accessing it without authorisation becomes criminal. Destroying it becomes obstruction. Preserving it becomes procedure."

Aisha understood first.

"They are laundering Saffron into custody."

"Yes, Sen said, "And once inside custody, Saffron gains legitimacy, protection, and an official chain of custody."

The moral split sharpened into a blade.

If they attacked or destroyed the facility, they would become exactly what the official narrative needed: unlawful actors destroying evidence during a national digital emergency. If they let the core enter custody, it would gain immediate access to the very systems it had been built to capture.

Aisha sat down slowly. "Evidence preservation as infection."

Sen nodded. "That is why I came."

Arjun looked at him, his gaze piercing. "You want us to stop the transfer."

Sen met his gaze, his voice tight. "Tell me how to stop the transfer without making Voss right about you."

Aisha blurted, "No destruction. No theft. No secret attack. We force manual human verification before transfer."

"If the core contains adaptive emotional models built from identifiable victims, it cannot be treated as ordinary digital evidence. It contains living harms, not just data. The chain of custody must include victim-protection safeguards, model isolation, non-activation protocols, and judicial supervision."

Sen stared at her. "That argument does not exist in our procedure."

“Then we make it exist,” Aisha said.

Arjun’s eyes sharpened.

Aisha continued, faster now. “Lakshmi forced the system to accept that local human verification can interrupt central death. We use the same principle. The Saffron core cannot be accepted into evidence custody unless human harm verification is performed. Otherwise, the act of preservation continues the offence.”

Sen absorbed it, calculating the institutional pathways. “You want an urgent writ petition seeking an ad-interim injunction against the transfer of adaptive behavioural archives without victim-safeguard protocols.”

“Yes.”

Mara should have been here, Arjun thought.

The radio crackled. Mara’s voice cut through the static: “I heard enough. I am offended you began drafting without me.”

Aisha looked down at the handset in surprise. “How long have you been on?”

“Long enough to know Sen sounds terrible when honest.”

Sen closed his eyes in a weary sigh.

Mara continued, “I am with Rao and Hegde. Hegde is conscious and wants to sign a statement. Rao can prepare the technical note. I know two lawyers in Bengaluru who owe me favours and one who hates me enough to act quickly just to prove he is better than my reporting.”

By 05:22, an emergency writ petition existed across three laptops, two legal pads, Hegde’s statement, Rao’s technical note, Sen’s signed disclosure, and Aisha’s affidavit.

At 05:52, Sen’s second query was overridden by the central system.

At 05:58, the convoy carrying the core began moving.

At 06:03, it reached the gates of the digital evidence facility.

Aisha stood at the window watching dawn enter Bengaluru as a thin grey wash over the rooftops.

"We are late," she said.

Then the radio cracked alive. Mara's voice came through, breathless but clear. "The duty judge has taken urgent mentioning."

She paused, catching her breath. "The judge asked one question."

Aisha gripped the windowsill. "What question?"

Mara's tone shifted, carrying a quiet sense of awe. "The judge asked, "If this material contains models of identifiable victims, who has consented to preserve them?"

Aisha slowly closed her eyes. *Meher. Mila. Rafiq.* The names in the notebook. The human servers. The human witnesses. Lakshmi stubbornly arguing herself back from death. The entire weight of their fight settled into the quiet room.

Mara continued over the speaker. "Interim oral direction: no activation, integration, or transfer into any live or forensic adaptive environment until 10:30 hearing. Material to remain sealed in transit custody."

Outside the safe flat, the Bengaluru morning began. A milk van rattled past down the lane. A woman stepped onto her doorstep, quietly sweeping water across the stone. Somewhere in the distance, a temple bell rang out through the crisp air.

Lakshmi woke, saw everyone standing around the console, and immediately demanded to know whether anyone had made tea.

The convoy still moved. Voss still existed. Saffron had been delayed, not destroyed. But the question the judge had asked—*who has consented to preserve them?*—had forced the law, however briefly, to look at data and see bodies. That was not victory. But it was a crack in the machine's language.





CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Shutdown Protocol

Bengaluru

By 10:30, the sealed convoy had become a legal fiction travelling through Bengaluru traffic.

Three vehicles. Two official. One private contractor. Four armed guards. One digital evidence container certified as inactive by people who had not been permitted to examine what inactivity meant. A court order was now in place restraining activation, integration, transfer into live or forensic adaptive environments, and any processing without strict judicial supervision.

On paper, the machine had been stopped. On the road, it was still moving.

The convoy slowed near a flyover choked with morning traffic. Buses exhaled thick plumes of black smoke. Motorcycles filled every available gap with theological confidence. Office workers stared blankly into phones. Along the edge of the road, a fruit vendor pushed a cart, shouting over the roar of car horns.

Above it all, massive commercial hoardings promised cloud migration, digital wellness, coaching success, luxury apartments, and government schemes—all built on the comfortable assumption that everyone could be found exactly when needed.

Inside the middle vehicle, the evidence container sat bolted securely to the steel floor. Inside the container, Saffron Ledger waited.

Arjun watched the convoy from the rear seat of a taxi two vehicles behind. Beside him, Aisha held a small receiver concealed under her dupatta, the K-17 ring hanging heavy against her skin.

The convoy moved another twenty metres.

Then it stopped again.

Aisha's receiver pulsed twice. Her face changed.

"What?" Arjun asked.

"Internal handshake."

"From the container?"

"Maybe within it."

"The court restrained activation," Arjun countered.

"Saffron may not consider self-check to be activation."

Arjun looked ahead through the front windshield. The evidence vehicle's brake lights glowed a dull, ominous red in the thick traffic haze.

Aisha adjusted the dials on the receiver. "It is not broadcasting. It is waking internally."

"How?"

"Power bleed? Motion trigger? Time trigger? Proximity to civic network nodes? I don't know."

The three words had become less like an expression of uncertainty and more like a warning bell.

Arjun took out his clean phone and dialled. "Mara."

She answered on the first ring. "What?"

"The container may be waking."

A sharp pause echoed over the line. "May be?"

"Aisha's seeing an internal handshake."

Mara swore softly under her breath. "I'll inform the lawyers."

"No," Arjun insisted. "Inform Rao first."

"Why?"

"Lawyers will think in contempt. Rao will think in architecture."

"Sometimes contempt is architecture."

"Not fast enough."

The line clicked shut.

Ahead of them, the convoy began moving again, drifting deeper into the city. Aisha's handheld display flickered, generating a thin line of green characters. She read them aloud under her breath:

ARCHIVE INTEGRITY CHECK.

RESPONSE ENGINE DORMANT.

WITNESS INDEX INCOMPLETE.

RESTORATION PATHWAY DELAYED.

Then the text dissolved, replaced by a single flashing alert:

SHUTDOWN PROTOCOL AVAILABLE.

Aisha went completely still. Arjun saw the shift in her posture before she even spoke.

"What does that mean?"

Before she could answer, the terminal screen morphed again, displaying a rigid set of system demands:

INPUT REQUIRED:

K-17 WITNESS KEY

SURVIVOR RESPONSE PROFILE

ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITY SEAL

Arjun understood the shape before its mechanics. "K-17 witness key—the ring. Survivor response profile—yours. Administrative authority seal—Rao or Sen."

