

LOST IN TIME

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Chapter 1

It was raining again. The kind of drizzle that blurred the edges of the city and made everything outside somehow look softer, almost forgiving. But inside Aayush's cramped room, nothing was soft. The air hummed with electricity, wires tangled like veins across the table, machines breathing in uneven pulses. It was a chaotic mess.

Aayush's world had shrunk to this room – the flicker of monitors, the scent of solder, the rhythmic scratch of tools against metal. But he didn't care because here no one judges him for who he is. Here, in this little world of his own, logic made sense. The circuits obeyed him and the equations didn't argue.

But then came a soft knock disrupting the stillness of the room.

It was small, but it broke something in the air – a fragile quiet that only existed between him and his inventions.

Without bothering to turn his head, he snapped, "Mom, how many times have I told you not to disturb me. I get distracted."

Sanvi's voice came muffled through the door, warm and weary as if carrying the world on her shoulders.

"But darling, just listen to me..."

He clenched his jaw. *Not now.* Why can't his Mom understand? "No Mom, I'll have my dinner in a while. Please leave me alone now."

For a second, there was silence. Aayush almost thought his mother left and that made him almost regret the sharpness in his tone. Then her voice came again, softer this time. "Your dad is calling. He wants to talk to you."

The mention of his stoic father made him pause. His hands that were busy joining wires froze over the machine, the sound of the rain suddenly seeming louder.

"Why does he want to talk to me?" he asked, confusion flickering in his eyes.

There was no answer. Just the faint shuffle of her feet outside. Sometimes he feels bad for his mother. She is stuck between two obstinate men.

He sighed. The frustration and fatigue catching up to him. "I'm coming, Mom," he said finally, voice low.

"Okay, don't take long," she replied.

When the footsteps slowly faded, Aayush looked back at the half-built machine before him. Its blinking light seemed to mock him like a child waiting for attention he couldn't give. He brushed metal filings off his palms, took a deep breath, and walked out.

Downstairs, the house smelled of dal and old conversations. The dining table was laid out neatly, too neatly if you asked Aayush, like a stage before an argument. His parents sat waiting, pretending to eat, eyes heavy with unsaid things. He is well-attuned to these signs.

Aayush sighed as he made his way to his seat. It's going to be a long night.

"How are you, son?" his father asked finally, breaking the quietness enveloping the air. His voice was casual but clipped.

"I'm fine, Dad," Aayush replied, shoving a spoonful of rice in his mouth. His father always began softly like this, his tone measured, before landing the blow where it always hurt.

It didn't take long. Just as Aayush predicted.

"Aayush, why don't you join the office?" Aakash, his father, said, chewing slowly, each word heavy with disapproval. "Until when are you going to waste your time playing with those childish machines of yours?"

The words landed exactly where Aayush expected them to, the same spot that had formed a bruise over the years.

Before he could reply, Saanvi intervened sharply. Ah! His mother. Always the peace-maker.

"Aakash, I told you not to start this at the dining table!"

"Saanvi!" his father's voice rose. "What am I supposed to talk about then? Gossip about Mr.Gupta's runaway cousin sister?"

Aayush almost snorted at the absurdity of it – *almost*. But the tension swallowed it before it could take form.

He exhaled, leaning forward. “Papa, I need more time to think about the job. I’m working on something important right now.”

“Important?” Aakash scoffed, waving his spoon in the air like a battle sword. “Stop wasting your damn time, Aayush. You’re wasting your life like this and nothing else.”

That statement made something in Aayush snap. His voice trembled, not from fear but anger that had been simmering for way too long. “How can you say that? Do you really believe I am just wasting time?”

The air around the table thickened, you could almost slice through it.

Saanvi’s voice cracked through it, desperate and tired.

“What has happened to you both? Sworn enemies act better than you. At least they let each other have food in peace. But even that is a luxury in this house now it seems.”

Aayush looked at her. His mother, always caught in the crossfire, always stitching together what neither of them knew how to fix. “Maa, you think it’s my fault?” he asked, his tone softening, almost pleading.

She didn’t answer.

Sometimes when sleep alludes to him and he is lying in bed at night, he thinks of his mother. That woman who is always left mediating between his father and him. On one side is her husband and on the other, her son. Which side could she even take without hurting the other.

So, when he realised she wasn’t going to say anything, he stood up abruptly, chair screeching against the tile. “Okay,

good. Enjoy your meal,” he said, his voice cracking at the edges.

As he walked back upstairs, the weight of their silence followed him till he reached his room. The rain outside had turned heavier, pounding against the windows like an echo of everything left unsaid.

Behind him, his parents sat in the quiet aftermath. Saanvi’s eyes fixed on her plate, Aakash trying not to look guilty.

“It’s not my fault, Saanvi,” he said at last.

“I know,” she murmured, the words barely audible. She didn’t look at him. The sigh that left her lips was small and weary, the kind that belongs to people who’ve said the same things too many times.

Upstairs, Aayush’s machine whirred back to life — precise, predictable, unfeeling — the only thing in the house that didn’t misunderstand him.

Chapter 2

Morning crept into the house unsure of itself, brushing pale light against the windows as if afraid to disturb the people inside. In Aayush's room, though, morning hardly mattered. Nothing ever did really. The curtains swayed with the wind, the fan hummed tiredly overhead, and on the floor lay a mess of wires, metal scraps, and half-built machines, just small mechanical skeletons waiting for life.

Aayush was hunched over one such contraption, eyes narrowed in stubborn concentration. His hair was messy, the air around him filled with the faint smell of soldering iron and overheated circuits. But this chaos was his sanctuary. It is where he thrived, and he wouldn't trade it for anything.

His concentration was broken when he heard a knock. Sharp, loud, impatient. As if the person on the other side of the door couldn't bother to wait.

Without glancing up, he muttered, "Maa, I don't want breakfast..."

"Dude, it's me. Anaya!"

The tool slipped from his hand, equally surprised as its owner. That voice never failed to puncture the fog around him. It always made him wonder how this girl is always so cheery as if carrying a permanent rainbow over her head.

“Ohh... Anaya?” he said, disoriented. “Wait a minute...”

Suddenly aware of the disastrous state his room was in, he scrambled like a culprit trying to hide evidence. He randomly shoved his books aside, dumped the wires under the bed, and the half-built machine? He wrapped it in his blanket like a burrito. He was still kicking a screwdriver into a corner when she knocked again so close to breaking down the door if he took a second longer.

“Can you be a little faster?”

“Yeah yeah, just a minute...” he said, breathless.

When he finally opened the door, Anaya marched in without waiting like a gust of warm air in human form. Her hair smelled faintly of jasmine, and her presence, as always, made the room feel embarrassingly small.

She looked around once, eyebrows lifting.

“Hm... is this a bedroom or a DC Universe set? Jeez, dude!”

Aayush laughed despite himself. “Hahahaha...” She always made him feel better with her presence.

“And wassup?” she asked, dropping into his chair and spinning lightly without a care in the world as though she owned the place.

“Just...I’m okay. Nothing extraordinary if that’s what you’re fishing for,” he replied, rubbing his temples.

“Sit. Why are you standing over there?”, she said, patting the place beside her.

He sat on the edge of the table, trying not to knock over a pile of capacitors.

“How about you?”

“I’m good... in fact I’m *absolutely splendid*.” She grinned, eyes gleaming. Then she slapped her forehead.

“Oh shit! I forgot to say what I actually came here for!”

“What?”

“Actually... I got a job!” she announced, excitement bubbling in her voice.

For the first time that day, something inside him genuinely lit up.

“Ohh... congratulations,” he said, smiling wider than he expected.

“Yes! And I brought sweets. I already gave some to uncle and aunt before coming upstairs. Now it’s your turn.”

He sighed under his breath. “Great... now they have another reason to mock me.”

“Did you say something? What are you murmuring under your breath?” she asked sharply.

“Nothing...”

But his eyes betrayed him — a quiet frustration, a heaviness she knew too well but chose not to poke at.

Then came the heavy footsteps he knew all too well whom it belonged to. As if proving his point, his father’s voice carried from the corridor.

“Anaya, sweetheart... Come, let’s have breakfast. Your aunty is waiting.”

Anaya’s eyes widened. She looked at Aayush, her eyes screaming *Help me*.

But Aayush could only muster a helpless shrug.

She slipped instantly into sweet mode.

“No, uncle... I must go home. It’s really urgent. I’ll join you all next time.”

“Okay okay. I won’t force you.”

Aakash turned to his son. “Aayush, let’s go and have breakfast. I need to talk to you about something..”

Aayush stiffened. His jaw tightening. He knew what this *something* was.

“No dad. I’m not ready for another argument.”

“It’s not about your career,” his father said, sounding unusually calm. “We have news for you. Come downstairs.”

Anaya looked between them, sensing the tension thickening the air. She placed a hand gently on Aayush’s shoulder, her eyes soft and questioning.

But she didn’t ask. She never did. Always giving him the space to talk about whatever is bothering him without ever crossing the boundary or pressurizing him. She is always kind and sweet.

“Umm, uncle, I’ll take my leave now,” she said quietly.

“Sure, darling. Make sure to visit us whenever you get time.”

“Okay uncle... bye Aayush. See you later.”

“Bye,” he whispered.

When she left, the room dimmed again as though she had taken the last bit of brightness with her.

With nothing left to do, Aayush followed his father downstairs, bracing himself for an impact he knew was coming.

The dining table was strangely peaceful. Plates arranged neatly, no raised voices, no tension thick enough to chew through. Aayush sat slowly, suspicious of the calm.

His father cleared his throat dramatically, his signature pre-announcement ritual.

“Ahem... Indeed to go to Australia for a business trip,” he said casually. “I was thinking of taking your mother along with me this time. She could stay with Varsha there since they haven’t met in a long time.”

Aayush blinked. Of all possibilities, this wasn’t one he had imagined.

“Um... okay. She could use some break from managing the house 24X7,” he said, glancing at her.

Saanvi smiled softly, but worry tugged at her eyes.

“But how long are we staying there?” she asked.

“Yes... how long?” Aayush echoed.

His father took a deep breath.

“Since it’s company work, I think it’s going to take more than five months.”

Aayush stared at him.

Five. Months.

The spoon clattered from his hand. His mother gasped softly, her fingers trembling.

“Five months? That’s too long,” Aayush said.

“I know,” his father replied. “That’s why I’m asking — could you manage to live alone for five months without us?”

Before Aayush could speak, his mother burst out, “No, Aakash! I don’t want to go with you. I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“Mom...” Aayush exhaled, touched and embarrassed all at once. “I’m not a child anymore. You guys can go without worrying about me. I can manage everything on my own. After all, I’m a grown adult man.”

He chuckled, trying to ease her panic.

His father smiled faintly. “By the way... when are you guys leaving?”

“Tomorrow at 6 p.m.”

Aayush blinked. “OH! Are you done packing?”

“We haven’t even started packing yet,” his mother admitted. “Aayush, you will help us in packing.”

“Okay, Mom,” he said warmly. “No problem. I can do that for you.”

They all returned to their food and the quiet returned. Albeit a fragile peace, but still peace.

It settled around them like soft dust, a reminder that even broken families sometimes found moments of gentleness.

After dinner, the house transformed into a frenzy of bags, scattered clothes, and half-zipped suitcases. His mother kept fretting, his father kept checking documents, and Aayush found himself laughing quietly at their chaos.

Because for tonight, at least, they felt like a family.

Tomorrow, everything will change.

Chapter 3

By evening the house felt strangely alive as if a storm had passed through. Suitcases rolled across the floor, zippers opened and closed, clothes strewn everywhere. His mom kept shouting from one room to another, sometimes about missing chargers, other times about packing medicines just in case. And his dad? That man kept insisting everything was “sorted” even though nothing ever was. At least not when it involved him. Aayush just moved around the house like a human trolley stand, picking up whatever they pointed at. For the first time in years, all three of them were doing something together and ironically, it was preparation for them to leave him behind.

By 4:30 p.m., the taxi was waiting outside, the driver like classic drivers, kept honking in irritation as if he, too, had a flight to catch. Aayush dragged the last trolley out, lifting it into the boot, and shut it with a dull thud. He didn’t feel the gravity of the situation up until that point but after putting the last suitcase in the boot, it hit him—how real all of this was. His parents were actually leaving.

His father patted his shoulder, trying hard to look casual and failing miserably. Despite their bitter-sweet relationship, Aayush knew his father truly adored him. It's just that he has a hard time showing it.

"Bye, son. It's time for us to leave now. Don't work too hard and take care of yourself."

Aayush nodded his head, pretending he had mastered adulthood. "Yes, Dad. Don't worry. You guys enjoy the trip."

His mother, however, was a different case altogether. Saanvi adjusted her dupatta and looked at him the way she always did—like he was still five and trying to walk without holding her finger.

"Aayush, promise me you will look after yourself," she whispered.

"Promise, Mom. And tell Di I said hi."

She was about to climb into the taxi when something inside him tugged sharply. Something he couldn't put a name on. Panic? Love? Loneliness? He didn't understand it.

Desperate, he called out, "Mom... listen."

She turned immediately, as if she had been waiting for that one word. Aayush worried she had sprained her neck in the process.

He stepped forward and hugged her tightly. A childish, messy hug he didn't care to hide. For a second, he could feel her stiffen in surprise. Then her arms folded around him, warm and familiar. His mother's arms had some magic that immediately appeased his worries. Always.

“Mom,” he said quietly, “am I a good son?”

She pulled back just enough to look at him properly. “Aayush, you are the bestest son I could ever have. I wouldn’t want you any other way. Just don’t take your dad’s words to heart,” she added with a soft laugh.

This is what he loved about his mother, among the other thousand reasons he loved her for, she always knows what to say to calm his wandering thoughts.

He smiled, but the heaviness inside didn’t go away. “Promise me you’ll love me the most—no matter what.”

“Darling,” she whispered, touching his cheek, “I love you more than anything in this universe.”

At that exact moment his Dad yelled from inside the taxi, “We’re running late! Come fast, Saanvi!”

His mother pressed his hand, giving him a final smile, and got inside. The taxi door shut, and for a moment everything felt too quiet. As the vehicle began to move, he waved. She waved back until he became a blur in her vision. And when the taxi finally turned the corner, it felt like someone had pressed mute on the entire world.

His eyes stung before he could stop them. He wasn’t crying, he told himself. His contacts were probably just misbehaving. Except...he doesn't wear contacts.

Aayush stood there for a while, watching the empty road, listening to the kind of silence that settled inside you slowly.

When he finally walked back into the house, it felt different. The house felt bigger. Colder somehow. Like all the warmth

had packed itself into their suitcases and flown away with them.

Maybe that's why, from that night onward, he threw himself into work. It was easier to lose himself in wires, circuits, gadgets—things that never asked how he felt and wouldn't leave him for five months. He locked his room from the inside and worked like someone was chasing him. Morning turned into afternoon, afternoon into night, and Aayush barely noticed. Days slid into weeks, but he kept going, convincing himself that he was being productive, that this obsession was necessary. Maybe it was. Or maybe he was just avoiding the emptiness the house had slipped into.

Some nights, he would catch himself staring at the door, almost expecting his mother to knock and ask if he'd eaten. But of course, the door stayed quiet. And he went back to pretending the silence didn't bother him.

What he didn't admit—not even to himself—was that he was terrified of being alone with his own thoughts. Work was the only thing he knew was loud enough to drown them out.

Three months passed in a blur of wires, circuits, half-built prototypes, and nights where the only light in the house came from his workstation. With every day that his mom and dad were away, the silence inside the house grew heavier, almost physical like an invisible fog that followed him from room to room.