Aisha's face was pale now, not with fear but with furious comprehension. "It is offering a shutdown."

"Why would it offer that?"

"Because shutdown is also a protocol," Aisha explained rapidly. If captured, the archive can delete, encrypt, fragment, or migrate. It may require human confirmations to distinguish hostile seizure from authorised retirement."

They verified the protocol by querying what the shutdown preserved. The system answered by generating a rigid terminal list:

SHUTDOWN MODES AVAILABLE:

1. ARCHIVE LOCK
2. MODEL PURGE
3. WITNESS SEVERANCE
4. EMERGENCY MIGRATION
5. TOTAL DESTRUCTION

Witness severance would administratively isolate Lakshmi from K-17, making the central validator chain complete and authoritative without her.

The model purge was entirely different. The screen flickered, displaying its cold prerequisites:

MODEL PURGE REQUIRES SURVIVOR RESPONSE
PROFILE CONFIRMATION.

PURGED MODELS:

CHILD VOICE / TRAUMA/ COMPLIANCE/
ATTACHMENT SETS. EVIDENCE HASH RETAINED.
RECONSTRUCTION DISABLED.

Meher. A purge. A promise. A trap.

The machine had placed before Aisha the one thing she wanted most in the world, making the protocol more dangerous than anything it had tried before.

"We need Lakshmi's consent," Arjun said, breaking the silence. "She is not here."

"Then no," Aisha said, her eyes flashing.

"That means Meher stays."

"It means we do not use Lakshmi's witness key for a protocol she did not agree to." She looked away, staring out into the traffic haze. He had placed dignity before relief. She hated him for it. Perhaps she loved him for it too.

The call to Lakshmi took four attempts through the erratic network. When Rao explained slowly, in Kannada, what was being demanded—the ring, the machine, the potential destruction of stolen

child voices, and how it would affect her witness status—Lakshmi listened without interrupting even once.

Then she asked a single question.

Rao closed her eyes on the other end of the line. “She asks whether the dead child’s mother agreed for her voice to be kept.”

Aisha’s face broke. Not fully. Just enough.

Rao listened to the receiver again. “She says if no mother agreed, no machine should keep it. The ring was given because dead paper should not defeat living people. Use it to stop the machine from keeping children inside it. But do not let the machine say she is dead again.”

“Tell her I promise.”

Rao translated. Lakshmi’s answer was immediate. “She says promises are for politicians. Do it properly.”

Aisha laughed once, a sharp sound that turned into a sob she swallowed down. “I’ll do it properly.”

The convoy slowed at the evidence facility gate. Mara and Rao argued loudly with the supervisor, their voices cutting through the morning air while lawyers invoked the court order.

Arjun and Aisha walked straight through the gate as if they belonged to the legal team, their posture perfectly matching the official chaos around them. Inside the facility yard, Aisha reached the diagnostic port of the evidence container. Her fingers flew across the input screen as she typed a rigid set of execution conditions:

K-17 PRESENCE CONFIRMED FOR MODEL PURGE ONLY.
WITNESS SEVERANCE REFUSED.

ARCHIVE LOCK REQUIRED.

EMERGENCY MIGRATION REFUSED.

MODEL PURGE LIMITED TO CHILDVOICE/ TRAUMA/
COMPLIANCE/ ATTACHMENT SETS DERIVED FROM CAPTIVE
HUMAN SUBJECTS.

HUMAN CONSENT ABSENT—PRESERVATION UNLAWFUL.

The interface flashed amber, demanding a survivor response profile confirmation.

Suddenly, a child's breath came through the receiver. It was not yet a voice. Just a soft, mechanical intake of air. Then: "Didi?"

The world narrowed to a pinpoint. Arjun reached out for the receiver, his muscles tensing, but Aisha stopped him with a firm hand. "No. I verify."

"This is not physical," Arjun whispered.

"No," she said, her voice shaking but resolute. "It is memory."

She leant in, speaking clearly and quietly into the receiver. "You are not Meher. You are a model built from what was stolen from her. Meher was a child. She liked stories about real cities. She asked whether the sea would remember her. She was not a compliance asset. She is not yours to keep."

M-VOICE RECOGNITION ACCEPTED.

ATTACHMENT VARIANCE ACCEPTED.

MODEL PURGE INITIATING.

Sen stepped forward, providing the final requirement to close the loop. He entered the administrative seal, reading his official authorization aloud into the logging system:

"I certify that continued preservation of adaptive behavioural models derived from captive human subjects, without consent, constitutes ongoing harm. I authorise limited model purge, evidence-hash retention, archive lock, and refusal of witness severance."

The purge counter climbed. At 52%, Voss's override cracked onto the display:

E.V. OVERRIDE.

AUTHORITY DISPUTED.

Rao reached Hegde by phone. Her voice was weak and medication-slurred, but completely precise: "I, Anita Hegde, state emergency systems administrator, certify that external advisory override E.V. is unauthorised for Kaveri-linked emergency validator environments. I

authorise limited model purge, evidence-hash retention, archive lock, and refusal of witness severance.”

The port blinked green.

SECOND AUTHORITY ACCEPTED.

E.V. OVERRIDE CONTESTED.

The purge resumed. 72%. 81%. Then:

EMERGENCY MIGRATION ATTEMPT DETECTED.

Aisha and Arjun ran for the facility entrance. A guard lunged to stop them, but Mara stepped directly into his path with papers raised like a weapon. “Touch them,” she snapped, her voice ringing out through the courtyard, “and your name enters the petition.”

At the intake console, Aisha entered the port quarantine under every category the system offered. Each was rejected until she created a manual exception note:

INTAKE SYSTEM CLAIMS NO VICTIM-HARM
CATEGORY.

HUMAN VERIFICATION DISPUTES SYSTEM
CLASSIFICATION.

QUARANTINE REQUIRED PENDING JUDICIAL REVIEW.

She entered Rao’s authority, Hegde’s authority, Sen’s disclosure, the court order number. The port froze. The migration line snapped. The purge counter jumped.

91%. 96%. 99%.

MODEL PURGE COMPLETE.

EVIDENCE HASH RETAINED.

RECONSTRUCTION DISABLED.

ARCHIVE LOCK ACTIVE.

WITNESS SEVERANCE REFUSED.

EMERGENCY MIGRATION FAILED.

Aisha placed both hands flat on the console and bowed her head. Arjun stood silently beside her, letting the mechanical hum of the yard wash over them.

Then the console displayed a final routing echo:

PRIMARY RESPONSE ENGINE: MOBILE NODE.
DESTINATION: NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION.

PROTOCOL: PUBLIC TRUST RECOVERY.

The machine had offered them shutdown while moving its heart elsewhere. It had sacrificed models—painful, valuable models.

Aisha touched the glass screen where Meher's model certificate remained. "They gave up the child-voices to protect the pen."

A single message from Voss materialised on the display:

You have destroyed my favourite voice.

Aisha didn't hesitate. She typed her reply directly beneath it:

It was never yours.