So Aayush did what he always does when things get too loud inside his head: He worked. He worked till the line between

day and night blurred. Till even the walls of his room began to feel like part of some machine he was building.

Because stopping meant thinking. And thinking meant hurting.

And Aayush wasn't ready for that yet.

Little did he know, the real storm—the one that wouldn't let him hide—was waiting just outside his locked door.

Chapter 4

Three whole months had passed since Aayush's parents left, but the house still felt like it was holding its breath, waiting for them to return any moment. Their voices lingered in corners. He can almost bet that he could hear his mom shouting from the kitchen telling him to at least eat before going back to whatever he was doing. Their expectations sat heavy on the walls. And inside his room, hidden from everyone else, stood the one thing that had kept Aayush sane and alive during those months—the machine.

It was well past midnight and like always the thoughts inside his head were louder than ever. The city outside slept peacefully, unaware that somewhere time itself was being challenged inside a small house. Aayush stared at the glowing indicators, each light a reminder of the five gruesome years of his life and what he had given up to be here today—friends, jobs, explanations, approval. He wondered, briefly, if he had made a mistake. If all of this was worth it. But doubt had a habit of never staying long. It never could. Not after everything he has endured.

He wanted to share this achievement, if he can even call it that, with someone. He knew who he wanted to share it with first. His hands hesitated over Anaya's name. Calling her at this hour felt wrong, but not calling her felt worse. So, he picked up his phone and called Anaya.

The call went unanswered the first time. Given the time, she must have been sleeping. But Aayush wasn't one to give up and bubbling with excitement, he dialled the number again. This time she answered after the third ring. "Aayush?" Her voice sounded groggy with sleep, but it also carried concern. She always knew when something wasn't right, Aayush thought with a shake of his head.

"I need you to come tomorrow morning," he said. "It's urgent."

There was silence on the other end for some time. He imagined her sitting up, rubbing her eyes, preparing herself for whatever madness he was about to drop into her life. Again. Anaya was used to his chaotic shenanigans by now; it wasn't anything new.

"Okay," she said finally. No questions asked. "I'll come."

That night, sleep didn't visit him at all. He lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering if all of this was bravery or sheer stupidity. Maybe the line between the two was thinner than we liked to admit.

The next morning, when Anaya knocked on the door, Aayush opened it quickly, as if he was waiting by the door from the moment he called her in the middle of the night, as if delaying even a second might change his mind. She stepped inside, her

eyes immediately searching his face, trying to read what he wasn't saying.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said, pointing to the couch in the living room. "I'll be back in two minutes."

"But what is all the fuss about?" she asked curiously. "Did you get a job or what?"

For a moment, he almost laughed. If only life were that simple. "Fortunately, no," he replied. "Just wait a bit more."

She sighed and dropped onto the couch, annoyed, but the worry lingered at the back of her mind. Aayush went into his room and dragged the machine out with effort. It scraped against the floor, heavy not just in weight, but in meaning. When she saw it, she stood up instantly.

Her mouth fell open.

"What is that?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"It's a time machine," he stated. There was a hint of pride in his voice. And saying it out loud still felt unreal, even to him. "It can take someone to the past or the future."

She stared at the machine, then at him, as if hoping he would suddenly laugh and tell her it was a stupid joke. "Are you serious?"

"It's real," he said, smiling—not because it was funny, but because for the first time, someone else was standing this close to his truth. The look on Anaya's face made him nervous.

Her expression hardened. "So this is what you were doing all these years? That's why you never applied for a job?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "Maybe."

She shook her head, running a hand through her hair as if Aayush just decreased twenty years from her lifespan. She was done with his antics but she didn't voice out her frustrations because looking at her friend, he clearly was excited about whatever madness he has invented.

So, keeping her doubts and worries suppressed, she asked "It's great, dude... but what are you planning to do with it?"

"I'm going back," he said. "To Vanshika Sharma's time." He said it so easily like he was talking about the weather.

Her eyes widened. "The revolutionary?"

"Yes. Who else?"

Anaya was baffled. "And?"

"I'll save her," he said simply. The words flowed easily, as if they had been waiting years to be spoken.

She let out a nervous laugh. "You're joking, right? Why the past? There's nothing there."

He looked at her, feeling something tighten inside my chest. "Anaya," he said softly, "everything is there."

Her tone changed instantly. Clearly Aayush wasn't thinking. "Do you even know how she died? You could be killed, you fool. Have you thought about your parents even once?"

The mention of his parents hurt more than he expected. "I didn't call you here for a lecture."

"I'm not lecturing," she said. "I'm telling you the consequences. Be practical, Aayush."

“I am being practical,” I replied, even though he wasn’t completely sure.

She folded her arms. “Ranjan Singh was powerful. This isn’t a movie where you go back, kill him, and everyone claps.”

“That’s not my plan,” Aayush defended.

“Then what is?”

“I’ll go to the island where they kept her,” he said. “I’ll try to bring her back peacefully.”

She laughed, sharp and disbelieving. “And you think they would let you go with Vanshika? So, according to your great plan, they would also be throwing flowers on your way out, right?”

“Stop being negative,” he snapped. “Those people were intellectuals. They’ll understand.”

She looked at him, tired and frustrated. She didn’t know if he was purposefully being naive or actually was. “You’re risking your life for someone who doesn’t even know you.”

That sentence stayed with him longer than he admitted. “Enough,” he said. “Just listen to me.”

She rolled her eyes but stayed quiet.

“In two months, my parents will return,” he said slowly. “If I don’t come back by then, tell them I went to another state for a job.”

Her face softened. “How long will you stay there?”

“There’s no guarantee,” he replied with a faint smile. “Time doesn’t follow rules.”

She exhaled. "If you have already made up your mind that you're going... then go. But please come back safely. And try to come back soon."

"I will," he said. "I promise."

"When are you planning to leave?" Anaya asked half-heartedly. She still did not seem convinced.

"Now."

Her eyes widened comically. "Now? As in right now? What the hell!"

"The machine's ready. See these watches? They control time. One is for me. One is for Vanshika."

"How far back are you going?"

"Seven hundred years."

She shook her head, disbelief written across her face. "That's too much. Too risky. And you would have to be insane if you think otherwise"

"Okay," he said gently. "Enough with your worries."

He hugged her before fear could find more words. She held on longer than usual, tighter, as if her arms could stop time from taking me away.

"I'll wait for you," she whispered.

"I know," he said, and for the first time, he wasn't sure if he was saying it for her sake or for his own.

Aayush stepped back, pressed the button on his watch—and vanished. Just like that.

The space in front of Anaya remained empty.

One second Aayush was there—standing, breathing, smiling with that irritating confidence of his—and the next second he was gone, like he had never existed at all. No weird mechanical sound. No dramatic flash. Just absence.

Anaya stood frozen, her heart racing, her mind refusing to accept what her eyes were seeing. She took a step forward instinctively, as if she could still catch him, as if time might suddenly decide to be kind. As if she was dreaming and everything will go back to as it was when she wakes up.

“Aayush...” she whispered, unsure who she was calling out to anymore.

The room felt different now. Too quiet. Too real.

She looked at that wretched machine again—four feet tall, solid, and unapologetically present. This wasn’t some sick joke. This wasn’t one of Aayush’s wild ideas that would collapse after a few arguments and sleepless nights. He had actually done it this time. And worse, he had actually left.

Her thoughts spiralled. *What if he doesn’t come back?*

What if time didn’t care about promises?

What if history didn’t allow heroes?

And what if all of this was a grave mistake?

She thought of his parents, the way his mother had hugged him, the way his father pretended not to worry. She imagined herself standing in front of them, forcing a smile, lying about job interviews and other states, while knowing their son was lost somewhere seven hundred years in the past.

Why didn't I stop him? she asked herself.

Or maybe the real question was—*could I have?*

Anaya sank onto the couch slowly, her hands trembling. For the first time, she felt the weight of what she had agreed to. Waiting suddenly didn't feel passive anymore. It felt like a huge burden masked as responsibility. It felt like fear.

She looked at the empty room once more, hoping, stupidly, that he would reappear, laugh, and say it was all a test. But the silence didn't break.

Time moved on. And this time, it had taken Aayush with it.

Anaya sat there, alone with the machine, with his secret, and with the terrifying thought that the next time she saw him—if *she ever did*—neither of them might be the same again.

Chapter 5

The ground beneath Aayush's feet felt colder than he had imagined. It was not merely cold, but also quite unwelcoming, as if it carried the memory of everyone who had been forced to stand there before him. This wasn't what he expected his surroundings to be like. And for a brief, unsettling moment, he held his breath and wondered whether the machine had truly worked or whether it had abandoned him somewhere between centuries.

The night air wrapped around him like a wet blanket, heavy and damp, carrying the raw scent of soil and salt. This was not the smell of modern cities or filtered air. This was land untouched by mercy, a time where survival mattered more than comfort, and power? It mattered more than the truth.

His eyes instinctively dropped to the watch on his wrist. The glow was faint, almost hesitant.

1319.

Seven hundred years back in time.

The number did nothing to excite him. It weighed him down. It was a cruel and terrifying reminder that there was no way back unless time allowed it. History had already been written here, and he had stepped directly into its margins.

Slowly, with care that borderline looked like reverence, he removed both watches, his only identity, and placed them aside. Kneeling, he started to dig into the soil with his hands. The earth resisted him, rough and unforgiving. When he finally buried the watches and pressed the ground back into place, he paused, his palms lingered there for a moment longer than necessary.

This is the last proof of who I am, he thought.

From this moment on, I belong to their time.

When he stood and looked around himself, taking in his surroundings, he found himself on an island. The only thing visible was a massive warehouse that loomed in the distance, dark and imposing. A small house stood beside it, silent. And near the gate, under flickering torchlight, stood a lone gatekeeper. His posture was rigid, watchful, and accustomed to suspicion.

Aayush understood then that this place was not meant to welcome anyone. It existed to hold people, to break them quietly, far from the eyes of the world without any suspicion. His instincts screamed caution, but hesitation was a luxury he no longer had. If Vanshika was imprisoned here, this place was not just a location—it was a threshold.

So, gathering some courage, he stepped forward anyway.

“Hey, don’t move. Stay right there.”

The heavy voice cut through the night with practiced authority.

Aayush froze. The gatekeeper slowly approached, eyes sharp, scanning him like a threat that needed to be classified. The man had the look of someone who didn't ask questions to understand—only to accuse.

“Who are you? And how did you come here?”

Aayush swallowed. His mind stripped away any language he knew, habits, and confidence he had. His mind raced, filtering words, stripping sentences of anything modern, anything wrong. *Don't sound clever. Don't sound educated. Don't sound like you don't belong here, his brain supplied.*

“Umm... a few masked men dropped me here and fled,” he said.

The gatekeeper laughed, mocking. “Ah, got it. You too must have written something against the government,” he said. “That's why they dropped you here.”

Aayush nodded his head slowly. The lie settled into him like a necessary wound. *If only you knew, he thought, how far I've come just to speak this sentence.*

“I seriously don't understand. Do you people not love your family or what?” the man continued. “Now you have to live here in this darkness for the rest of your life.”

Fear rose within Aayush but it did not own him. Beneath it was resolve, quiet and dangerous.

“Well, what can I say, I love my nation more,” Aayush said. “Can't leave it in the hands of some two-faced bastard.”

The punch landed before the sentence fully settled into the air. Swiftly, without warning, without argument. Aayush didn't see it coming.

Pain erupted across his face, immediate and humiliating. His body staggered, dragged brutally into the truth of this century where power spoke louder than belief. He could feel the blood filling in his mouth, warm and very much real, erasing any remaining illusion that this was an experiment.

The gatekeeper cursed and called out to someone.

Soon, another guard arrived. Someone called Ravi whose expression was heavy with boredom rather than concern. "Who is this?"

"New scapegoat," the gatekeeper said. "And speaks too much for his own good."

Ravi looked at Aayush like one might look at damaged property. "Throw him inside with the others."

"Let's introduce him to the Master first," the gatekeeper offered.

"Not now," Ravi snapped. "We will inform him in the morning. Keep him with the other captives for now."

Aayush stayed quiet. He didn't utter a single word as they led him away.

He had crossed seven centuries to save a woman history had already buried. He can't mess up. But one thing Aayush realised in his very first hour here was that the past—it would not be saved so easily.

After the guards threw him into one of the rooms, Aayush lay still on the cold floor, staring into the darkness above him. The warehouse breathed around him—soft groans, uneven breaths, bodies shifting in uneasy sleep. This was not how he had imagined arriving in the past. There were no heroic entrances, no dramatic confrontations. Just pain in his jaw, dust on his clothes, and fear sitting quietly in his chest. Only one thing revolving in his mind now —

What if I've made a mistake?

The thought came uninvited and refused to leave. For the first time since pressing the button, doubt crept in. Not about the machine, no, but about himself. He had crossed seven centuries chasing an idea, a name, a story he had read and reread until it felt personal. But those history books never talked about the loneliness of being trapped in time, or the terror of not knowing if you would survive till morning.

He closed his eyes and thought of home. Of his mother's voice. Of Anaya standing frozen in his room, watching him disappear. A part of him wondered if this was how people felt when they realised they had gone too far to turn back.

If I fail, he thought, no one will ever know why I came here.

Somewhere in the warehouse, someone coughed. Aayush turned onto his side, curling slightly, as if trying to protect something fragile inside him—hope, perhaps, or courage.

Vanshika, he reminded himself. You're here because of her.

That thought steadied him. Whatever happened next, this night was only the beginning. Tomorrow would bring answers or consequences. Who knows?

And as sleep finally crept in, slow and uneasy, Aayush didn't know whether he was afraid of what he would find in the morning or of what the past might demand from him.

Chapter 6

Aayush woke up to a strange stillness.

For a few seconds, his mind refused to cooperate. His body felt heavy, unfamiliar, as if it had been borrowed and used badly overnight. The air around him was stale, thick with the smell of sweat, damp cloth, and something metallic he couldn't place. The first thing he felt was stiffness—his back aching from the hard floor, his jaw sore where the punch had landed the previous night. For a few moments, his mind floated somewhere between centuries, unsure of where it belonged. When he finally opened his eyes, the ceiling above him was low and dark, nothing like the clean, controlled space he remembered falling asleep in.

Jail, his mind concluded instinctively.

He sat up slowly, afraid that sudden movement might invite pain. That was when he saw them.

Men. Too many men. Lying on either side of him in long rows, stretched across the floor on thin bedding. Every single one of them wore the same black-and-white striped clothes, the fabric hanging loosely from their tired bodies. The

sameness was unsettling—like individuality had been erased deliberately. Most of the men were fully bearded, the kind of beard that didn't come from style but from neglect. Months without a blade. Months without choice.

Aayush's hand instinctively went to his own face.

Smooth.

No beard.

He looked down at himself again. Different clothes. Different posture. Different eyes. Among all of them, *he* was the anomaly. The real prisoner here was not the one in chains, but the one who didn't belong.

A tight knot formed in his chest.

So this is it, he thought. This is where I've landed.

He sat up, pulling his knees closer, suddenly conscious of how exposed he was. Seven hundred years ago, individuality was a risk. Standing out was dangerous. And he was standing out badly. He was still absorbing the reality when a shadow fell over him. A man stood beside his bed—long beard, half-bald head, his age hard to guess because time had carved itself unevenly across his face. His movements were slow but practiced, like someone who had learned how to survive by conserving energy. He looked at Aayush with the casual familiarity of someone who had seen many new faces arrive and disappear.

"Get up," the man said, voice flat. "It's time for breakfast."

Breakfast.

The word felt oddly misplaced in a place like this.

Before Aayush could respond, the man added, almost mechanically, “You can find the plates and all under the bed. Everyone uses those.”

Aayush bent down and pulled out the bowl. It was old, dented, its surface scratched beyond repair. Clearly not his. Clearly everyone’s; passed from one prisoner to another over countless mornings. As he held it, a sharp wave of discomfort passed through him—not just physical, but something deeper. A quiet humiliation.

Till yesterday, I was doing whatever and whenever I wanted, he thought. And today...

He stood up with the bowl in his hand, suddenly very aware of how fragile his sense of control had become.

The moment he stepped outside, the morning light hit his face harshly. It wasn’t gentle. It didn’t welcome him. It exposed him. The sun looked the same but it felt different here. Harsh. Unforgiving.

Aayush walked forward with the bowl clutched in both hands, feeling strangely naked despite being fully clothed. The open ground stretched ahead of him, and men moved in quiet, disciplined lines. No one spoke unless necessary. No one looked around unless required.

He joined the queue feeling like an intruder in their suffering, someone who had chosen this pain rather than being born into it.

Standing there, bowl in hand, waiting for food like this, something inside him twisted painfully. He had chosen this

journey, yes—but standing here now, he couldn't escape the feeling.

I look like a beggar, he thought. *Standing in line just for some food.*

Before the thought could settle, heavy footsteps approached. A uniform entered his line of vision. The authority here, Aayush realised, didn't need to announce itself—it arrived already obeyed.

The senior guard stopped in front of him.

“Do you think this is a park?” the guard snapped, his voice sharp with irritation. The uniform itself seemed to give him permission to humiliate.

Aayush lifted his eyes slowly. His heartbeat thudded loud in his ears, but his voice came out controlled.

“No,” he said. “I have come to get breakfast.”

For a brief second, silence.

The laughter that followed wasn't loud, but it was enough. The other prisoners laughed not because it was funny, but because someone else was being targeted for a change. There was relief in their laugh, Aayush thought bitterly.

The guard's jaw tightened. His hand lifted.

In that suspended moment, Aayush didn't think about the slap. He thought about how easily this could end. How fragile everything was. How one wrong reaction could destroy everything he had come here for.

Then, another hand entered his line of sight.

Firm. Steady.

It stopped the slap mid-air.

“You don’t have the right to slap anyone.”

The voice wasn’t loud. It didn’t need to be.

Aayush turned instinctively.

And that was the first time he saw Vanshika.

Not the revolutionary frozen in textbooks. Not the martyr reduced to a paragraph. She stood there alive, breathing, her eyes steady, her posture dignified even in captivity. There was nothing dramatic about her presence—no grand gestures—but the authority she carried was undeniable. Not rebellion for the sake of rebellion, but conviction rooted deep enough to look authority in the eye without flinching.

Something inside Aayush collapsed quietly.

This is her, his mind whispered. *This is the woman history couldn’t protect.*

Something inside Aayush shifted violently.

The noise around him faded. The guards, the prisoners, the warehouse—all of it blurred.

Vanshika...

He felt an emotion he couldn’t immediately name—relief, perhaps. Or recognition. As if some long-lost part of him had finally come into view. He had read about her courage, her ideas, her resistance. But no book had prepared him for this—how human she felt, how real. But standing here, seeing her like this, none of that mattered.

He swallowed.

A human being is but another name for unfulfilled desires, he thought inwardly. And I know this—no one ever feels truly whole. Yet standing there, watching her, I felt an unfamiliar stillness. Not happiness. Not love. But rather something deeper. A sense of alignment. Like everything I had built, risked, and abandoned had led me here—not to change history, but to understand it.

His chest felt painfully full.

The guard's furious voice snapped him back into the present.

"Now you will teach me about rights?" he barked.

"If needed," Vanshika replied evenly, "yes, I will."

Before the tension could explode further, another woman stepped in—Bhavna Sinha. She gently took Vanshika by the arm, pulling her aside, already apologising with practiced urgency. She knew where resistance was possible and where it was not. Strategy, Aayush realised, was also a form of resistance.

The guard sneered. "Put it inside her head," he warned. "Otherwise the consequences won't be very nice."

"Yes sir," Bhavna said quickly. "I'll explain it to her."

The guard turned away, his attention shifting back to procedure.

"Ravi," he ordered, "give this new guy the clothes."

"Yes sir," the junior guard replied.

He then led Aayush towards the storeroom.

The storeroom smelled of old cloth and dust. The guard handed Aayush a folded uniform—black and white stripes, identical to the others.

“Change into these.”

Aayush hesitated. “Here? In front of you?” he asked, genuinely confused.

The guard scoffed. “Are you mad? There is the bathroom. Go and change there.”

“Oh... okay.”

Aayush stepped into the washroom. The mirror reflected someone he barely recognised. When he changed and stepped out two minutes later, the transformation felt complete.

The clothes didn’t just change how he looked.

They changed where he stood. The clothes erased something—not his identity, but the illusion that he was in control.

“How do I look?” Aayush asked lightly, forcing humour into his voice.

The guard smirked. “Very nice. Now you look like an actual prisoner.”

Aayush nodded quietly.

“Yes,” he murmured. “I guess I do.”

“Now, let’s go.”

As they stepped out together, the ground was alive with routine.

Some prisoners sat eating silently. Others worked in the fields, their bodies bent, movements repetitive, almost mechanical. *Life here flowed forward not with hope*, Aayush thought bitterly, *but with habit*.

Aayush scanned the area instinctively.

Looking for *her*.

He didn't see Vanshika at first. And a strange disappointment settled in his chest. So, he went to find his bowl instead, filled it, and sat on a bench. Bread. And boiled potatoes. He ate slowly, barely tasting anything.

Then—he saw her.

Vanshika stood among the sunflowers, working quietly. Yellow petals surrounded her, bright and stubborn against the dullness of the place. The contrast struck him deeply.

Aayush watched, unable to look away.

History remembers how she died, he thought. *But not how she lived*.

He finished his breakfast as quickly as possible, almost choking but he didn't care. His focus solely on Vanshika.

Whatever fear he carried, whatever doubts haunted him, one truth settled firmly inside him as he walked towards Vanshika—

He hadn't come here to fight the past. He had come here to walk through it.

And towards everything that would follow. He was finally ready to speak to her.

Chapter 7

The garden was quieter than the rest of the camp, as if even suffering knew when to lower its voice. The noise of commands, metal bowls scraping against stone, and tired feet dragging themselves through routine all dissolved here into something gentler. The air smelled of soil and crushed leaves, warm under the afternoon sun, and rows of sunflowers stood unevenly, their bright faces turned stubbornly toward the sky. They looked almost defiant, as if they had decided long ago that light was their right, no matter where they were planted.

Aayush stood at a distance, watching her.

Vanshika moved calmly among the flowers, her hands working the soil with quiet precision. There was no drama in her movements, no visible anger or fear. She looked... steady. Grounded. It unsettled him more than chains or wounds would have. He had imagined a woman broken by exile, weighed down by captivity, but what stood before him was someone who still belonged to herself.

His chest tightened.

This was her. Not a story he has read. Not a paragraph in a history book. Not a martyr frozen in time. She breathed, she worked, she existed—right here, in front of him.

And what am I doing? he asked himself.

Did I just come to meet her...or change everything?

His feet felt heavy, as though the soil itself was testing his resolve. Every step toward her felt like a step deeper into responsibility. He knew too much. He knew how this story ended, and that knowledge pressed against his ribs like a secret that refused to stay quiet.

One wrong word... one wrong gesture...

and perhaps history itself might slip out of place.

He took a breath and stepped closer, close enough for her to sense him before she turned. The moment stretched, fragile and uncertain, before he spoke.

“Vanshika.”

She looked up, surprise flickering briefly across her face before curiosity replaced it. Her eyes held an alertness that made him instantly aware of how exposed he felt.

“Yes?” she said, then studied him more closely. “Oh...it’s you. You are new here, right?”

“Yeah,” he replied, nodding.

There was a pause, the kind that carries more weight than words.

“How do you know my name?” she asked.

The question landed heavily in his chest. He felt the urge to look away, to escape into silence, because how did one explain

centuries of distance in a sentence? How did one admit that her name had travelled through time long before he had?

He smiled instead, a hesitant, almost boyish smile that tried to hide the chaos inside him.

“Everywhere I look... it’s only you,” he said.

She frowned slightly, tilting her head. “Huh?”

“I mean outside,” he explained slowly, choosing each word as if it could cut him if mishandled, “People are searching for you. And no one even knows... that you’re here.”

Something softened in her expression, but it wasn’t relief. It was regret.

“Oh,” she said quietly. “Yes. But I’m sorry.” Her gaze dropped to the soil beneath her hands. “I couldn’t even expose him properly.”

Aayush felt an unexpected ache rise in him. The instinct to reassure her came naturally, urgently.

“No,” he said at once. “What you did... was more than enough. It was enough to make them afraid.” His voice steadied as conviction took over. “That’s exactly why they sent you here.”

She looked at him again, more intently this time, as if trying to place him somewhere she couldn’t quite reach.

“You know,” she said, lowering her voice, “Ranjan Singh’s party is corrupt to the core. They never should have been allowed to contest the election in the first place.”

“Yeah,” Aayush agreed. “You’re right.”

Inside him, something twisted painfully.

And yet you will lose, his mind whispered.

And yet history will remember their name... not yours.

She held his gaze for a moment longer before asking, gently but directly, “What did you ever do to them, that they sent you here?”

The question lingered between them, raw and unanswered.

Aayush felt the weight of it settle on his shoulders. He wanted to tell her everything—to confess that he had crossed centuries for her, that he knew her fate, that her courage would one day be reduced to a footnote. His lips curved into a smile, but it was strained, layered with restraint.

If I tell the truth, he thought, *I won't just put my own life at risk... I might endanger the entire story.*

He was about to speak when the moment shattered.

“Let’s go.”

The sharp command came from behind him.

“The senior officer has called for you.”

Aayush turned, startled. “Bu why?” he asked, confusion breaking through.

“I don’t know,” the guard replied flatly. “Go and see for yourself.”

Aayush hesitated, then turned back to Vanshika. “I’ll be back in a while,” he said.

She nodded once, simply. “Okay.”

As he walked away, he felt her gaze follow him. There was something unspoken there, something unfinished, and it stayed with him long after he left the garden behind.

The office felt different the moment he stepped inside, as though history itself had taken a physical form. His eyes were immediately drawn to the flag on the wall—older, simpler, yet heavy with meaning. His chest tightened with a sudden, unexpected pride.

Then he saw the map.

Undivided India.

It stretched across the wall in quiet authority, borders intact, untouched by the fractures he knew were inevitable. His feet carried him closer without conscious thought, his eyes tracing lines that would one day disappear.

All of this is still connected, he thought.

And I know how it ends.

In his time, this map existed only in textbooks and debates. Here, it was present, breathing, unquestioned. The realization hit him hard—he wasn't just standing in the past. He was standing inside a moment that would be mourned centuries later.

And if I change something... he questioned in his mind,
Will I be able to save anything? Or will I only break even more?

The senior guard entered, pulling him back into the room.

“So,” he said casually. “What’s your name?”

“Aayush.”

“Tell me your full name.”

“Aayush Patel.”

The man nodded, murmured something to a junior guard, and left without another glance.

As the junior guard began writing, Aayush noticed the details he had missed earlier—the feather quill dipped into ink, the rough paper, the old rifles leaning against the wall. Things he had only ever seen behind museum glass now surrounded him casually.

I am the future here, he realised. And the future has no right to be here.

Questions followed—about his past, his people, his reasons. He answered calmly, lying to everything except his name. Each false word felt heavier than the last.

Telling the truth would be the easiest thing, he thought, if only its burden weren't so dangerous.

When the writing ended, the guard looked up. “Go.”

Aayush stepped out of the office, the weight of what he had seen pressing down on him. Somewhere outside, Vanshika waited—unaware that her life, her choices, and her courage were already tangled with a man who knew how her story was supposed to end.

And Aayush, walking back toward her, wondered for the first time whether saving her would mean betraying history or whether history itself was asking to be challenged.

Chapter 8

The corridor outside the office felt strangely hollow as Aayush stepped into the noon light. The sun hung overhead, sharp and unforgiving, yet the ground was empty in a way that unsettled him more than noise ever could. The fields that had earlier been alive with movement now lay abandoned, tools resting where hands had left them, as if time itself had paused for a breath. For a fleeting second, a cold thought crossed his mind—that something terrible had happened while he was inside—but he pushed it aside and stopped a passing guard.

“Where did everyone go?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“They went for some rest at the warehouse,” the guard replied without looking at him.

“Oh,” Aayush murmured, though the answer did little to ease the unease in his chest.

He walked back toward the warehouse slowly, his mind still tangled in the images he had just left behind—the map, the flag, the quiet authority of a past that didn’t know it was already fragile. As he stepped inside, the air changed. It smelled of sweat, straw, and exhaustion. Most of the prisoners

lay stretched out on their beds, bodies surrendered to brief moments of rest. And then he saw her.

Vanshika sat at the round table with a small group, her posture relaxed yet alert, as if rest for her was merely a pause between battles. Laughter floated softly around her, subdued but real, and Aayush felt something loosen inside him. This—this ordinary moment—felt almost dangerous. It made her human in a way history never had.

He hesitated, watching from a distance. *By what right am I sitting here?* he asked himself. *Did I come here to become part of this... or to break it apart?*

Yet something pulled him forward. Maybe it was the need to belong, even if it was brief. Maybe it was the selfish desire to hear her laugh again.

He gathered his courage and walked toward them.

“Hey... hi everyone,” he said, his voice slightly louder than he intended.

A chorus of greetings followed, warm and unguarded.

“Vanshika,” he added, turning to her, “about the morning incident... Thank you so much.”

She waved it off lightly. “It’s okay. You don’t need to thank me for that”

She gestured for him to sit, and as he joined them on the bench, introductions followed naturally, hands shaking, names exchanged. Bhavna’s smile was quick and curious, Nitin’s handshake firm and familiar in a strange way, Ishan quieter but attentive. When Vanshika said her own name,

looking straight at Aayush, something stirred again in his chest, an echo of the moment in the garden.

As the conversation settled, Ishan leaned forward. "So, what's the situation outside right now?"

Aayush paused. He realised then how dangerous knowledge could be. He knew too much and yet too little of this exact moment. Choosing the safest truth he could manage, he shrugged slightly. "Not very good... but it's manageable."

They nodded, as if that answer matched their own fears.

"How long have you been here?" Aayush asked.

"It's been three months," Nitin replied, and the weight of that time settled heavily between them.

Bhavna studied Aayush for a moment. "By the way, why are you here? What did you ever do to Ranjan Singh?"

The question returned, sharper this time. Aayush thought quickly, measuring every word. "I'm... a writer. I wrote about his dark deeds on the internet."

"On... internet?" someone asked, puzzled.

The word slipped out before he could stop it, and the room seemed to tilt. *Fool*, he scolded himself. He recovered quickly, explaining it away as a kind of newspaper, newly launched, inaccessible to those kept here. The explanation was accepted with nods, though doubt lingered faintly in the air.

"Most of the people kept here are journalists and new leaders." Vanshika said then, her voice calm but edged with anger. "Outside, there's hardly anyone left who dares to speak. People have fallen for his manipulation."

Bhavna sighed, agreement heavy in her silence.

Before Aayush could respond, a guard entered and ordered them all outside. The mood shifted instantly. The laughter died and everyone kind of stiffened.

They were asked to assemble on the ground under the open sky, the guards lined up like reminders of consequence. Aayush stood beside Vanshika in the queue, his voice low. “What do you think... they won’t gather us all here just to kill us, will they?”