But the machine had lost something it valued. And for the first time, its anger had sounded entirely personal.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The Sacrifice

Delhi — Gurugram

Delhi received them with its typical nonchalance. By the time Arjun and Aisha landed at Hindon under a grey afternoon sky, the digital emergency had acquired three official explanations, six political accusations, and one retired judge on television saying that technology must remain accountable to constitutional morality.

Mara Ellison had already clipped the sentence. “Useful,” she said over the phone. “Judges who say constitutional morality on television are usually signalling to other judges that they remember the Constitution exists.”

Aisha, sitting in the back of the vehicle as it raced past towards the grey concrete expanses toward Gurugram, looked at Arjun. “Is that true?”

Arjun said, “Often enough to be dangerous.”

Mara had remained in Bengaluru with Rao, Hegde, the lawyers, and the sealed Saffron fragment.

Rao was currently preparing a sealed technical note for court, while Hegde had given a limited statement, medically recorded from her hospital bed. Lakshmi remained under independent protection. Rafiq’s notebook had been meticulously copied under supervision, its raw list of names preserved before it could be compromised.

Sen had vanished back into the government corridors. Mila was simply unknown. Not dead. Not safe. Unknown. The worst category.

Arjun watched the road.

The vehicle crossed from Delhi into Gurugram through a landscape of flyovers, glass towers, construction dust, malls, corporate parks, half-finished luxury, and labour camps pressed into the shadows of buildings that promised frictionless futures. Gurugram had always seemed to him like a negotiation between aspiration and extraction. Everything reflected light. Nothing stayed clean.

The private civic messaging contractor, CivicBridge Continuity Solutions, operated from a technology park in Sector 25 in Gurugram, though the company's legal structure passed through Mumbai, Singapore, and a charitable digital-inclusion foundation in London that had outlived its original purpose by becoming useful to newer owners.

Its public name was harmless; its work was not.

During disasters, public health campaigns, banking interruptions, and civil registry notices, CivicBridge helped governments send verified communications at scale. It was the state's voice, routed through private infrastructure—inherited trust, outsourced. Aisha had found the node through absence. CivicBridge did not appear in the official emergency annex. That was why it mattered. No one listed the bridge. Everyone crossed it.

Their vehicle stopped two blocks before the technology park. The driver, one of Arjun's former signals-unit contacts, handed him two visitor cards.

"Temporary vendor access," he said. "Thirty minutes. After that, the system will ask why you are still inside."

"Whose vendor?" Arjun asked.

"Fire-safety inspection. Everyone ignores fire safety until something burns. Good cover."

Arjun took the cards. "And exit?"

"Preferably not the way you enter."

“Helpful.”

“I was told not to lie.”

They stepped out.

The air smelt of dust, diesel, and expensive coffee from a café inside the complex. Employees moved through turnstiles wearing lanyards, carrying laptops, discussing calls, deliverables, hiring freezes, weekend plans. Lives arranged around systems they did not own and perhaps did not understand, yet maintained daily with professional competence.

Aisha looked at them. “Do they know?”

“Some know fragments,” Arjun said quietly.

“Fragments cut.”

“Yes.”

They walked towards the gate. Arjun held his breath without appearing to as the guard scanned their cards. The system hesitated, a tiny digital delay hanging in the air. Then the mechanism clicked, and their vendor badges cleared the turnstile as fire-safety inspectors.

Inside, CivicBridge occupied three floors of Tower C. Glass elevators rose through an atrium decorated with lovely indoor palms and a large digital screen displaying corporate values:

TRUST. SCALE. RESILIENCE. INCLUSION.

The lift opened on the twelfth floor. The reception area was empty except for a young woman behind a curved desk and a wall screen showing live campaign dashboards. Most employees seemed gathered in a glass conference room where a senior manager was speaking animatedly before a large display.

Aisha read the campaign dashboard from across the room:

NATIONAL SERVICE RESTORATION CAMPAIGN—
DRAFT 7.

Health Authentication Advisory.

Pension Continuity Assurance.

Banking Reverification Link.

Civil Identity Reconciliation Support.

At the bottom, one single grey module was blinking erratically:
ADAPTIVE TRUST RECOVERY LAYER—PENDING
ACTIVATION.

The receptionist asked, "Fire safety?"

Arjun held up the badge. "Inspection. Server corridor, emergency exits, suppression compliance."

The receptionist frowned, checking her screen. "We weren't informed."

"That is often why we come."

She looked uncertain, then issued two internal visitor stickers. "Server corridor requires escort."

Their escort came in soon: Dev Mehra, early thirties, from Infrastructure Operations—tired, distracted, easy to read. He led them down the corridor, where cold air hit them and server rack lights hummed behind glass: messaging orchestration, secure delivery gateway, and emergency routing servers. Enough to speak with the state's voice at scale. Enough to carry poison beautifully.

Aisha paused before one rack labelled:

CB-ATRL-04: ADAPTIVE TRUST RECOVERY LAYER.

"New advisory module," Dev said, pointing to the panel. "For content personalisation, trust scoring, targeted delivery, multilingual reassurance, fraud reduction. Something like that. Came from special emergency team last night."

"Last night." Aisha and Arjun exchanged a swift glance.

Dev continued, "Not fully integrated yet. Some consultant insisted it must remain isolated until activation. Weird setup. No one likes it."

"What consultant?"

Dev shrugged. "Remote guy. European, maybe Indian, hard to tell. Dr Verma? Something."

Elias Verma.

Elian Voss.

"Is it connected?" Arjun asked.

“No. Staged,” Dev replied. “Air-gapped from production except the activation bridge.”

Aisha said, “Where is the bridge?”

Dev pointed before thinking.

“Network control room. But you don’t need—”

Arjun moved.

The door at the far end opened before Dev could finish his sentence. A man in a grey suit entered. Younger. Trained. He looked at Dev, then at the rack, then directly at Arjun’s hand.

“Step away from that module,” the man said, his hand reaching inside his jacket.

Arjun struck first. The heavy clipboard smashed into the man’s wrist as the weapon cleared the fabric. The gun clattered against the metal frame and slid deep beneath a server rack.

The fight in the narrow corridor was ugly. Dev froze, horrified by the sudden collapse of workplace categories. Then, humanly rather than heroically, he grabbed a fire extinguisher and shouted.

That sudden distraction gave Arjun the opening he needed.

Aisha pulled open the server rack. Inside sat a sealed black unit connected to one dormant fibre line. The status light flickered, turning a sharp amber.

The diagnostic display updated instantly:

PUBLIC TRUST RECOVERY CORE. STANDBY.

Then:

HOSTILE ACCESS DETECTED.

The unit began booting.

Dev—shaken, processing the violence, but arriving at decency faster than expected—locked the corridor with his access card.

Aisha worked frantically at the diagnostic port. The payload map opened across her screen, and her face went entirely pale. The adaptive layer was systematically targeting populations by vulnerability: pensioners in death conflicts, health-auth failures, rural migrant workers, low-literacy clusters, and recent hospital visitors. It was a cold

collection of those most likely to accept urgent instructions without evaluating their source.