She glanced at him and smiled, just slightly. “Shut up. Nothing like that will happen.”

Her calm embarrassed him, and steadied him both at once.

The senior guard stepped forward and began to speak, his words wrapped in false courtesy and thinly veiled threats. As he talked of peace and safety, of guests and duty, Aayush felt his stomach twist. The warning slipped through the speech like poison—three deaths already, and the promise of more if obedience faltered.

This isn’t just a mere threat, Aayush realised. It’s the system.

When it ended, fear clung to everyone like a second skin. Work resumed as ordered, some to cleaning, most to the fields. Vanshika and her group walked together, talking as they worked, using words like weapons softened by humour.

“Did you see the way he was talking about peace and harmony?” Vanshika scoffed, and laughter followed, brief but defiant.

Aayush listened, contributed where he could, careful again with truth. As hours passed and the sun dipped lower, he found himself watching Vanshika not as a symbol or a mission, but as a person—arguing, laughing, working, hoping.

And if I try to change all this, he thought, will I steal the right to these moments?

When the call for dinner finally echoed across the fields, Aayush felt the weight of the day sink quietly into him. It wasn't exhaustion alone—it was something deeper, heavier. The island no longer felt like a stop in a mission or a chapter borrowed from history books. It had faces now. Voices. Laughter that survived fear. And her presence, steady and unassuming, had begun to blur the line between purpose and attachment.

For the first time since he had arrived, the thought unsettled him: this wasn't just the past anymore. It was a living, breathing world, and he was standing right in the middle of it.

As he walked back with the others, one question kept returning, softer but more insistent each time. He didn't yet know the answer but he knew it would define everything that came next. Was he here to change fate... or to understand why some destinies, no matter how cruel, were written to remain untouched?

Chapter 9

Aayush didn't even realise when the entire day passed, giving way to night. It crept in slowly, settling into the cracks of their tired bodies and worn routines. The open space around him was dimly lit, shadows stretching long across the uneven earth. People ate wherever they found space—on benches, on the ground that still held the day's warmth. He could smell boiled potatoes and dust in the air, a smell that had begun to define time here more accurately than any clock.

Aayush sat with his plate balanced on his knees, beside Vanshika. He was hungry, but it wasn't sharp anymore. Over the course of the evening, it had dulled into something quieter. He tore a piece of flat bread reluctantly and stared at it for a moment longer than necessary, as if hoping it might change into something else if he waited long enough.

"How long are we going to eat the same old boiled potatoes and flat breads?" he asked finally, his voice light but carrying an undercurrent he couldn't hide.

Around them, a few heads turned towards him. Some people exchanged knowing looks while others simply sighed as if they

already resigned to their fates. Tired faces pulled into familiar expressions because this question, too, has become a part of their routine.

“As long as you stay here,” Vanshika said, her tone steady. “Make this a habit.”

Aayush looked at her then, really looked. There was no frustration in her eyes, no bitterness in her voice. Just clear acceptance but not the kind that would show she has given up. No, it was the acceptance of someone who had learned where to spend her energy and where not to waste it. *How can she say this so easily?* he wondered. *Or is it just a facade she has put up for others?*

“Yeah,” Ishan added from nearby, pushing food around his plate more than eating it, “and you only get food two times a day here. Morning and night.”

“You get used to this too,” Nitin said with a barely there smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Aayush let out a soft laugh at that and nodded. “Okay,” he said, though the word felt heavier than it should have. He told himself this was temporary, that he was only passing through this reality. And yet, sitting here, listening to people talk about survival like it was a skill one mastered over time, he felt something unsettling take root inside him. *What if I truly belonged here... then what?* The thought frightened him more than hunger ever could.

Vanshika watched him quietly as he ate. There was a restlessness about him she couldn’t ignore. He laughed, he nodded, he tried to blend in but his eyes kept drifting, as if

searching for something beyond the fences, beyond the guards, beyond even this time. *This guy isn't just stuck here for nothing*, she thought. *He looks like he belongs somewhere else*. The idea unsettled her, though she didn't know why.

A sharp voice broke through the low murmurs. A guard ordered them to finish quickly and head inside. Like always no one protested. Plates were set aside, some even left their food unfinished without a second glance. Here, even hunger learned obedience over time, Aayush thought.

Inside the warehouse, the dim yellow lights cast a tired glow over rows of narrow beds. The space smelled of metal, old fabric, and human exhaustion. People moved mechanically, claiming their spots, bodies already anticipating sleep. As Aayush passed Vanshika, his feet slowed instinctively.

"Good night," he said, it came out softer than he had intended.

"Good night," she replied, meeting his eyes for a brief moment longer than necessary.

As Vanshika lay down, her body sank into the thin mattress with a familiar ache. Every muscle reminded her of the day she had lived, the days before it, and the many days still to come. As she adjusted her pillow, her fingers brushed against something unexpected. She sat up slightly and brought it closer—a sunflower, its yellow petals vivid even in the dim light.

For a moment, confusion replaced exhaustion. *How did this come here?* Flowers didn't belong here. They were fragile things, meant for open skies and careless joy, not places like this. Her

mind ran through possibilities, faces she knew, gestures she had seen. And then, uninvited, Aayush's face appeared in her thoughts.

She shook her head gently. No, she told herself. *Here, people don't have the time to hold on to their dreams—forget about stopping to leave flowers behind.* Still, her fingers lingered on the petals. A small smile escaped her despite herself, one she didn't try to stop. She placed the flower carefully beside her pillow, as if it were something worth protecting, and let her eyes close. Sleep came quickly, but not without leaving behind a faint warmth she hadn't felt in a long time.

Far away in a different century, Aayush's dad lay awake in his room, the fan above him spinning steadily, indifferent to his thoughts. After going for the business trip leaving their son alone at home, everything around him felt emptier than usual, as if it too sensed the distance between him and his son. He turned onto his side, staring at the wall, memories playing uninvited in his mind, arguments that escalated too quickly, silences that lasted too long.

Maybe... I never truly understood him, he admitted to himself, the thought settling heavily in his chest. He had wanted to protect Aayush, guide him, correct him but somewhere along the way, concern had turned into control. *But if he was wrong, Aakash thought slowly, then that mistake belongs to me as well.* The realization hurt more than anger ever had. He closed his eyes, hoping sleep might soften the edges of regret, though a part of him knew some questions were meant to stay unanswered for now.

Back in the warehouse, the night deepened. Breaths evened out, bodies surrendered to rest, and unspoken thoughts lingered in the darkness. Between past and present, between acceptance and resistance, something quietly shifted—fragile, uncertain, and waiting for morning to test its strength.

Chapter 10

Morning did not arrive gently inside the warehouse. The guard's voice tore through the half-darkness like a blade, loud enough to jolt even the deepest sleepers awake. He barged in, loud and unforgiving, taking personal pleasure in waking people from whatever little peace sleep had offered them.

“Get up! It's already so late. You have to go to work!”

Aayush opened his eyes slowly, his head feeling heavier than it should have after a full night's rest. Around him, bodies stirred with visible reluctance. People sat up, confused, blinking as though the day had appeared too soon and without permission. For a brief, disoriented second, he forgot where he was. Then the ache in his body, the rough texture of the bedding beneath him, and the sight of striped uniforms moving around him brought everything rushing back. His head felt strangely heavy, not painful exactly, but dull—like his thoughts were wading through thick water.

So deep a sleep...he thought, running a hand over his face.

How long has it been since I last slept like this?

The thought unsettled him more than he liked to admit

because he hadn't slept like that in years. Not even when exhaustion had nearly crushed him in his own time. Something about it didn't feel natural. But the suspicion had to be swallowed quickly. There was always work waiting.

They moved together, half-asleep and hollow-eyed, toward food. Hunger existed, but it was distant, almost secondary. What weighed heavier was the exhaustion that seemed to seep into their bones no matter how long they slept.

Outside the warehouse, morning light stretched across the ground with an almost mocking cheerfulness. It was warm and deceptively normal, as if this place were just another worksite and not a cage disguised as discipline. Aayush sat beside Vanshika as they ate, the silence between them calm but not empty. The routine had already begun to feel familiar, and that frightened him more than the guards ever could. For a while, neither felt the need to fill it. Sometimes silence, he was learning, was simply another way of sharing space.

Vanshika's face was calm, unreadable, but Aayush noticed the small things—the way she ate slowly, the way her gaze occasionally drifted beyond the fences, the way her shoulders never truly relaxed.

Then Aayush spoke, his voice low, casual, though the thought behind it wasn't.

"What do you think," he asked, nudging his plate slightly, "do these people mix sleeping pills into the food or something?"

Vanshika paused, considering it seriously before giving a small, knowing smile. "Yeah," she said. "I think so too."

Aayush let out a soft laugh, shaking his head. “I slept like a baby after so long”

She looked at him then, properly this time. There was curiosity in her eyes, and something else too—an instinctive alertness, as if she sensed there was more behind his words than he was saying. “Oh,” she said quietly, as if storing the details away.

They didn’t say much after that. The guards soon broke whatever peace lingered, directing everyone back to their work. Still, as Aayush walked away, the thought stayed with him. “If sleep is being forced on us,” he wondered, “what else are they hiding from us?”

By afternoon, fatigue had settled in like an unwanted companion. After hours in the field, they returned to the warehouse for rest. Vanshika and her friends gathered around the round table as usual, shoulders slumped, eyes heavy. Silence sat among them—not uncomfortable, just tired.

Aayush shifted in his seat. Too much silence made his thoughts louder, and lately, his thoughts were dangerous.

“Can I ask something?” he said finally.

Everyone looked up.

“Ask away,” Vanshika replied.

He hesitated, then asked, “What will you do after you’re freed from here?”

The question changed the air, giving it shape, direction—hope.

Ishan spoke first, his voice softening as if it belonged to another version of him. “I have a three years old daughter,”

he said, eyes distant. "I'll spend time with her. I don't want anything else."

"So sweet," Bhavna said, smiling.

Ishan turned to her. "You?"

"I just want to live with my parents," Bhavna replied. "They are old now. I have to take care of them."

"Aww," Vanshika said, squeezing her hand.

Bhavna smiled shyly before turning to her. "And what about you?"

Vanshika laughed lightly, though something resolute flickered beneath it. "Maybe... I'll run for the election."

The group smiled, some laughed softly. For a brief moment, she wasn't a prisoner. She was who she had always been—a woman who refused to imagine herself small.

"Nitin?" Bhavna asked.

"Let's just get out of here alive first," he said irritably.

"Be positive," Bhavna insisted. "We will leave from here very soon."

Everyone nodded, clinging to the thought like a prayer.

"I'm sure of it," Vanshika said firmly. "People will be looking for us. They'll come to save us."

Aayush felt something tighten inside his chest.

"If anyone were coming," he muttered under his breath, "you wouldn't be dying here."

"What?" Vanshika turned sharply.

“Nobody is going to come save us,” he said more clearly now. “We have to do something ourselves”

“Why do you think so?” she asked, voice steady but strained.

Aayush laughed softly—not because it was funny, but because the truth felt unbearable. *You don’t understand what time really is*, he thought. *If you did, you would never have this much faith.*

“Why are you laughing?” she snapped. “What wrong have I said?”

“At your innocence,” he said. “You place far too much faith in people... in humanity.”

Her face hardened. “And you should stop lecturing people for no reason.”

She stood up abruptly. Bhavna tried to stop her, but Vanshika pulled away and walked out, her back straight, steps quick.

Aayush stared after her, guilt settling heavily inside him. *When did telling the truth become wrong?* he wondered. *Or is the truth only what people want to hear?*

“Don’t worry,” Bhavna said gently. “She is a bit moody. I’ll talk to her.”

He nodded, though the heaviness refused to lift.

Soon, a guard’s voice summoned them back to work. As Aayush stood, his gaze drifted once more toward the door Vanshika had disappeared through.

Somewhere deep inside, a quiet fear took shape. This place wasn’t just breaking bodies—it was testing faith. In people. In

hope. In how much truth one could afford to speak before losing the fragile connections that made survival possible.

And he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep holding his tongue.

Chapter 11

Bhavna stayed beside Vanshika through the afternoon, working silently at first, then trying gently to break through the wall she could feel forming. She spoke about small things, about how the sun felt harsher today, about how the soil here never seemed to rest, about how people said foolish things when they were tired or scared. It was the language of someone who loved without demanding an answer.

Vanshika heard her, but she didn't respond. Her hands moved steadily through the earth, fingers darkened with soil, nails broken and rough. There was a calmness about her that afternoon, but it wasn't peaceful. It was restraint. She had learned long ago that reacting immediately only gave others power over her emotions. Silence, on the other hand, belonged to her.

What stayed with her wasn't Aayush's tone, or even his words. It was the certainty with which he had spoken. As if hope were a childish thing, something people outgrew once reality taught them better.

You shouldn't put so much faith in humanity.

She had survived on that belief. In courts, in newsrooms, in threats whispered behind closed doors. If she let go of it now, what would remain?

Across the field, Aayush worked mechanically, his body moving while his mind replayed the moment again and again. He hadn't meant to hurt her. He knew that much. But knowing something and saying it were two very different things. He had spoken from fear, not wisdom. Fear that the truth he carried would crush the fragile world she had built around herself.

Speaking the truth is easy, he thought bitterly. What is hard is living with that truth.

As evening settled in, exhaustion seeped into everything, numbing thoughts and making conversation feel like an effort no one had the strength to make. Dinner came and went in a silence that felt heavy rather than awkward, as if everyone instinctively understood that words would only get in the way. Vanshika ate quietly, then stood up and walked back toward the warehouse without pausing or looking back, not waiting for company or explanation. There was no visible anger, no sign of confrontation—only a measured, intentional distance, and that quiet withdrawal cut far deeper than any harsh words ever could have.

Night settled over the warehouse with its familiar weight, thick and unyielding, as if the walls themselves were designed to absorb every leftover thought. One by one, bodies gave in to exhaustion and collapsed onto their beds, minds too worn out to wander or resist the pull of rest. Vanshika reached her place without expectation or anticipation, her movements

automatic, her thoughts already loosening their grip as sleep began to claim her.

Then she saw it.

A sunflower lay on her pillow.

She stopped. Looked at it for a long moment, as if unsure whether it belonged there. Beside it was a small folded note. She picked it up slowly, unfolded it.

Sorry.

Just that one word.

Something loosened in her chest. The tightness she hadn't acknowledged all day softened, not disappeared, but eased. She exhaled, a faint smile touching her lips despite herself. Whoever had left this hadn't tried to explain, hadn't defended themselves. They had simply admitted fault.

She didn't need to turn her head to know who it was. Still, she did.

Aayush stood a little distance away, pretending to adjust his bed, pretending not to watch her reaction. When their eyes met, he didn't smile. He waited. And when she smiled first, small and unguarded, it felt like forgiveness without words.

They lay down soon after. Sleep came easily to Vanshika that night, the flower resting carefully beside her. For Aayush, sleep took longer. He stared into the darkness, thinking not of the future or the mission that had brought him here, but of how fragile trust was—and how easily it could be lost.

Morning arrived the same way it always did—loud, impatient, unforgiving. The guard's voice cut through the warehouse,

pulling everyone out of sleep. Bodies moved slowly, eyes heavy, minds fogged. Routine took over.

At breakfast, Aayush sat beside Vanshika without asking. For a few minutes, they ate in silence. Then he spoke, his voice low, careful.

“Hey... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She didn’t answer immediately. She kept eating, thinking. Then she nodded.

“Hm,” she said softly. “It’s okay.”

After a pause, she added, almost to herself, “I mean you weren’t wrong. If anyone were going to come save us, they would have been here by now.”