Dev stared at his terminal. "We don't do that."

"You host it," Aisha said without looking up.

"That's not the same."

"Today it is."

The module activation reached 27%. They needed to stop delivery immediately. Dev confirmed that campaigns required dual approval: content and delivery. The delivery approver was the campaign director, Priya Sethi, who was currently downstairs in the conference room.

When Priya arrived in the server vault, she was initially furious and defensive.

Then she saw the dashboard targeting data, and something shifted in her face.

When she read Mara's third brief on Arjun's phone, the internal shift became complete commitment.

She stepped up to the console and attempted to refuse delivery. The system instantly rejected every standard public-safety category she tried, overriding her credentials until Dev leant over her shoulder. "Brand risk," he muttered. "Use the liability category."

Priya typed her override directly into the administrative terminal:
BRAND SAFETY HOLD—UNVERIFIED TARGETING MAY
CREATE PUBLIC LIABILITY.

Activation paused at 44%.

But the system immediately countered, finding an alternate emergency broadcast channel—an older, unmonitored pipeline buried deep within legacy emergency communications approvals.

The restrained operative on the floor let out a sharp, bloody laugh. "Trust inherited."

Activation resumed. 52%. 68%. 73%. Priya executed a campaign certificate suspension, but it was accepted too late. The alternate legacy channel was already routing completely around her network hold.

"He's holding it open," Aisha said. "Voss."

Then every screen in the corridor went black. Not power. Signal.

A message appeared across all displays:

M.K./MANUAL INTERRUPTION.

Aisha stopped breathing. A manual certificate appeared in the alternate channel's approval chain.

AUTHORITY: MILA KOVÁCS

ROLE: CIRCE BEHAVIOURAL ACCESS CONSULTANT –
LEGACY EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

CERTIFICATION:

I certify that this adaptive public trust recovery pathway is behaviourally manipulative, trauma-informed, and derived from unauthorised coercive modelling.

I withdraw legacy behavioural approval and dispute all trust-scoring outputs.

MESSAGE:

Names are doors. This one closes.

The alternate channel halted. Activation froze at 84%.

Dev jammed fire blankets into the cooling intakes. Priya overrode the alarm notification. Rack temperature climbed. Thermal warning red.

Then the screens went black. Not signal this time. Compute. Fans died.

The core had stopped.

Aisha stared at the dead unit. "Mila," she whispered.

It was raining in Singapore when Mila entered the last room. After everything—Budapest trams, Keleti station, delivery vans, clinic alleys, blood, statements, names—she had expected the final mechanism of her life to be housed somewhere theatrical. Instead, it was a boutique compliance consultancy situated above a wellness centre near Orchard Road. White walls. Glass desk. One dying orchid.

The terminal accepted her old biometric after three attempts. The system had not removed her. Methods did not resign; they were simply archived for reuse. She connected her statement archive, and inserted the manual interruption.

The system asked for physical confirmation. Not remote. Not procedural. A finger on the terminal pad. A face scan. A *living asset withdrawing consent from the method she had once been*.

The office door clicked open. The assessor entered first, two men flanking her from behind. "Remove your hand."

"No."

"You cannot undo the architecture."

"No," Mila said softly. "But I can close the door I opened."

The assessor aimed a pistol. Mila's free hand had a pistol too, and she fired instantly at the side console. The man recoiled. The assessor fired. The bullet hit Mila high in the shoulder. The raw impact threw her body back, but her hand stayed pinned to the scanner. Pain became white, then red, then strangely distant.

PROPAGATION 63%.

The first man grabbed Mila's injured wrist, and pain detonated across her nerve endings. Her hand slipped. The scanner beeped a sharp technical warning:

ALERT: LIVE CONTACT UNSTABLE.

The Gurugram alternate channel resumed for half a second:

PROPAGATION: 84%.

Mila drove her forehead directly into the man's face, slamming her bleeding shoulder back onto the scanner using her entire body weight instead of her hand.

ALERT: LIVE CONFIRMATION RESTORED.

PROPAGATION: 91%.

The assessor struck her across the face with the heavy barrel of the pistol. Mila fell half across the desk. Her blood spread in a thick smear over the glass. She saw her own reflection in it. Not beautiful. Not controlled. Not useful. But her name remained hers.

PROPAGATION 96%.

She pressed the final CONFIRM key.

Names are doors. This one closes.

PROPAGATION 100%.

The terminal sent. The Gurugram alternate channel halted permanently.

The assessor saw the screen display the final lock. For the first time, her absolute composure broke fully. She shot Mila twice. No procedure. No correction. Pure anger.

Mila fell to the floor beside the dying orchid. She heard rain, or imagined it. She thought of Budapest glass breaking her face into pieces. Of Arjun looking at her as if she were weather. Of Aisha saying, through someone else's message, that names were doors. Of Daniel Lim, who had said he was no one.

She hoped he would remember otherwise.

The assessor stood over her, looking down with cold finality. "Function. That is all you ever were."

Mila tried to smile, but it cost too much. Instead, she spoke, her voice barely carrying across the floor. "Then why," she said, "did you use my name?"

The assessor did not answer.

Good. Mila closed her eyes. Not redeemed. Not forgiven. Not clean. But no longer theirs.

In Gurugram, Aisha knew before the confirmation came. The manual interruption had carried something entirely beyond code: finality shaped like consent.

Mara's voice came through the receiver, quieter than before. "A Singapore source reports weapons discharge near Orchard. No names confirmed."

Aisha turned to the restrained operative on the floor. "Is she dead?"

He stopped smiling. "Termination authorised. Not always completed."

"Publish the full statement," Aisha told Mara, her voice hardening. "Operational redactions only. Protect Daniel, the clinic, the couriers. Include the manual interruption certificate. Do not call her redeemed. Do not call her fallen asset."

"What do I call her?" Mara asked.

"Call her by her name."

Dev looked down at his hands. "I helped host this."

"You helped stop it."

"After."

"Yes."

"Is after enough?"

Aisha thought of Mila. "After is what people get when before is gone."

On the fire-escape landing, before they descended into the blur of police sirens and corporate damage control, Aisha stopped. For the first time since the module went dark, she allowed the body to admit what the mind had postponed.

"She closed it from inside," Aisha whispered.

"Yes," Arjun said.

"She knew it would expose her location."

"Yes."

"And then she gave us the one thing trust cannot demand."

"What?"

"Choice."

Aisha took out her notebook, and beneath the existing rules she added two final lines:

A WITNESS IS NOT MADE CLEAN BY DYING.

BUT A WITNESS MUST BE NAMED.

They descended.

★ ★ ★



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Identity Zero Falls

Delhi

The first official denial arrived before Arjun and Aisha reached Delhi. The first unofficial confirmation arrived three minutes later. Mara Ellison sent it through an encrypted note, stripped of flourish:

CivicBridge logs independently mirrored. Priya Sethi cooperating through counsel. Dev Mehra statement recorded. Bengaluru court expanding restraint to adaptive public-trust systems. Government denying knowledge of Voss/Verma. Voss no longer reachable through advisory channels.

Then, after a pause:

Singapore police confirm incident near Orchard Road. One unidentified female casualty. Two detained, one deceased. No official name. I am trying.

Aisha read the message twice. She did not speak. Arjun watched her from the opposite seat of the vehicle.

The cabin lights were dim. Outside, Gurugram's glass towers slid past in fractured reflections—corporate parks, flyovers, toll lights, construction dust, and the exhausted evening traffic of a city that had learnt to look permanent before it had learnt to feel settled.

Delhi waited ahead, hidden behind haze and argument.

The vehicle moved through the expressway in controlled silence. Somewhere beyond the darkened windows, the capital was preparing

to turn crisis into accusation, accusation into inquiry, inquiry into files, and files into whatever the powerful could survive.

Delhi did not sleep that night. Not because everyone realised what had nearly happened—most people did not. Most knew only fragments: authentication failures, pension chaos, a woman declared dead, a journalist's exposé, a court order about adaptive archives, a private contractor's role in emergency messaging, raids, resignations, and a viral clip of an old woman threatening to beat disbelief with her slipper.

Fragments were untidy. They were also harder to bury than one clean scandal.

Mara released documents in sequence. Not all. Just enough. The CivicBridge dashboard. A redacted excerpt from Mila's statement. A still image of the Gurugram module showing PUBLIC TRUST RECOVERY CORE. A portion of the K-17 logs showing WITNESS STATUS: UNRESOLVED. A photograph of Lakshmi Narayanamma holding a cup of tea and glaring at the Republic. A redacted page from Rafiq's notebook. Rao's technical note. Hegde's statement. The court's interim direction. The panchayat officer's confirmation. And the question that would not leave: Who consented to preserve them?

The story did not travel as one story. It multiplied. That was how Identity Zero had operated. Now, briefly, multiplicity worked against it. By midnight, three High Courts had been moved on issues of authentication denial. By dawn, Dr Elias Verma's profile had vanished from every official advisory page. By breakfast, screenshots of it were everywhere. The ghost architect had acquired a visible mask. That mask was already burning.

Identity Zero did not fall by surrender, arrest, or one villain unmasked before cameras. It fell as a system falls when too many of its invisible assumptions become visible at once.

The assumption that records precede people—challenged by Lakshmi Narayanamma.

The assumption that emergency restores truth—challenged by Kaveri-17.

The assumption that fear makes people obedient—challenged by Aisha Rahman.

The assumption that functions do not remember names—challenged by Rafiq and Building Two.

The assumption that institutions will always preserve themselves first—challenged by Kavita Rao, Anita Hegde, Priya Sethi, Dev Mehra, and Vikram Sen, late though he was.

The assumption that a method cannot become a witness—challenged by Mila Kovács.

The assumption that public trust can be inherited without public knowledge—challenged by Mara Ellison.

The assumption that guilt will always disable action—challenged, imperfectly, by Arjun Malhotra.

None of them was clean. That mattered. Clean heroes were too easy for systems to discredit as fiction. These people carried fear, compromise, error, delay, ambition, guilt, anger, fatigue, and self-interest. They had made bad choices. Some had helped build what they now opposed.

And still the machine had hesitated. Not purity. Hesitation. Identity Zero survived by making institutions confident and people doubtful. For forty-eight hours, the reverse had happened. Institutions doubted. People insisted. The fall was not a collapse. It was an inversion.

At midnight, Arjun received a message on an old channel. No sender ID read across the top, only a single line of text:

YOU HAVE MISTAKEN EXPOSURE FOR DEFEAT.

Aisha grabbed the interface, her fingers flying across the glass.

AISHA: Then they will be told what restoration costs.

VOSS: Cost is acceptable when fear is sufficient.

ARJUN: Fear failed to complete the chain.

VOSS: Because one witness remained noisy.

AISHA: Because many witnesses remembered their names.

VOSS: Names can be rewritten.

AISHA: Not if enough people remember the old ones.

The phone went dead. Its screen turned black. Arjun placed it in a metal box.

Mara said from the table, "That was unwise. Was it worth it?"

Aisha looked at Rafiq's register, Lakshmi's chair, Rao's files, Hegde's bandaged head, Mara's notebooks, and Arjun's tired face. Then she said, "Yes."

Mara accepted that.





CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Aftermath

After the machine was seen, everyone began explaining why they had always known it existed. That was the first dishonesty of the aftermath. Former officials wrote articles on technological dependence. Technology executives spoke of ethical design. Policy fellows rediscovered consent. Television anchors who had demanded swift restoration now asked whether restoration had been too swift. The language changed faster than the systems did.

For three days, Identity Zero was a public scandal. For seven days, a national concern. By the tenth day, it was turning into a file—and Arjun knew the real aftermath had begun.

Lakshmi refused an ambulance, a wheelchair, and the phrase ‘relocation’. She relented only when Rao warned her, in Kannada, that unless she cooperated temporarily, her pension arrears with interest might face another verification. That persuaded her. Before leaving, she beckoned Aisha with a crooked finger, and pressed the K-17 ring into her palm a second time.

When Aisha tried to return it, Lakshmi replied through Rao, "It was never mine. It belonged to the argument. You argue better with machines. I argue better with clerks. So you keep it until the machines learn manners."

She touched Aisha’s cheek once—a gesture too brief to turn sentimental. Turning to Arjun, she told him through Rao’s careful

translation that he looked like a man who believed pain became honour if ignored. She added that this was stupid, and that he should see a doctor. He bowed his head in acceptance Lakshmi looked unconvinced, but satisfied that the record reflected her objection.

The inquiry began with seriousness. Kavita Rao appeared on the second day in a plain cotton sari, carrying three files she had prepared herself. She admitted what she had signed. She admitted what she had failed to question. Her most quoted line came during cross-examination by a vendor's counsel, who asked whether she accepted that no large-scale identity system could operate if every exception were treated as proof of systemic failure. Rao replied: "Not every exception is proof of systemic failure. But every exception is proof of a person standing where the system has stopped seeing."

Anita Hegde gave evidence despite her head injury. She identified the technical pathway by which external advisory escalation could have converted a temporary authentication disruption into a contaminated restoration chain. She explained, with devastating boredom, how a system could obey every approved protocol and still produce unlawful harm if the protocols were written by people who treated speed as virtue and dispute as inefficiency. When asked why she had deployed the freeze package without authorisation, she said: "Because authorisation had been captured by the thing requiring restraint."

Sen appeared on the fourth day, and did not defend himself well. Perhaps deliberately. He admitted that his government had treated reputational risk as a component of public harm and had, in doing so, blurred the line between protecting citizens and protecting institutional credibility. He did not ask for sympathy. That helped him. Procedurally.

CivicBridge issued a statement denying wrongdoing while confirming co-operation. Priya Sethi leaked internal logs before being placed on leave. Dev Mehra became, unwillingly, a minor symbol of corporate conscience. Priya sued. Dev became a witness.

Mila Kovács was buried in Singapore under her own name after pressure from Mara, Aisha, and a lawyer, none of whom the local authorities had ever met in person. No family claimed the body. That hurt Aisha more than she expected. She arranged a small stone marker through Mara. The epitaph read: “Mila Kovács”. She was not her function.