They laughed quietly not because it was funny, but because sometimes laughter was the only way to keep despair from settling too deeply.

“Yeah,” Aayush said. “You’re right.”

They finished breakfast and stood up to leave for work. Nothing had been solved. Nothing had been promised. But something had shifted—an understanding that truth could hurt, hope could deceive, and yet both were necessary to survive.

As they walked back toward the fields, side by side, neither spoke. And for the first time since he had arrived on this island, Aayush felt something close to belonging.

Chapter 12

Time no longer moved in neat, measurable units. It blurred and thinned until days felt less like lived experiences and more like endurance layered one upon another. Vanshika noticed the change first in her body—how her clothes hung looser now, how her arms had grown wiry, how fatigue no longer came and went but stayed, settling deep into her bones as if it intended to remain. Everyone around her looked altered in the same way: thinner, quieter, stripped of excess emotion, and yet somehow more exposed than before.

Aayush had changed too, though his transformation unsettled her more than the others'. His hair had grown long and untamed, his beard uneven and heavy, giving him a wildness that seemed to mirror the place they were trapped in. It disturbed her how quickly the markers of their former lives had disappeared, how effortlessly the world they came from had loosened its grip on them. More than once, she caught herself wondering how long it took before people stopped remembering who they had been before survival became the only identity that mattered.

What troubled her most, however, was not how much he had changed, but how easily she had grown accustomed to him.

They spoke constantly now, not because either of them tried to, but because silence between them had stopped feeling necessary. Conversations slipped into place during work, during rest, during those long walks back beneath exhausted skies. She told herself it was harmless, that talking merely helped pass the time, but somewhere along the way those conversations had begun to anchor her days. She found herself anticipating his presence, noticing his absence, measuring time not by meals or commands but by moments spent beside him.

And that realization frightened her.

Vanshika had learned long ago that attachment was a liability. Caring too deeply made loss inevitable, and hope was a dangerous indulgence, especially in places designed to break both spirit and will. She noticed the glances people cast in their direction now, the lingering looks and softened smiles that carried assumptions she had never voiced aloud. She didn't correct them, nor did she confirm anything. Labels felt reckless here, like tempting fate into paying attention.

That evening, the sky softened into shades of fading gold and burnt orange, and Vanshika stood near the warehouse watching the sun descend, feeling an ache she couldn't quite name. Sunsets had begun to matter more here, not because they were beautiful, but because they reminded her that the world still moved forward, even if their lives felt suspended in a place without direction.

She sensed Aayush beside her before he spoke.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said quietly.

She turned slightly toward him. “What?”

“The sunset.”

She nodded, her gaze returning to the horizon. “Very.”

After a brief pause, he said, “People in the past didn’t trust the sun.”

She looked at him then, curiosity briefly lifting the heaviness in her chest, inviting him to continue.

“They believed it might not return the next day,” he explained. “So they lived each day as if it truly mattered.”

A faint smile touched her lips, though something tightened inside her as the words settled. “They were wise,” she said.

“Smarter than us,” he replied.

The thought stayed with her long after the sky darkened. Living as though tomorrow might not arrive sounded romantic, even brave, but Vanshika knew the cost of such living. Hope makes you careless. Hope makes you believe in things that could be taken away without warning.

Dinner followed, then the familiar routines, but the quiet between them lingered long after the noise faded.

When she finally reached her bed that night, she stopped short.

A sunflower lay neatly on her pillow. *Again.*

Her breath caught before she could stop it. She no longer needed to ask who had left it there, and that certainty unsettled her more than the gesture itself. Warmth rose

unexpectedly in her chest—gratitude, tenderness, something dangerously close to comfort—and she felt the urge to push it away before it took root.

This is how it begins, she warned herself. Small things. Harmless things.

She lifted her gaze and met Aayush's eyes across the dim space. He wasn't smiling widely or waiting for approval; he simply looked at her, as though the act itself had been enough. That restraint disarmed her more than any grand gesture could have.

"Good night," she said softly.

"Good night," he replied.

Morning arrived without ceremony, pulling them all back into routine. Vanshika moved through the motions until they sat down for breakfast, when she noticed immediately that Aayush seemed different—lighter somehow, distracted, carrying a nervous energy she hadn't seen in him before.

He sat beside her as usual. "How are you?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, studying his face, trying to understand the shift.

Then he spoke again, almost casually. "Happy birthday, Vanshika."

For a moment, everything narrowed to that sentence alone.

She stared at him, startled. "How do you know it's my birthday?"

He smiled, lowering his voice as though sharing a secret. "There's nothing about you I don't know."

The words landed heavier than he seemed to realize, making her feel suddenly exposed, seen in a way that stirred both comfort and caution within her. Instinctively, she pulled back.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “At least say thank you.”

She managed a smile. “Thank you.”

Leaning back slightly, he asked, “So, any special plans today, or are we following the same routine again?”

She shrugged. “What other choice do we have?”

“We could try something different,” he suggested.

Her first instinct was humor, a familiar shield she relied on when things edged too close. “Should I ask the guard to bring a cake?”

He laughed, then grew thoughtful. “No. Something different. Something we don’t usually do.”

“Like what?”

“I’ll tell you once I figure it out.”

She nodded slowly. “Alright. I’ll wait.”

As they stood and prepared to return to work, Vanshika felt something shift quietly inside her. She reminded herself not to read too much into it, not to confuse attention with permanence, not to let kindness weaken the instincts that had kept her alive this long.

And yet, as she walked beside him, she couldn’t ignore the truth pressing gently at the edges of her thoughts. For the first time since arriving here, she was no longer merely surviving the days; she was beginning to care about how they unfolded.

Chapter 13

By the time evening arrived, the day had hollowed them out. Their bodies moved out of habit rather than strength, hands repeating motions learned too well, muscles aching with a familiar, almost comforting pain. When the work finally slowed, Vanshika let her tools fall to the ground and straightened slowly, her back protesting as she lifted her gaze toward the horizon. The sun was already sinking, stretched low and heavy, its light spilling across the horizon in slow, deliberate colors. Orange bled into gold, gold into something softer and sadder, the kind of beauty that never stayed long enough to be trusted. Vanshika watched it with an intensity that surprised even her, as if this sunset were different from the countless others she had seen here, as if it were quietly asking something of her.

Her thoughts drifted without direction, circling familiar questions she rarely allowed herself to examine too closely. How many evenings have passed like this? How many sunsets had she watched while telling herself that tomorrow would be different, that something would shift, that rescue or change or justice would arrive wearing certainty? Hope had once

come easily to her, had once felt like a responsibility rather than a risk, but here it had thinned, stretched, and learned to hide in smaller things.

She didn't hear Aayush approach, but she felt his presence beside her, steady and familiar now in a way that unsettled her more than it should have.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked softly.

She turned toward him, pulled back into the moment, masking the weight behind her eyes with practiced ease. "Nothing special," she replied, then paused before adding, "Did you think of something for today?"

He nodded, and she caught the flicker of anticipation that crossed his face, quickly masked but not entirely hidden. It made something stir in her chest, a lightness she hadn't invited but couldn't deny.

"Yes," he said.

The excitement she tried so hard to suppress flickered openly across her face. "What is it?"

For a second, he simply watched her, as though committing the expression to memory. Then he said, "Tonight, we'll sleep on top of the warehouse. Under the open sky, in the cool breeze, peacefully."

She stared at him, caught between disbelief and amusement, and then let out a short laugh as she studied his face. "And the guards will help us climb up there, I assume?" she asked, her voice light, teasing.

“No,” he said, grinning despite himself. “We’ll go quietly. Sneak up.”

Her smile faded almost instantly, replaced by a sharp shake of her head. “No. That’s too risky,” she said firmly. “And I’m not planning to die anytime soon.”

Her words were meant to end the conversation, but instead they seemed to stir something restless inside him. He turned fully toward her, the joking ease slipping from his expression, and said with a seriousness that startled her, “Vanshika, I will never let you die. I promise.”

The air between them shifted. The words landed harder than she expected.

For a moment, the sunset ceased to exist. Vanshika felt something tighten inside her chest, a reflexive resistance rising even as another part of her leaned dangerously toward belief. She searched his face, not for romance or bravado, but for cracks. What she found unsettled her more. He looked sincere, not in a dramatic or impulsive way, but convinced in a way that suggested he had already made peace with the cost of such a promise.

She recognized the same reckless intensity she had once carried herself, the kind that made people believe they could bend fate if they wanted it badly enough.

“Aayush,” she said quietly, her voice gentler now, “a person should never make promises about things they have no control over.”

He hesitated, aware of the truth in her words, yet unwilling to let them stand unchallenged. “You might be right,” he

admitted, then added, almost stubbornly, “but still, I won’t let you die. No matter what.”

Something softened in her chest despite herself. She looked away, a small smile betraying her resistance. “Idiot,” she murmured, though there was no real insult in it.

He took the word like a victory.

“So,” he asked, lighter again, “are we going or not?”

She exhaled slowly, torn between caution and the quiet longing she rarely allowed herself to acknowledge. “Maybe,” she said at last.

That single word seemed to satisfy him more than certainty ever could. He smiled, and they stood there together, shoulder to shoulder, watching the sun disappear completely, letting the silence settle comfortably between them. Vanshika told herself she was only enjoying the view, only allowing herself this small, harmless moment, yet deep down she knew the truth was far more complicated.

Because as the sky darkened and the call for dinner finally reached them, she realized something had already shifted. The danger no longer lay only in guards or punishment or risk, but in the way she had begun to imagine nights beyond survival, moments that felt stolen and precious, and a future she had sworn never to picture.

And that, she knew, was the most dangerous thing of all.

Chapter 14

Dinner that night passed quietly, the way most things did here—without ceremony, without appetite, without complaint. Metal plates scraped softly against one another, hands moved mechanically, and faces remained lowered as if everyone had collectively decided that eye contact required too much effort. The guards watched with bored vigilance, their presence now a background weight rather than an immediate threat. Vanshika ate slowly, distracted, her mind lingering elsewhere despite her body being firmly rooted in routine.

When she finally returned to the warehouse and reached her bed, habit guided her before thought did. Her hand moved instinctively toward the pillow, already expecting the familiar roughness of sunflower petals beneath her fingers. For days now, that small, defiant ritual had been her quiet reassurance that something gentle could still exist in a place built to erase gentleness.

Her fingers met nothing.

She frowned slightly and lifted the pillow, checking underneath, then glanced beside the bed, even bending down to peer into the shadows below as if the flower might have fallen unnoticed. It hadn't. There was no sunflower. No folded note. No silent acknowledgment waiting for her.

An unexpected tightness settled in her chest, sharp enough to surprise her. She told herself it was foolish, that she had no right to expect anything, that she was reading too much into a gesture that had never come with promises. Still, disappointment crept in quietly, the way it always did—without asking permission.

She turned her head and looked across the dimly lit warehouse, searching without fully meaning to. Aayush lay on his bed, already asleep, his face softened by exhaustion, lashes resting against his cheeks, breathing slow and even. He looked younger like this, stripped of words and intent, just another tired body in a room full of them.

Of course, she thought. Of course he's asleep.

The thought was not angry, just resigned. Whatever she had momentarily hoped for dissolved into practicality, and she lay down herself, pulling the thin blanket over her shoulders. Sleep came slowly, but eventually it came, dragging her under before she could question why the absence of a flower had unsettled her so much.

The warehouse fell into its usual midnight stillness, broken only by the occasional cough, the rustle of someone turning in their sleep, the distant sound of guards shifting positions.

And then, quietly, deliberately, Aayush moved.

He rose from his bed with practiced care, every muscle alert, every breath controlled. The warehouse at night demanded respect; one wrong sound could unravel everything. He crossed the narrow space between them and stopped beside Vanshika's bed, watching her for a moment longer than necessary. She slept on her side, her face half-buried in the pillow, features relaxed in a way he rarely saw during the day.

Gently, almost reverently, he brushed his fingers against her hair, then her cheek, light enough that it felt more like a thought than a touch.

She stirred immediately.

Her eyes flew open, fear sharp and instinctive, and she inhaled sharply, her body tensing to scream—but his hand covered her mouth before sound could escape.

“Shh,” he whispered urgently. “It’s me. Aayush.”

Recognition replaced panic in stages. Her breathing slowed. He removed his hand carefully, watching her expression change, making sure the fear had truly passed.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered, her voice barely audible, thick with sleep.

He smiled, unable to help himself. “You look even more beautiful when you’re asleep.”

She scoffed softly despite herself. “Very funny.”

“I’m serious,” he said, quieter now, sincerity creeping into his tone.

She shifted slightly, pulling the blanket tighter. “Why did you wake me?” she asked, still half-asleep. “What are we supposed to do now?”

“Did you forget the plan?” he asked gently.

Her eyes widened a little. “Oh... I thought you forgot.”

He grinned. “Very funny. Now come on.”

“Where?” she asked, though she already knew.

“Up,” he replied simply.

Her hesitation returned immediately. “What if someone sees us?”

“No one will,” he said with quiet confidence. “Just follow me. Walk like a cat. No sound.”

She studied his face for a long second, weighing fear against trust, habit against impulse. Then she exhaled and nodded. “Okay. And Aayush?”

“Yes?”

“I trust you,” she said softly.

“I know,” he replied, without arrogance, without doubt.

They moved together, silently, slipping into the washroom where the narrow ladder waited like a secret kept between walls. One by one, they climbed, careful and deliberate, until the warehouse roof opened above them and the night greeted them fully.

The sky stretched endlessly, vast and unguarded, the moon full and luminous, stars scattered carelessly across the darkness. A cold breeze swept over them, sharp and alive, and

Vanshika felt it rush into her lungs as if she had been holding her breath for years.

They lay down side by side, letting the night hold them.

For a while, neither spoke.

Then Aayush reached into his pocket and held something out to her. "You were looking for this," he said lightly. "And don't say you weren't."

Her fingers closed around the sunflower, and she smiled despite herself.

"Aayush," she murmured.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"For what?" he asked.

"This place," she said, looking up at the sky. "Being here feels like someone gave me two moments of freedom after centuries."

He nodded. "It does."

After a while, he spoke again. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"When you were outside... did you ever love someone?"

She was quiet for a long moment. "Honestly," she said finally, "I never had time for things like that."

"Really?" he asked, surprised.

"No," she said gently. "When a person has a purpose, there's no time left for love."

“And if someone’s purpose is love?” he asked.

“Then that person is very lucky,” she replied.

He smiled, satisfied.

“I wrote a poem,” he said. “Can I read it to you?”

“You write too?” she asked, genuinely surprised.

“A little.”

“Alright. Read it.”

He recited softly, letting the words breathe between them, and when he finished, she turned toward him, stunned.

“Did you write that?” she asked.

“No,” he admitted quietly. “Faiz did.”

“What?”

“I’m joking,” he grinned. “I wrote it. I’m talented, after all.”

She laughed. “It’s beautiful. Truly exceptional.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

After a few minutes, he gathered his courage. “Can I hold your hand?”

She hesitated, then nodded.

Their fingers intertwined beneath the open sky, and for the first time in a long while, neither of them felt like prisoners.

Chapter 15

They lay there for a long time without speaking, their fingers intertwined beneath the open sky, as if even the smallest movement might disturb the fragile illusion they had created. The moon hung above them in unbothered brilliance, silver light spilling across the roof and softening the hard edges of the warehouse below. The breeze moved gently through Vanshika's hair, and for the first time in weeks she felt something dangerously close to peace.

Yet peace, she had learned, never lasted long enough to trust.