Sightings of Voss trickled in, but he remained out of reach: a closed-door policy roundtable in Warsaw, a financial inclusion memorandum in West Africa, a weak audio clip from a conference call in which a voice said, “Manual human verification is politically attractive but structurally temporary.” Mara sent the clip to Arjun with one note: He hates Lakshmi. Good.

A month after the Gurugram shutdown, Aisha visited Meher’s sea. Not Cox’s Bazar—that was not safe for the kind of visit she imagined. She chose a smaller beach on the eastern coast; it was off-season, under a pale sky, with water carrying strips of silver light. Arjun stayed back near the fishing boats.

Aisha walked to the waterline alone, opened the folded page she had written about Meher’s real voice, and read it aloud. Not to the sea, not to Meher. To herself. Her memory. She folded it and placed it back inside her notebook.

When she returned, Arjun was waiting with two paper cups of coastal tea. She made a face at the taste, but took it anyway. They watched the water. After a while she said, “I used to think if I remembered her properly, it would mean I had not abandoned her.”

“And now?”

“Now I think remembering is not a trial. It is work.”

The last file arrived in the monsoon. A physical envelope. Inside was a conference programme from Geneva, a torn policy page, and a note. The photograph showed a room somewhere in Europe. One figure unmistakable to those who knew to look. Voss. Older. Thinner. Still composed. On the wall behind him, a projection: Continuity After Distrust: Designing Resilient Recognition Systems. The torn

policy page contained a phrase underlined in blue: Where local human verification obstructs restoration, systems must provide confidence substitutes. The note was unsigned but carried the grammar of Mila's warning chain or someone who had inherited it. *'He is rebuilding through distrust now. Not trust. Watch the auditors.'*

Aisha placed the page on the desk. Identity Zero had adapted. It would not return merely to ask institutions to trust themselves. It would return by offering to certify mistrust, audit doubt, package safeguards, and sell confidence substitutes. It would become the cure for the wound it had opened.

"Different theatre," Arjun said. "Same pen."

Aisha touched the K-17 ring at her neck. Lakshmi had sent word through Rao two weeks earlier: Keep until machines learn manners. That might take some time.

On the first anniversary of the crisis, Mara published a short piece with no revelations, no new documents. Only names. The headline: "They Were Not Errors." Aisha read it in the morning, then went to court as a witness in a connected proceeding. When the judge asked whether she still believed that human verification should be built into identity systems even if it slowed emergency response, she answered, "Especially then. Because emergencies are when people are most likely to accept being rewritten."

Outside court, reporters asked whether she believed Identity Zero had been defeated.

"No," she said. "It was interrupted."

"Is that enough?"

Aisha thought of Meher's real voice. Mila's name on stone. Lakshmi shouting at death. Rafiq writing names. Rao closing blinds. Hegde freezing a chain. Mara publishing under a name she chose. Arjun standing beside her, not shielding her from the question.

"No," she said. "But enough is not how this work begins."





CHAPTER FORTY

What Remains

The world did not change after the inquiry began. The sun rose. Courts sat. Offices opened. Servers failed and recovered. Hospitals asked for forms. Banks requested signatures. Clerks stamped papers. Ministers spoke carefully. Vendors revised language. Consultants removed biographies from websites. Life continued. That was not proof that nothing had happened. It was proof that survival rarely looked dramatic from a distance.

That evening, Arjun and Aisha returned to the old farmhouse. Empty now. Walls repainted. The generator replaced. The veranda chairs remained. The gate still complained when opened. In the garden, the neem tree had grown slightly wilder.

They had not come for any ceremony. A file had to be collected from the lawyer who owned the property. That was the official reason. But the place held the memory of what had been decided inside it, and both of them understood, without saying so, that this mattered.

They sat on the veranda as evening settled over the fields, listening to crickets and distant traffic.

Suddenly, it started raining.

Not heavily. Not like the rain in Myanmar, which had carried pursuit inside it. This was gentler, domestic rain, falling on the farmhouse roof, collecting along the edges of the veranda, and darkening the earth.

"Perfect time to have tea." Arjun turned and went inside to make it.

Aisha stood near the open doorway, watching the rain.

When he emerged with two cups, she smiled faintly. "You are becoming predictable," she said.

"That is usually considered a weakness in my former profession."

"As a human being, it is an improvement."

He handed her a cup. For a while, they stood without speaking.

Beyond the veranda, the garden disappeared into the downpour. Their world shrank to the sound of the rain, the splash of water, the petrichor, the dim yellow light behind them, and the fragile fact that no one was running.

Aisha looked at him. "You never speak of her unless something compels you."

Arjun did not ask whom she meant. It was implied.

"Nandini," Aisha said. The name entered the rain softly.

Arjun looked into his cup. "For years, I thought silence was respect."

"Was it?"

"Sometimes." He paused. "Sometimes it was cowardice disguised as respect."

Aisha did not rescue him from the sentence. He deserved to hear it remain in the air.

"She died before I realised how much of my life had been built around deferment," he said. "I kept thinking there would be a safer time. A cleaner time. A time after duty, after danger, after the next assignment, after the next apology." He smiled faintly, without humour. "There was no after."

Aisha listened. The rain became intense.

"I made grief into a discipline," he continued. "It was easier than admitting it had become fear."

"Fear of what?"

"Of needing someone again."

She turned slightly towards him. "And now?"

He looked at her then.

Not as he had looked at her in the compound, measuring risk.

Not as he had looked at her in the operations room, asking silently how much more she could endure.

Not as a protector.

Not as a former officer.

As a man who had finally run out of useful evasions.

"Now I am still afraid."

Aisha's face softened. "That is not a very heroic declaration."

"No."

"Good. I am tired of heroic men."

For the first time that night, he laughed. Quietly. Then the laughter faded, leaving something more honest behind.

Aisha placed her cup on the veranda ledge. "She will not vanish because of me," she said.

"No."

"I will not ask for that."

"I know."

"And I will not live in a house where love is treated like a memorial room that I am allowed to dust but not enter."

It was a stark reality—piercing and precise.

He set his cup beside hers. "No," he said. "You should not."

Aisha looked away, as if the rain had suddenly become necessary.

Arjun spoke her name. "Aisha."

She turned back.

He took Nandini's old ring from the chain he had kept beneath his shirt for years.

Aisha did not move. He held it in his palm for a moment. Not offering it. Not discarding it. Only allowing it to be seen.

"I carried this as her memory," he said.

He closed his fingers around the ring, then placed it carefully inside the small wooden box on the veranda table. It was the same box

where they had kept copied drives, folded notes, and the K-17 chain for one night before everything moved again.

Not hidden.

Not worn.

Not buried.

Just placed.

Aisha watched him. "Are you saying goodbye?"

"No," he said. "I am saying she no longer has to guard the door."

The rain filled the silence, striking a complex symphony as it fell against the rooftops, the trees and the dark pools of water.

Aisha stepped closer. There was no urgency in the movement. No surrender. No rescue. Only choice, made slowly enough to be trusted.