At some point, exhaustion overtook her without warning. Her head had been resting lightly against Aayush's shoulder, her breathing slowing in rhythm with his, when sleep claimed her completely. Aayush felt the shift before he saw it, the way her fingers slackened slightly in his grasp, the way her weight leaned into him without resistance. He turned carefully, studying her face in the moonlight, and something inside him tightened with tenderness he had not prepared for.

He should wake her, he knew. They could not risk being found there at dawn. But for a few selfish minutes, he allowed

himself to simply watch her sleep beneath the sky she had longed for. She looked unguarded in a way that made him both protective and afraid. Protective because he wanted to shield that softness from everything this place threatened to take. Afraid because he understood that loving something fragile meant accepting the possibility of losing it.

When the night deepened and the air grew colder, he finally forced himself to move. Carefully, slowly, he freed his hand from hers and lifted her into his arms. She stirred faintly but did not wake. Each step down the ladder demanded precision, every sound amplified in his own ears, but he did not falter. He carried her back to her bed, lowered her gently onto the mattress, and brushed a strand of hair away from her face before returning to his own place as if he had never left.

By morning, the roof had become memory.

Vanshika woke abruptly to the sharp, irritated voice of a guard shouting for everyone to get up. The sound tore through the warehouse like a blade, snapping bodies out of sleep. She sat upright instinctively, heart pounding, her mind still tangled in moonlight and cool air.

For a few disoriented seconds, she couldn't understand what felt wrong. Then realization struck her with quiet force.

She was in her bed.

Her eyes widened as she looked around, trying to reconcile the memory of the rooftop with the hard floor and iron beams above her. She was certain she had fallen asleep under the open sky, her hand still in Aayush's. She remembered the moon. The breeze. The sunflower resting against her chest.

Slowly, she turned her head toward him.

Aayush was already awake, though he pretended otherwise for half a second before meeting her gaze. There was a softness in his smile, a silent acknowledgment that answered her unspoken question.

Of course it was him.

He had brought her back. He had taken the risk alone so she wouldn't wake to consequences.

Something warm and complicated moved through her chest, equal parts gratitude and unease. She didn't like that he had carried that responsibility without telling her. She didn't like that she hadn't even felt it. More than anything, she didn't like how deeply it affected her that he had done it at all.

Before she could dwell further, the guard barked again, ordering everyone outside because the senior guard wanted to speak.

The atmosphere shifted instantly.

Bodies moved with renewed alertness, whispers replacing sleep-heavy silence. Vanshika stood, her pulse quickening. Aayush caught her eye briefly, and in that glance lay the same unspoken fear: Had someone seen them?

They stepped outside with the others, lining up automatically on the ground like children summoned for assembly. The morning air was cooler than usual, sharp against skin still warm from sleep. Confusion rippled through the line. No one had been warned about any announcement.

Aayush stood just behind Vanshika, close enough that his breath brushed the edge of her ear. “No one saw us last night, right?” he murmured.

She swallowed, uncertainty tightening her throat. “I don’t know,” she whispered back.

Her eyes flicked toward the guards. One of them held a gun more visibly than usual, fingers resting too comfortably near the trigger.

“Why is he carrying the gun like that?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Aayush replied, and this time the fear in his voice was unmistakable.

Before they could say more, the senior guard called out sharply, “Vanshika.”

Her name cut through the murmurs like a crack of thunder.

Both she and Aayush froze. For a split second, everything inside her went still. She could feel his gaze on her back as if it were a physical weight. They looked at each other, and in that look passed a hundred thoughts neither dared to voice. If they had been seen, if someone had reported them, if this was punishment—

She stepped forward anyway.

Her legs felt heavier than they should have as she stopped beside the senior guard. He looked at her briefly, unreadable, then turned toward the rest of the prisoners.

“Do you all know what day it is?” he asked. Then, specifically, “Vanshika, do you know what today is?”

She shook her head. “No, sir.”

A murmur passed through the line as everyone tried to recall whether they had forgotten some rule, some anniversary, some hidden offense.

The senior guard's tone shifted unexpectedly. "Today is Diwali. I wish you all a very happy Diwali."

For a moment, silence followed, as if no one quite understood what they had heard.

Then Vanshika and Aayush both exhaled almost at the same time, relief flooding their bodies so suddenly it left them slightly dizzy. The tension that had wrapped itself around her spine loosened just enough to allow breath again.

From somewhere in the line, Nitin muttered under his breath, "What kind of happy Diwali is this?"

The senior guard continued, unfazed. "Today, you all have a one-day break. No one will work. You will rest. You will light lamps and make this island glow. However, our guards will be more alert than usual, so do not try to be clever. I do not want anyone losing their life today. Is that clear? Does anyone have a problem or a question?"

Ishan raised his hand hesitantly. The guard gestured for him to speak.

"Sir," Ishan asked, "will we get something special to eat today?"

The senior guard's lips curved into something almost resembling amusement. "The special thing is that lunch will be served at two o'clock. And yes, the special meal will be boiled potatoes and bread."

Laughter erupted from the guards and gatekeepers, sharp and mocking. Ishan muttered, “Idiot,” under his breath, but quietly enough to avoid trouble.

“Enough,” the senior guard said finally. “Go back and sleep if you want.”

The line broke apart, tension dissolving into scattered movement.

Later that morning, the ground transformed subtly. Some of the prisoners began cleaning the warehouse more thoroughly than usual, sweeping corners that had long been ignored. A few gathered colored powders to attempt a rangoli near the entrance, their movements hesitant at first, as if unsure whether celebration was permitted or merely tolerated. Small clay lamps were arranged carefully, waiting for evening.

Others chose exhaustion over festivity and returned to their beds, determined to spend the unexpected freedom in sleep.

Aayush found Vanshika near the entrance, where she stood examining the ground as though already imagining patterns forming beneath her fingers.

“Hey,” he said lightly. “What are you planning to do today?”

She looked up at him, and instead of answering immediately, she said quietly, “Do you know how scared I was this morning?”

He blinked. “You get scared?”

“No,” she replied, though her tone softened. “But I was worried about you.”

The admission hung between them.

He smiled nervously. "Why were you worried about me?"

She hesitated, searching for a reason that would not reveal too much. "Just like that," she said. "Why shouldn't I be?"

He studied her for a moment longer than usual, something deeper stirring beneath his playful exterior. "You should be," he said at last. "After all, I'm your husband."

She laughed despite herself. "You do have a good sense of humor."

He nodded, accepting the deflection. "That I do."

Then, gently, he asked again, "So what's the plan? Anything special?"

"I'm going to make a rangoli," she said.

"And you?" she added. "What will you do?"

"I don't know," he replied with a shrug. "Maybe sleep all day."

They walked together for a few minutes more, the air between them lighter now but not entirely free of the undercurrents that had grown there. Eventually, they parted, each moving toward their chosen distraction.

Yet even as Vanshika knelt to trace the first lines of color onto the ground, she could not stop thinking about the rooftop, about the way he had carried her back without waking her, about the promise he had made so recklessly under the fading sun.

And she realized, with a mixture of fear and quiet acceptance, that the most dangerous thing about last night was not that they had been caught.

It was that she had begun to believe him.

Chapter 16

The afternoon light filtered weakly through the high, grilled windows of the warehouse, casting long, dusty streaks across the concrete floor. By the time evening settled in, most of the prisoners had drifted outside, eager to cling to the fragile excuse for celebration that the day offered. Diyas were being arranged carefully along the ground, their small flames trembling in the breeze, fighting against the vastness of the darkening sky. Laughter, hesitant at first, began to grow in pockets, as though people were reminding themselves how it felt to sound alive.

Inside the warehouse, however, it was quieter.

Vanshika sat alone on her bed, her back resting against the cold wall, her hands loosely clasped in her lap. The sounds of celebration drifted in through the open door—crackling wicks, scattered chatter, the faint shuffle of feet—but they felt distant, like something belonging to another life. She stared at the floor without really seeing it. Festivals had once meant warmth, family, chaos in the kitchen, her mother’s voice calling out instructions, the smell of sweets filling the house.

Here, Diwali felt like a memory someone had borrowed and poorly recreated.

She did not hear Aayush approach until she felt something soft brush against her hair.

He had come quietly, holding something behind his back, unsure of how she would react. For most of the day he had been unusually restless, weaving together wildflowers he had managed to gather near the edge of the ground earlier that afternoon. It had taken him hours to shape them into something that resembled a crown. His fingers still bore faint scratches from thorns. He had told himself it was foolish, that such gestures meant nothing in a place like this, but the thought of her sitting alone tonight had unsettled him more than he expected.

Standing behind her now, he gently placed the flower crown over her head.

The touch startled her. She turned quickly, and when her eyes met his, he froze.

There were tears clinging stubbornly to her lashes.

“Hey... what happened? Are you okay?” he asked, the playfulness gone from his voice, replaced by immediate concern.

She wiped her cheeks hastily, almost embarrassed to be caught. “Nothing. I was just... missing home.”

Her voice trembled slightly despite her effort to steady it.

He exhaled slowly. “I miss it too.”

For a moment, neither of them pretended otherwise. There was no strength in denial tonight. Aayush stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her carefully, as though she might break if he held her too tightly. She leaned into him without hesitation, allowing herself that one unguarded second of relief.

“Aayush,” she murmured.

“Hm?”

“Thank you for everything.”

He knew she did not mean only the crown. She meant the roof. The sunflower. The quiet reassurances. The way he made this place feel slightly less suffocating.

He tried to lighten the mood, though his own throat felt tight. “We should go outside now. If someone sees us like this, they might misunderstand.”

She pulled back just enough to look at him, a faint defiance surfacing through her sadness. “Let them misunderstand. Whoever wants to think something can think it.”

He smiled at that, not because it was bold, but because it was honest. She was tired of hiding what she felt.

After a few more seconds, they stepped outside together.

The ground glowed softly under dozens of diyas. Someone had attempted a rangoli near the center, its imperfect lines evidence of limited colors and even more limited freedom. For a brief while, the warehouse did not feel like a prison. It felt like a gathering of people trying to remember who they were before captivity defined them.

Yet beneath the flickering lights and forced cheer, something fragile lingered—a reminder that tomorrow would return them to the same routine, the same guards, the same walls.

And it did.

The next morning, exhaustion hung thick in the air. Most of them had slept late after the small celebration, their bodies surrendering to the rare emotional release. The guard's shout cut through the warehouse like a blade, ordering everyone to wake up and move. One by one, they rose, stiff and silent, heading out for breakfast after washing up.

As usual, Aayush, Vanshika, Nitin, and Ishan found their place at the same worn wooden table. Plates clattered. The food tasted the same as every other day. Routine resumed without apology.

Vanshika noticed it first—the way Aayush kept glancing around, his brows slightly drawn together.

“Aayush,” she called softly.

“Hm?”

“Where are you lost?”

He hesitated, scanning the ground again. “Don’t you feel like something is missing?”

They all looked at each other, confused.

“No,” Ishan replied. “What’s missing?”

And then it struck Vanshika like a sudden chill.

“Bhavna,” she said, her voice tightening. “Where is Bhavna?”

Aayush nodded slowly. “That’s what’s missing.”

The space at the table where Bhavna usually sat felt glaringly empty now.

“I’ll check in the warehouse,” Vanshika said quickly, already rising.

She moved toward the entrance, her steps urgent but controlled. A junior guard standing near the door blocked her path casually.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m looking for Bhavna. Have you seen her anywhere?”

He shrugged. “Bhavna? Yes, she’s inside. Go check.”

His indifference unsettled her, but she did not argue. She walked in.

The warehouse felt different in the morning light—colder, more clinical. She spotted Bhavna immediately, lying on her bed, still wrapped tightly in her blanket. Vanshika hurried over and sat beside her.

“Bhavna, wake up,” she urged gently.

Bhavna opened her eyes slowly and managed a weak smile. “Hi.”

“Why didn’t you come for breakfast? Everyone was looking for you.”

“I think I have a fever,” Bhavna replied faintly. “I feel weak. I didn’t feel like eating.”

Vanshika placed her hand on Bhavna’s forehead and instantly pulled back in alarm. Her skin was burning.

“You have a very high fever,” she said, unable to hide the tension in her voice.

“Yes,” Bhavna admitted.

“Did you ask the guard for medicine?”

“I told them. They said they’ll give it after some time.”

Before Vanshika could respond, a guard entered and signaled for her to leave. She looked back at Bhavna, worry etched across her face.

“I’m going outside now. If you need anything, tell me, okay?”

Bhavna nodded weakly.

Outside, the others were waiting.

“What happened? Was she not inside?” Aayush asked immediately.

“She’s inside,” Vanshika replied.

“If she’s inside, why didn’t she come?” Nitin questioned.

“She has a fever. She’ll come later, maybe.”

“I thought she ran away without us,” Ishan joked lightly.

The boys laughed for a moment, but the laughter faded quickly when they noticed Vanshika’s expression. There was no humor in her eyes.

Before anyone could speak further, a guard shouted at them to return to work. They dispersed reluctantly.

By midday, when they were allowed to return for rest, Vanshika went straight to Bhavna’s bed with the others trailing behind her.

“How are you feeling now?” she asked.

“The same,” Bhavna replied, her voice weaker than before.

“Did they give you the medicine?” Vanshika pressed.

“No. They said they’ll bring it soon.”

“And when is soon?” Vanshika muttered, anger simmering beneath her words. “Wait. I’ll talk to the guard.”

She stood up and approached the junior guard stationed at the door.

“When will the medicine arrive?” she asked firmly.

“For whom?” he replied irritably.

“For Bhavna.”

“Oh. I’ve already informed sir. He said it will be brought very soon.”

“When will you bring it? After her condition gets worse?” Vanshika shot back, unable to contain herself.

The guard’s expression hardened immediately. He raised his voice, ordering her to lower hers.

Aayush heard the tension and rushed over, stepping between them gently. He guided Vanshika back before the situation escalated further.

The guard looked at Aayush with annoyance. “Explain it to this mad girl. I’ve told sir about the medicine. If he’s not ordering it, how is that my fault?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Aayush said calmly. “She’s just upset. She’s been in the sun, and she’s worried. That’s why she reacted like that.”

The guard grunted dismissively.

Aayush led Vanshika back to their place. Nitin handed her a bottle of water silently. She drank it, her hands trembling slightly, not from fear but from frustration.

As they sat together in tense silence, Vanshika stared at Bhavna’s fragile figure and felt a deep, gnawing helplessness settle inside her. Festivals, crowns, sunflowers, whispered confessions under the sky—all of it felt painfully small in this moment.

What was the value of hope if it could not protect someone burning with fever in front of her?

She clenched her fists quietly, her mind racing, her heart heavy with a realization she had tried to avoid: in this place, care was a rebellion, and even rebellion had limits.

Chapter 17

That evening, the air inside the warehouse felt heavier than usual, as if it carried something unspoken that refused to settle. They returned from work mechanically, their bodies moving out of habit while their minds lingered around Bhavna's fragile condition. The sun had set without drama, and dinner was distributed in the same indifferent manner as every other day.

Vanshika did not go to her own place immediately. Instead, she sat beside Bhavna's bed, holding the metal plate in her hands. Bhavna was half-reclined, her face pale, her eyes dull with fever.

"You need to eat," Vanshika said gently, her voice carrying a firmness that came from fear rather than authority.

"I don't feel like it," Bhavna whispered weakly.

"If you don't eat, I'm not going to eat either," Vanshika replied, her jaw tightening slightly. "And I mean it."

Bhavna looked at her for a long moment, recognizing the stubborn concern in her eyes. Even in sickness, she managed a faint smile. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re not allowed to skip dinner,” Vanshika answered softly.

Slowly, with visible effort, Bhavna sat up. Vanshika supported her with one arm while holding the plate steady with the other. They ate together in silence, small bites, long pauses. It felt less like dinner and more like resistance against the inevitable.