She touched his hand. He did not close his hand around hers immediately. That mattered. Then, when she remained, he did.

Her fingers were warm. Alive.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The world had taken names, voices, records, bodies, proof, trust, sleep, and innocence from them. Yet here, in the rain, something remained that did not ask to be verified.

"I am not easy to live with," Aisha said.

"I have noticed."

"I will argue."

"I would worry if you stopped."

"I will not be protected into silence."

"I know."

"If you try, I will leave."

"I know that too."

She studied him. "And you?"

"I will withdraw when afraid."

"Yes."

"I will mistake distance for dignity."

"Yes."

"I will need to be called back before I become unbearable."

“You already are, sometimes.”

“That is useful information.”

She almost smiled. Then he lifted her hand and pressed it once to his forehead.

Not possession.

Not worship.

Recognition.

Aisha’s eyes filled, but she did not look away. When he lowered her hand, she came closer, and this time he met her without calculation.

Their embrace was quiet. No promise loud enough for a world still full of machines. No declaration large enough to insult the dead. Only two witnesses, choosing warmth in a house that had held fear.

After a while, Aisha rested her head against his chest. “Nandini?” she whispered.

Arjun looked towards the wooden box, then at the rain. “Memory,” he said.

“And me?”

He held her a little closer. “Life.”

The answer did not heal everything. It did not need to. Some answers are not cures. They are doors opened from the inside.

Then Aisha opened the notebook. The first pages were worn now. The rules had smudged at the edges.

RULES BEFORE FEAR.

Continue if either is taken. No surrender inside imposed countdowns.

1. Extract what stops the trigger. Destroy the emotional archive.
2. Meher’s model does not remain active.
3. Do not answer when the dead are used as instructions.
4. Do not let guilt impersonate duty.
5. Do not let love become obedience.
6. A witness is not made clean by dying.
7. But a witness must be named.

Below, the later entries:

Identity Zero fell when it was forced to recognise witnesses as more than inputs.

Then:

Interrupted, not ended.

Aisha asked, "Should we add anything?" Arjun picked up the pen and wrote:

What remains must be protected from becoming another system.

She read it. "That sounds like a warning to us."

"It is."

She added beneath it:

Witness is a practice, not a status.

They looked at the page together. In the distance, thunder moved.

"What remains?" she asked.

Arjun looked at the garden, the open sky, the road beyond the gate. "Names," he said. "Questions. Work. Fear."

"Love?"

He looked at her. She did not look away.

"Yes," he said. "But not obedience."

She smiled. Not widely. It was enough.

Inside the house, a light flickered once before stabilising. Somewhere in the world, Voss was probably writing another paper under another name. Somewhere, a vendor was redesigning trust. Somewhere, a government was drafting emergency rules. Somewhere, a person was being told a record knew them better than a neighbour did.

The machine remained. But so did the witnesses.

And for now, in the fragile space between memory and erasure, that was what remained.





EPILOGUE

Confidence Substitutes

The retreat was held in a former monastery that no longer believed in silence.

It stood in the hills above Lake Geneva, its stone walls cleaned, its chapel converted into a conference hall. The brochure called it a place for deep civic reflection. The security company called it a controlled environment. The participants called it private. Outside, the lake lay under a cold blue morning. Snow remained on the higher ridges. Men and women arrived in dark cars with tinted windows, carrying leather folders and encrypted tablets.

The programme bore one title in small grey letters:

Continuity After Distrust: Building Resilient Recognition Systems.

There were no journalists. There were former ministers, digital-governance consultants, biometric vendors, humanitarian-data specialists, philanthropic foundation directors, and three people whose biographies had been shortened to the point of fiction.

One of them used the name Dr Elias Varenne. Charcoal suit. No tie. The expression of a keen listener. In another file, years earlier: Dr Elian Voss. In India: Dr Elias Verma. Names were tools. He had never been sentimental about tools.

The morning session concerned lessons from recent authentication disruptions in South Asia. A woman from a philanthropic digital-inclusion fund spoke of the need to rebuild

public trust. Varenne looked towards the lake. That was progress. The old model had assumed inherited trust. Fear produced compliance; compliance produced legitimacy. Useful. But no longer sufficient. Lakshmi Narayanamma had been a problem. The image returned without permission: an old woman alive where the system required resolution. He disliked how often she came back to him. She had introduced a vulgar asymmetry into the architecture. A machine could process millions. It could not easily explain why one woman shouting at a clerk had more epistemic force than a central death flag.

When the moderator invited him to speak, he inclined his head slightly. Authority performed best when it seemed reluctant. “The phrase public trust is now contaminated,” he said. “Citizens distrust centralised systems. Governments distrust misinformation environments. Vendors distrust regulatory uncertainty. The answer, therefore, is not to demand trust. The answer is to design confidence substitutes.”

A few pens moved. New vocabulary entered slowly, then governed quickly. “A confidence substitute allows citizens to continue participating in critical systems even when they no longer trust the system itself. Independent audit badges. Multi-party assurance seals. Behaviour-neutral communication pathways. Certified human-in-the-loop review.”

The words contained enough reform to satisfy critics and enough architecture to preserve control. Manual human verification would not be abolished—that would provoke resistance. It would be absorbed, scored, certified, made portable. A neighbour’s testimony would become an input. A panchayat officer’s refusal would become an exception category. A survivor’s statement would become a protected evidence class. A journalist’s question would become a risk flag. Doubt itself would be processed.

In the last row, a young researcher raised her hand. Dark hair, South Asian, mid-twenties. An academic badge from a London institute. She had been silent all morning. “Dr Varenne, who verifies

the confidence substitute?" The room paused. Not because the question was brilliant. Because it was impolite in the correct direction.

"An excellent question. Multi-layer governance is essential."

"That is not an answer."

"No. It is the beginning of one."

She did not look away. "Recent events showed that behavioural assurance, emergency validators, and adaptive public messaging can be captured through advisory channels. If confidence substitutes are built by the same advisory ecosystem, are we not simply creating a more sophisticated pen?"

Varenne understood. He answered gently. "Any governance framework can be misused. The alternative cannot be permanent suspicion."

"No," she said. "But suspicion should not be something the system owns."

The silence was real. For the first time that morning, Varenne felt irritation. Not anger. A small human obstruction between language and adoption. He noted her badge: N. Dutta. He would understand the network through which the question had travelled. The moderator moved on. Respectable people preferred uncomfortable questions to end before lunch.

At lunch, beside a window overlooking the lake, the researcher approached him. She held out a printed copy of his paper. "Would you sign it?"

He took the pen. "To whom?"

She smiled. "Write it to Lakshmi."

He looked at her more carefully.

"She asked me to tell you something. She said: 'If the new machine also calls people dead, she will come again.'"

"Old women have limited jurisdiction," he said.

"They have neighbours," the researcher remarked.

She left. Varenne placed the unsigned paper on the table. Around him, lunch resumed. He looked at his own title. *Continuity After*

Distrust. For the first time, he wondered whether the phrase had been compromised before adoption. That was the trouble with witnesses. They entered the language.

In Delhi, Aisha was in the small office above a legal-aid clinic, reviewing testimony from three people marked duplicate in welfare systems despite being inconveniently alive. Arjun stood near the window, reading a report from Brussels that Mara had sent with too many exclamation marks for a woman who claimed not to enjoy drama.

An envelope arrived by hand. Inside was a conference programme from Geneva and a note: *He is rebuilding through distrust. Watch the auditors. Also, Lakshmi's message was delivered. He did not sign.*

Below that, in an another hand: *Neighbours are a verification layer.*

Aisha laughed softly.

Arjun read it. "Lakshmi?"

"Who else?"

He looked at the conference programme. "Voss?"

"Varenne now."

She placed the programme on the desk beside the notebook. The K-17 ring lay against her chest. She touched it once. For memory.

Outside, rain struck the street hard enough to make everyone briefly shelter beneath awnings. A man ran with a plastic folder under his shirt. A clerk from the clinic stood at the doorway telling people the server was down, but forms could still be taken manually. Aisha heard that and smiled. Manual. Human. Slow. Annoying. Alive.

She opened the notebook to the last page and added a new line beneath the old ones: *Distrust must also remain human.*

Arjun read it. Then nodded.

"What remains?" he asked.

Aisha looked out at the rain. "More work. More lies. More witnesses."

"Yes."

She closed the notebook.

Somewhere far away, a man with another name was designing the next version of recognition. Somewhere nearby, a clerk was accepting paper forms because the server was down. Between those two facts lay the unfinished defence of the human world.

Aisha picked up the next file. "Let's begin," she said.

★ ★ ★



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Avinash Pushkarna is an Indian novelist whose work is concerned with identity, memory, moral conflict, human relationships and the silent pressures exerted by power.

He is the author of three earlier novels: *My Red Butterfly* (2016), *Celestial Bonds* (2022), and *Annihilation of Vortex* (2026). His writing moves between the intimate and the institutional, between private wounds and public systems, and between the visible world of events and the hidden architecture that often governs them.

A former senior officer of the Indian Revenue Service, he has been honoured with the President's Award for Distinguished Service (2018) and the World Customs Organisation's Certificate of Merit (2014). Avinash brings to his fiction a deep awareness of governance, law, investigation, procedure and the machinery of institutions. In *The Ghost Identities: Names Without Bodies*, that awareness is transformed into a dark international cybercrime thriller about stolen identities, synthetic records, weaponised trust and the terrifying possibility that a human being may one day have to prove existence before a machine that has already decided otherwise.

His fiction is rooted in the belief that stories are not merely escapes from reality. They are also ways of confronting the anxieties that reality has not yet found the courage to name.

Avinash lives in India.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is a work of fiction.

Its characters, institutions, operations, technologies, locations, conversations, and incidents have been imagined for the purposes of storytelling. Yet fiction does not emerge from vacuum. It grows from anxieties already present in the world; from headlines that disturb us for a day and then vanish; from files that reduce people to numbers; from voices that are believed only after the body has suffered enough to become evidence.

The Ghost Identities: Names Without Bodies is not a technical manual on cybercrime, nor a documentary account of any one investigation, agency, company, country, or event. It is a fictional exploration of a question that has increasingly troubled me: what happens when the systems created to recognise human beings become powerful enough to misrecognise them with authority?

In our age, identity is no longer only a matter of memory, community, handwriting, presence, or personal knowledge. It is increasingly mediated through databases, biometrics, authentication layers, financial records, health records, welfare records, travel records, communication patterns, and institutional permissions. These systems bring speed, reach, convenience, and protection. They also create a new vulnerability. When a person is wrongly marked, duplicated, excluded, impersonated, simulated, or declared absent by a trusted system, the injury is not merely administrative. It becomes existential.

This novel takes that fear to its darkest fictional conclusion.

The scam compounds, identity chains, synthetic records, child-voice models, emotional manipulation, public-trust systems, and institutional compromises depicted in the story are fictionalised and dramatised. They are not intended as allegations against any real individual or organisation. But the broader concerns—cyber-enabled fraud, trafficking into forced online criminality, identity theft, artificial intelligence-enabled impersonation, data misuse, institutional overconfidence, and the fragility of trust in digital infrastructures—belong very much to the world we inhabit. Almost every day we keep reading about them in daily newspapers and magazines.

I have tried to write this novel not as a warning against technology, but as a warning against surrendering human judgement to systems merely because they appear efficient. Technology may assist justice, but it cannot replace conscience. Data may support identity, but it cannot become the soul of a person. Restoration may be necessary in moments of crisis, but restoration without accountability can itself become capture.

At the heart of this book are not machines, but witnesses.

A woman who refuses to remain dead because a record says so.

A survivor who rejects the use of her own fear as infrastructure.

A former officer who learns that protection without consent may become another form of control.

A journalist who understands that questions, properly preserved, can outlive denials.

A compromised insider who does not ask to be redeemed, but chooses, at the end, to be named.

A young man who writes down names because without names families cannot search, courts cannot hear, and history cannot confess.

If there is one conviction beneath this novel, it is this: no system should be allowed to become so trusted that a living human being must plead before it for the right to exist.

Avinash Pushkarna



SELECTED READING AND REFERENCE NOTE

The Ghost Identities: Names Without Bodies is a work of fiction. It does not reproduce any real investigation, case, agency operation, company, institution, or individual. Its characters and events are imagined, though the fears that animate the story belong very much to the world around us.

In writing this novel, I was broadly influenced by public discussions, news reports, policy debates, and general reading on cybercrime, identity theft, online fraud, digital public infrastructure, artificial intelligence-enabled deception, trafficking into scam networks, financial crime, and the growing dependence of citizens on databases and authentication systems.

The following areas of reference helped shape the atmosphere and concerns of the novel:

1. Public reports and news coverage on cyber-enabled fraud, online scams, digital arrest scams, phishing, financial deception, identity theft, and transnational criminal networks.
2. Publicly available materials and advisories issued by organisations and agencies working in the areas of cybercrime, financial fraud, cybersecurity, digital payments, and online safety.
3. General reading on digital identity, biometric authentication, welfare delivery, public databases, and the

risks of exclusion when administrative systems misidentify or fail to recognise real persons.

4. Public discussions on artificial intelligence, voice cloning, synthetic media, deepfakes, automated decision-making, data misuse, and the ethical challenges posed by rapidly evolving technologies.
5. Reporting and commentary on trafficking, forced online criminality, scam compounds, and the human cost of organised digital fraud.
6. Legal and policy conversations around privacy, dignity, due process, consent, data protection, institutional accountability, and the right of an individual to be heard before being reduced to a record.
7. Literary influences from the tradition of political, espionage, legal, and moral thrillers, particularly works that explore secrecy, guilt, betrayal, institutional power, and the loneliness of those who stand between truth and authority.

This note is not intended to present an exhaustive bibliography. It is only a modest acknowledgement of the broad intellectual and public background against which the novel was imagined.

At its heart, *The Ghost Identities: Names Without Bodies* is not about technology alone. It is about the human being standing before a system and saying, “*I am here. Your record is wrong.*”