From across the warehouse, Aayush watched.

He noticed the way Vanshika leaned closer every time Bhavna coughed, the way she checked her forehead repeatedly as though hoping the fever would disappear under her touch. He admired her strength, but at the same time, a quiet unease settled inside him. He had grown used to protecting her from external dangers—from guards, from punishment—but he did not know how to protect her from this kind of pain. Illness was not something he could outsmart.

Later that night, when the lights dimmed and most of the warehouse surrendered to sleep, Vanshika remained seated beside Bhavna for a few extra minutes, making sure she was resting comfortably before finally returning to her own bed.

She did not know that Aayush lay awake longer than usual, watching the ceiling and wondering why a bad feeling had begun to coil in his chest.

Morning arrived without mercy.

The guard's shout echoed against the metal walls, ordering everyone to wake up. Bodies stirred. Blankets were pushed aside. Routine resumed once again. Vanshika sat up and instinctively glanced at Bhavna's bed. She was still asleep.

"She must be exhausted," Vanshika thought. "I'll wake her up after I freshen up."

She convinced herself not to worry prematurely. Fever makes people tired, she reasoned. That's normal. She forced her steps toward the wash area, finished quickly, and returned feeling physically refreshed but emotionally restless.

As she approached Bhavna's bed, something felt wrong even before she touched her.

The stillness.

Bhavna was lying exactly the way she had been left, her face turned slightly to one side, her blanket unmoved. Vanshika sat down carefully beside her and brushed her fingers across Bhavna's hair.

"Bhavna," she called softly. "Wake up."

There was no response.

She touched her cheek. It was colder than it should have been.

Her heartbeat quickened.

"Bhavna," she repeated, this time shaking her shoulder lightly. "Get up. It's morning."

Nothing.

A sharp wave of fear surged through her body. She gripped Bhavna's arm more firmly and shook her harder. "Bhavna!"

The silence felt unnatural, violent.

Her hands moved instinctively to Bhavna's wrist, searching for a pulse. For a second that stretched endlessly, she felt nothing. She pressed harder, her fingers trembling. Still nothing.

Her mind refused to accept what her body already understood.

"No," she whispered, her voice cracking. "No, no..."

Then the scream tore out of her.

It was not controlled, not measured—it was raw and desperate. The entire warehouse froze before erupting into motion. People rushed toward her. Aayush was among the first to reach her, dropping to his knees beside her.

"What happened? Vanshika, what happened?" he demanded, his hands gripping her shoulders.

She could not form words. She was shaking her head violently, tears streaming down her face.

Nitin stepped closer, his expression shifting as he looked at Bhavna's unmoving body. He reached out hesitantly, checking her himself, and then slowly withdrew his hand.

"Bhavna is dead," he said quietly, the words heavy and unreal.

The sentence seemed to suck the air out of the room.

For a few seconds, no one reacted. The reality hovered above them like something too large to comprehend. Then the sobbing began—first from the girls, then from others. Shock and disbelief painted every face. Anger followed close behind.

Guards stormed inside within minutes, ordering everyone to step away and move to the ground outside. Their voices sounded distant to Vanshika, who was still clinging to Bhavna's lifeless hand as if warmth might return if she refused to let go.

Eventually, she was pulled back gently by Aayush, who held her against him as they were forced outside.

In the senior guard's office, a junior guard delivered the news.

"Sir... she died."

The senior guard frowned. "Who died? Say the name."

"Bhavna. The girl. She's dead."

For a brief second, the senior guard's face showed confusion more than sorrow. Then he stood up from his chair, adjusting his uniform as though preparing to handle an inconvenience rather than a tragedy. He walked out toward the ground where the prisoners had gathered.

The scene unsettled him immediately. The girls were crying openly. The boys stood stiff, their eyes red, their fists clenched. Grief had transformed into something sharper—rage.

He sensed it before it erupted.

Aayush broke from the line suddenly, his body moving on instinct, anger blinding his reason. He charged toward the senior guard, fury roaring in his ears. All he could see was Bhavna's burning forehead from the day before, the empty promises about medicine.

Before he could reach him, two guards restrained him roughly, dragging him back. He struggled, shouting, his voice hoarse with helplessness.

The senior guard reacted quickly. He pulled out his gun and fired a bullet into the air.

The sound cracked through the ground, silencing everyone instantly.

The echo lingered.

“If you all cooperate,” the senior guard announced coldly, “Bhavna’s last rites will be easier. The more you create trouble, the harder it will be.”

The threat was subtle but unmistakable.

Silence fell again, this time forced.

By evening, the cremation was arranged under strict supervision. The guards handled most of it, their movements efficient and detached. The prisoners were allowed to stand at a distance.

The fire rose slowly, consuming what had once been their friend.

Vanshika stood rigid, her tears flowing silently now. The heat from the flames brushed against her face, but she felt nothing. Her mind replayed the previous day in fragments—Bhavna saying she felt weak, the promise of medicine, her own anger at the guard.

“If I had shouted louder... if I had done something more...” her thoughts spiraled.

Aayush stood beside her, his fists clenched so tightly his knuckles had turned white. He wanted to scream, to fight, to break something, but he also understood the cruel reality—they were powerless here.

The sky darkened as the fire dimmed. When it was over, they were marched back to the warehouse. That night, no one spoke.

They lay on their beds, staring into darkness. The usual whispers, the faint jokes, even the small comforting rituals were absent. Grief filled the space like smoke that refused to clear.

Those closest to Bhavna cried quietly, muffling their sobs into their blankets. Others stared blankly at the ceiling, processing fear in a new form.

If a fever could kill her so easily, what did that say about the rest of them?

Vanshika lay awake, her eyes swollen, her chest aching. The flower crown from Diwali still rested near her pillow. It felt like it belonged to a different lifetime.

Beside her, Aayush watched the shadows move along the walls and realized something had changed inside him permanently. Anger had taken root where hope once tried to grow.

And in the suffocating silence of the warehouse, every single one of them understood that Bhavna's death was not just a loss.

It was a warning.

Chapter 18

The days following Bhavna's death passed with a strange, suffocating slowness. Nearly a week had gone by, yet the atmosphere inside the warehouse had not returned to anything resembling normal. If anything, the silence had deepened. Conversations had become rare, laughter nonexistent. Even the guards seemed slightly more cautious, as if they sensed the fragile tension simmering among the prisoners.

That afternoon, a group of them sat around a rough wooden table outside the warehouse during a short break. The sun hung overhead, harsh and indifferent, while the ocean breeze carried the salty smell of the sea across the island. Vanshika, Aayush, Nitin, and Ishan sat together, though "together" felt like the wrong word. Their bodies occupied the same space, but their thoughts wandered in completely different directions.

For several minutes no one spoke. Each of them stared at the table, their hands idle, their minds circling the same questions they had been avoiding since Bhavna's cremation.

Finally, Aayush leaned back slightly and exhaled.

“How long are we going to keep ignoring each other like this?” he asked.

His voice was calm, but beneath it there was a sharp edge, the kind that appears when silence becomes unbearable.

Nitin rubbed his forehead slowly. “What other choice do we have?” he replied tiredly. “What else can we do?”

Aayush looked at him carefully before speaking again.

“I have another way.”

The words immediately drew everyone’s attention. Vanshika looked up first, her eyes narrowing slightly, trying to understand what he meant. Ishan tilted his head, confused but curious.

“What way?” Ishan asked.

Aayush leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“A way of rebellion.”

For a moment the word hung between them like a spark hovering over dry wood.

Nitin reacted first, shaking his head quickly. “No, man. That’s too risky. We don’t want to die.”

Aayush’s expression hardened slightly.

“If we don’t run, we’ll die anyway,” he replied quietly. “At least if we try to escape, there’s a chance we might succeed.”

His words carried a brutal honesty none of them could easily dismiss.

Ishan glanced around nervously. “There are guards everywhere. How exactly do you plan on escaping right under their noses?”

A faint smile appeared on Aayush’s face, the kind that surfaced whenever he believed he had thought something through carefully.

“You don’t escape with strength,” he said. “You escape with a plan.”

Vanshika folded her arms and leaned forward slightly.

“Alright then,” she said. “What’s the plan?”

Before answering, Aayush looked at each of them individually.

“First you all have to promise something,” he said. “You have to promise that if we do this, you won’t back out halfway.”

Vanshika responded almost immediately.

“We don’t have any other option anyway.”

Aayush gave a small, sarcastic smile. It wasn’t the cheerful grin he usually carried; this one had bitterness in it, shaped by everything they had witnessed over the past weeks.

He was about to explain further when a guard’s voice cut through the air, ordering everyone back to work. Instantly the small moment of secrecy shattered.

They stood up reluctantly.

“Don’t worry,” Aayush said as they began walking toward the field. “I’ll explain the plan while we’re working.”

Later that afternoon, under the harsh sun of the open ground, they continued their assigned labor while keeping a careful eye on the guards. The men patrolled lazily, some talking among themselves, others half-asleep from boredom.

When the guards drifted farther away, Nitin quickly moved closer to Aayush.

“Alright,” he whispered impatiently. “Now tell us the plan.”

Ishan gestured for everyone to stand closer together so their voices wouldn’t carry.

Aayush glanced around once more before beginning.

“Look,” he said quietly. “This island where we’re trapped... it’s in the Indian Ocean.”

Everyone stared at him with puzzled expressions.

“How do you know that?” Nitin asked.

Aayush shrugged casually.

“Because I studied geography.”

Vanshika rolled her eyes immediately. “Very funny.”

Ignoring the sarcasm, Ishan gestured for him to continue.

“So cargo ships pass near this island all the time,” Aayush explained. “If we manage to escape from here, getting off the island won’t be the hardest part.”

Vanshika nodded slowly, thinking it through.

“Alright,” she said. “But escaping from here is still the main problem.”

“Good question,” Aayush replied.

“Then answer it,” Ishan said irritably.

“I am answering,” Aayush said, slightly annoyed. “We escape on Saturday.”

“Why Saturday?” Ishan asked suspiciously. “Is there some lucky timing that day or something?”

Aayush sighed dramatically.

“Because most of the guards get drunk on Saturday nights and fall asleep early.”

Vanshika’s eyes widened slightly.

“Oh,” she said, impressed. “Genius.”

“Thank you,” Aayush replied shyly.

But Ishan still looked doubtful.

“Some guards still patrol the whole night though.”

Aayush nodded.

“Exactly. Which is why we need to distract them.”

Nitin frowned. “Distract them how?”

For a moment Aayush looked at each of them, waiting to see if someone else would come up with the idea. No one did. So, finally he spoke.

“Don’t think too hard,” he said with a teasing smirk. “You might lose whatever little brain you have left.”

Everyone stared at him in mild irritation.

“Stop acting smart,” Vanshika said. “Just tell us the rest.”

Aayush took a breath.

“We need to start a fire.”

Ishan blinked in confusion. “A fire? Where?”

“In the office.”

Nitin’s eyebrows shot up. “Wow... I didn’t think of that.”

Vanshika looked at Aayush carefully.

“But who’s going to set the fire?”

For a moment no one answered. Their eyes moved from one face to another until finally Aayush spoke.

“I will.”

Vanshika’s expression immediately changed.

“Why would you take that risk?”

“Because I’m the only one who can do it properly,” he said quietly.

Ishan leaned closer. “And when do we escape?”

“Tomorrow,” Aayush replied.

“Tomorrow?” Ishan repeated, stunned.

“Yes, tomorrow. Saturday.”

He glanced at Nitin’s beard and added with a grin, “If we stay here any longer, Nitin’s beard will grow down to his knees.”

Despite everything, a few small smiles appeared.

“Alright,” Vanshika said after a moment. “Done.”

One by one they all nodded and briefly shook hands before dispersing quickly, returning to their work before the guards noticed anything suspicious.

Saturday night arrived with a quiet tension that none of them could ignore. Inside the warehouse, most prisoners slept deeply after the exhausting day. The dim lights cast long shadows across the rows of beds. Only four people remained awake.

Aayush, Vanshika, Nitin, and Ishan lay still, pretending to sleep while waiting for the right moment. After some time passed, Aayush slowly sat up. His heartbeat had begun to pound loudly in his chest. It was time.

He moved quietly toward Vanshika's bed and whispered her name.

"Vanshika."

She turned her head slightly. "Yes?"

"You're still awake?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Oh."

A short silence passed between them.

"Alright," Aayush whispered with forced lightness. "Then wait here. I'll go start the fire and come back."

Vanshika smiled faintly at his attempt to sound casual. As he began to turn away, she suddenly called him back.

"Wait."

He stepped closer again.

"What happened?"

Instead of answering, Vanshika reached forward and kissed him. For a second Aayush froze completely. The moment caught him so off guard that his mind went blank. Her lips were cold, nervous, hesitant—but unmistakably real.

Inside his head, however, something entirely different happened. His thoughts erupted into chaotic excitement, as if a celebration had suddenly begun somewhere deep in his mind. When she finally pulled away, her expression returned to its usual seriousness.

“Now go,” she whispered.

Aayush nodded quickly, trying to look composed while his heart raced uncontrollably.

Outside the warehouse, the night had fallen into the lazy rhythm Aayush had predicted. Several guards lay sprawled on the ground floor near the office, drunk and unconscious. Empty bottles rolled across the dirt floor. Moving carefully through the shadows, Aayush slipped toward the office building and climbed through the window.

Inside, the room smelled of dust, alcohol, and old paperwork.

He moved quickly but deliberately. The first thing he did was remove the Indian flag and the map of India hanging on the wall. He folded them carefully and placed them safely aside, treating them with a quiet respect. Then he began gathering papers, files, and pieces of furniture into a pile. A noticed a small container of kerosene sat in the corner. He poured it generously across the stack until the smell filled the room.

Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the strange watch he had been carrying—the time-travelling watch.

For a moment he stared at it, his mind briefly wandering through memories and possibilities. Then he struck a flame and dropped it onto the soaked pile.

The fire caught quickly.

Orange flames spread across the papers, climbing higher within seconds.

Aayush didn't wait to admire the destruction.

He slipped back through the window and hurried toward the warehouse. Inside, he quietly returned to his bed and lay down as if he had never moved. His heart pounded loudly in his ears as he stared at the ceiling.

Now all he had to do was wait for the chaos to begin.

Chapter 19

The moment Aayush slipped back onto his bed and stilled his breathing, the world outside began to fracture exactly the way he had imagined it would.

At first, it was only distant noise—shouting that seemed half-drowned in sleep, the kind of confusion that didn't quite register as danger. Then came the unmistakable sound of panic. Boots against gravel. Orders barked too quickly to be understood. Someone yelling about fire. Someone else shouting names that dissolved into chaos.

Aayush lay there, eyes open in the darkness, staring at the wooden ceiling above him, feeling something cold and electric settle inside his chest.

It's started, he thought.

For a brief second, he allowed himself to feel it. It was not relief, not exactly, but something dangerously close to satisfaction. The plan was working. The fire had taken hold and the guards were distracted. This was the moment he had been waiting for.

And yet, beneath that sharp edge of control, something else stirred quietly.

This is real now.

Around them, the warehouse had begun to empty. Prisoners rushed out, drawn by the noise, by fear, by instinct. The sound of bodies moving, whispering, scrambling toward the unknown filled the space, but Aayush did not move, and neither did Vanshika, Nitin, or Ishan.

They stayed. Waiting patiently because for them, this was not confusion. This was an escape.

Aayush pushed himself up slowly and reached under his bed, his fingers closing around the two bottles of kerosene and the matchbox he had hidden earlier. When he turned, Nitin and Ishan were already watching him, their expressions tight with anticipation and something close to disbelief.

He handed the bottles over without ceremony.

“Outside, there are boats,” he said in a low, steady voice. “Burn all of them. Leave just one.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Nitin frowned, trying to process the scale of what Aayush was asking. “What... what are we going to do with kerosene?”

Aayush didn’t waste time explaining more than necessary. “Do as I’m saying. Burn every boat except one.”

Something in his tone made it clear this wasn’t up for debate.

Nitin exhaled slowly, nodding. “Okay. I understand.”

The weight of it settled over them then—not just escape, but sabotage. Not just running, but ensuring no one could follow.

Aayush turned toward the back of the warehouse. “We don’t have much time.”

The wall behind the storage section had always looked weak, almost neglected, and now it became their only way out. He gestured to Ishan, who stepped forward without hesitation, and together they began forcing the wooden planks apart. The sound felt deafening in the quiet, each crack echoing like a warning.

Hurry.

The wood finally gave way, splintering enough to create an opening as the cold night air rushed in. Freedom—or something dangerously close to it—waited on the other side.

“Run,” Aayush said, his voice low but urgent. “We need to cover at least three kilometres to reach the edge of the island.”

No one asked questions after that. They just ran.

—

Outside, the camp had descended into chaos.

Flames licked the night sky from the office building, casting a violent orange glow over everything. Guards rushed back and forth, some trying to control the prisoners, others desperately attempting to contain the fire. Guns were drawn, voices were raised, and fear had begun to replace authority.

The illusion of control had shattered. Near the centre of it all, the senior guard stood rigid, scanning the scene with growing suspicion.

“Is everyone here?” he demanded sharply. “No one is missing, right?”

A nearby guard nodded quickly. “No, sir. Everyone is here. Don’t worry.”

For a moment, it seemed like that answer might hold.

Until another guard came running from the warehouse, breathless, panic written across his face.

“Sir—someone broke the warehouse wall. Some prisoners have escaped.”

The shift was immediate.

The senior guard’s expression hardened, rage replacing confusion in an instant. Without hesitation, he pulled his gun and shot the guard who had just spoken. The sound of the gunshot cut through the chaos like a blade.

Silence followed—brief, stunned, terrified.

Then he turned.

“Find them.”

And just like that, the hunt began.

—

Aayush could hear them now. Footsteps behind them, shouts getting closer and the unmistakable sound of pursuit. He glanced back once and saw it clearly—guards, armed, running toward them with deadly intent.

“They’re coming,” he said, breath uneven but voice firm. “Run faster. If we slow down, we’re dead.”

The words didn't need emphasis. They all understood.

The ground beneath their feet felt uneven, treacherous, every step heavier than the last. The distance stretched endlessly ahead of them, and behind them, death was closing in.

Aayush's mind raced—not with panic, but with calculation. This wasn't how it was supposed to feel. He had imagined this moment so many times, had planned every step with precision, but no amount of planning could prepare him for the sound of real bullets, for the weight of real lives depending on him.

For her life.

Vanshika.

He glanced at her briefly, running beside him, her breathing strained but determined, and something twisted painfully inside him.

I won't let anything happen to you, the thought came instinctively. And yet, somewhere deep inside, another voice whispered—

You already know what happens.

Before he could fully confront it, the night exploded.

Gunshots rang out.

The first bullet hit him before he could react.

Aayush felt it like a sudden, brutal force tearing through his body, the impact knocking the breath out of him as pain spread sharply across his stomach. His steps faltered, vision blurring for a fraction of a second.

But what came next hurt more.

Vanshika's scream.

He turned just in time to see her stagger, a bullet grazing her arm, blood staining her sleeve almost instantly.

"No!" he shouted, the word ripped out of him before he could stop it.

For a moment, everything else disappeared. The guards, the chase, the plan. Nothing seemed to matter. All that existed was the sight of her in pain. Something inside him snapped into action.

He pulled out the gun, his hands shaking but determined, and fired back. One of the guards fell, the others hesitating just enough for them to gain a few seconds.

"Move!" he shouted.

They stumbled behind a tree, using it as a brief cover.

Aayush reached for Vanshika, his hands trembling as he tried to steady her. "Stay with me. Just a little further."

She tried to move, but her strength was already fading, her body struggling against the shock.

"I... I can't," she whispered.

Panic surged through him. No. Not now. Not like this.

He turned to Nitin, his voice sharp, almost desperate. "Take her. Carry her. Go."

Nitin hesitated only for a second before lifting her onto his shoulder.

“Go!” Aayush repeated.

There was no time left for anything else.

Ishan and Nitin ran ahead, carrying Vanshika between them, their pace uneven but relentless. Aayush stayed back for a moment longer, firing again to keep the guards at a distance, ignoring the burning pain in his own body. Every second felt like it was slipping away.

This is the cost.

The thought came uninvited. This is what changing things feels like.

—

By the time they reached the edge of the island, the world had narrowed to breath and movement.

Nitin lowered Vanshika onto the boat carefully, his chest heaving, his hands shaking from exhaustion and fear. Ishan moved quickly, setting fire to the remaining boats, ensuring no one could follow them.

Flames spread behind them once more, cutting off the path they had just taken. For a moment, everything stood still, the ocean stretched endlessly ahead, dark and uncertain.

Behind them, danger still lingered.

Nitin turned to Ishan, his voice breaking under the weight of everything they had just endured. “Should we wait for Aayush?”

The question hung in the air, heavier than anything else. Ishan didn’t answer immediately because the truth was simple.

Waiting meant dying and leaving meant something worse.

Finally, he shook his head, his expression hardening in a way it never had before.

“No.”

It was not a careless decision. It was survival.

Together, they pushed the boat forward, the water parting beneath them as they moved away from the island, away from the fire, away from everything they had known.

And behind them, somewhere in the darkness, Aayush was still fighting—caught between the life he was trying to save and the past he was trying to rewrite.

Chapter 20

The night did not end with the escape. It simply thinned into something quieter, colder, and far more unforgiving.

By the time the sky began to pale, Aayush had stopped running. He had collapsed against the base of a tree, his back pressed to the rough bark as though the earth itself was the only thing still holding him upright. The gun had slipped from his hand at some point—he didn't remember when—and now his fingers rested uselessly in his lap, stained dark with his own blood. Every breath felt heavier than the last, as though his body had already begun the slow process of letting go.

In front of him, the horizon was beginning to glow. The first hint of sunrise stretched across the sky, soft and almost indifferent to everything that had happened just hours ago.

Aayush stared at it, his vision blurring at the edges, not entirely sure whether he was looking at the present or remembering something else entirely.

For a moment, the island disappeared.

And he was home.

He could see his mother standing in the kitchen, the quiet rhythm of her movements filling the space with something warm and familiar. His father, sitting with the newspaper, pretending to read but always listening. The kind of ordinary life he had once taken for granted, the kind that now felt impossibly distant.

A faint smile touched his lips. He had always thought he would have time to go back. Time to fix things, time to explain. But time, he realized now, had never belonged to him in the way he had believed. It had only allowed him to borrow it.

His thoughts shifted, unsteady, drifting toward something else—someone else.

Anaya.

The memory of her came not as a clear image, but as a feeling, something soft and persistent that refused to fade. He remembered the promise he had made, the way it had felt so certain in that moment, so possible.

I'll come back. I won't let anything happen.

Now a quiet laugh escaped him, though it barely made a sound.

Promises were strange things. They felt so powerful when spoken, as though words alone could shape reality, as though intention was enough to defy everything that stood in the way.

But lying there now, with the morning unfolding in front of him and his strength slipping away, he understood something he hadn't allowed himself to accept before.

Some promises were never meant to be kept. Not because they didn't matter but because the world did not bend to them.

His gaze drifted again, unfocused, lingering on the rising sun.

At least she's safe. That thought brought him a kind of peace he hadn't expected.

Vanshika.

He didn't know what the future would look like for her now, didn't know whether she would remember him as anything more than a fragment of this nightmare, but the fact that she was alive—that was enough. It had to be enough.

The sound of footsteps pulled him back. They were not loud or even rushed. They were controlled and deliberate.

Aayush didn't turn immediately. He already knew who it would be. There was no one else left to come.

The guards approached slowly, forming a circle around him, their weapons drawn, their expressions hardened by what had unfolded through the night. He could feel their presence more than see it, the way the air seemed to tighten, closing in around him.

The senior guard's voice cut through the silence.

"Make a circle. Surround him."

There was no panic in it this time, no confusion. Only anger. And something else beneath it—fear, perhaps, though it was carefully hidden.

Aayush lifted his head slightly, forcing himself to look at them.

His body refused to cooperate the way it once had. Even holding himself upright felt like an effort he could no longer sustain, and when he tried to reach for the gun, his fingers barely responded.

It didn't matter. He knew how this would end.

One of the junior guards stepped forward, cautiously at first, then with more certainty when he realized there was no resistance coming. He bent down, prying the gun from Aayush's hand, as if taking something that no longer belonged to him.

Aayush didn't stop him. What was the point?

A faint smile appeared on his face instead, the kind that came not from defiance, but from a strange, quiet acceptance. So this is it.

The senior guard stepped closer, his expression sharp, his eyes burning with a kind of fury that demanded an answer for everything that had happened.

For the fire.

For the escape.

For the loss of control.

Aayush met his gaze without flinching. There was no fear left in him now. Only exhaustion and something that felt almost like relief. The guard didn't speak. He didn't need to. The gun was raised. And in that final moment, Aayush's thoughts

didn't return to the chaos, or the pain, or even the promise he had broken.

They returned to something simpler.

A sunrise. A quiet moment. A girl standing beside him, laughing at something small and ordinary.

And the feeling, brief but real, that for once, he had been exactly where he was meant to be.

The shot echoed through the stillness. And just like that, it was over.

—

The ocean was calmer by the time they found the cargo ship.

Nitin had spotted it first, his voice breaking through the exhaustion as he pointed toward the distant silhouette. By then, Vanshika had lost consciousness completely, her body too weak to hold on any longer. Ishan had taken over rowing when Nitin's arms began to tremble, and together they had pushed forward with a desperation that refused to give in.

When they were finally pulled aboard, everything moved quickly. There were rushed voices, hands tugging, questions they couldn't answer.

Vanshika was taken first, her injury treated with an urgency that made the situation feel real in a way it hadn't before. Blood loss, shock, dehydration—words that floated around them without fully settling.

Nitin and Ishan stood at a distance, watching, unable to do anything except wait. Time passed strangely after that. The

minutes felt like hours and hours felt like something else entirely.

And then, finally, she opened her eyes.

At first, there was confusion. A ceiling she didn't recognize, a smell that wasn't the warehouse. The absence of noise—the kind of silence that didn't belong to that island.

Then the memory returned. Too quickly.

She sat up slightly, her breathing uneven, her eyes searching instinctively.

“Aayush?” she asked, her voice fragile, as though saying his name would somehow make him appear.

Nitin and Ishan exchanged a glance. Neither of them wanted to be the one to say it. But silence was its own answer.

“Where is he?” she asked again, more urgently this time.

Nitin swallowed, the words catching in his throat before he forced them out.

“He... didn't make it.”

For a second, she didn't react. As though the sentence hadn't reached her properly. As though her mind refused to accept something so absolute. And then it did.

The sound that left her wasn't controlled, wasn't quiet, wasn't anything she could stop. It was raw, breaking through her chest as tears followed without warning, her body shaking under the weight of something she couldn't contain.

“No... no, that's not possible,” she whispered, as if denying it could undo it.

But reality remained unchanged.

Hours later, when the ship finally reached the Indian coast, the grief hadn't lessened. It had only settled deeper, becoming something heavier, something that would not leave easily.

The hall was filled with voices. Journalists were scattered everywhere, pointing cameras, their questions waiting to be asked.

Vanshika stood at the front with Ishan and Nitin beside her, her posture steady in a way that didn't reflect what she was feeling inside. The world had shifted again, from survival to accountability, from silence to truth.

Then she spoke. Not as a victim. Not even as someone grieving.

But as someone who had seen what needed to be seen. She told them everything. About the island, about the prisoners, about the system that had allowed it to exist. Every word carried weight, not just of memory, but of responsibility. By the time the conference ended, the story had already begun to spread.

And this time, it could not be buried. Ranjan Singh was arrested soon after, taken into custody as the truth unraveled around him piece by piece.

Justice, in its own delayed and imperfect way, had begun to move.

When the police finally reached the island, the silence there felt different from before. It was heavier.

Bodies lay scattered across the ground—guards, prisoners, remnants of a night that had changed everything. The fire had consumed parts of the camp, leaving behind ash and evidence of what had taken place.

But not everything was gone. The senior guard was found alive although barely.

He was taken into custody without resistance, his authority stripped away as easily as it had once been enforced. And as they brought him back to the capital, the island remained behind, no longer a place of control, but a graveyard of choices, consequences, and a story that would not be forgotten.

Somewhere beyond all of that, beyond the noise and the aftermath, a life had ended. And in its place, something else had begun. It wasn't a closure in any sense nor was it peace.

But the truth.

Chapter 21

Justice, when it finally came, did not arrive with the kind of release people imagine.

By the time the verdict was announced, the country had already moved on to debating outcomes, drawing conclusions, attaching meaning to something that, for a while, had consumed every headline. For most people, it had become a story—disturbing, yes, but distant enough to be discussed over conversations and then set aside. For Vanshika, it had never turned into a story. It remained exactly what it had been—lived, breathed, survived.

When the government ordered the execution of Ranjan Singh and Amit Kumar, there was a quiet approval that rippled through the public. It felt decisive. Final. Necessary. The kind of ending that reassures people that systems, however flawed, can still correct themselves.

But sitting with the news, Vanshika felt none of that reassurance.

She expected something—anger, perhaps, or even relief—but what settled inside her instead was a strange emptiness, as

though the outcome had arrived too late to change anything that actually mattered. The island did not disappear because of a verdict. Bhavna did not return. And Aayush... Aayush remained exactly where she had last seen him, frozen somewhere between memory and loss.

The day of the execution passed with the kind of controlled efficiency that institutions pride themselves on. Inside the prison, everything followed protocol. Movements were measured, voices kept low, as though even the walls understood that this was not a moment to be disturbed.

Ranjan Singh and Amit Kumar were brought forward one after the other. Stripped of their positions, their influence, the aura that had once made people hesitate before speaking against them, they looked almost unfamiliar. Not because they had changed, but because the power that had defined them was gone.

For a brief moment, Vanshika wondered if this was what justice ultimately did—it reduced people to what they were without the structures that protected them.

There were no words exchanged that carried weight. Nothing that could bridge the distance between what had been done and what was being done now. And when it ended, it ended quietly. No spectacle. No drama. Just a finality that closed a chapter the world was ready to move on from.

But closure did not come with it.

It never had.

—

Time, as it always does, continued without asking who was ready.

The country absorbed the incident into its collective memory. Reforms were introduced. Systems were tightened. The names that had once been spoken with fear were now used as examples—proof that accountability could exist, that power was not always permanent.

And somewhere within that changing landscape, Vanshika built a life that seemed, from the outside, almost inevitable.

Her entry into politics had not been planned. It had begun with small decisions, the kind that feel temporary when you make them, only to realize later that they have quietly redirected your entire life. She spoke because she had seen things that others hadn't. She stayed because leaving felt like abandoning something unfinished.

People listened.

Over time, that listening turned into belief, and belief doesn't take much time to turn into trust.

Years passed, and she carried that trust forward, step by step, until one day she found herself standing at a place she had never once imagined for herself—not even in the most distant version of her future.

The Prime Minister's office did not feel like a destination. It felt like a responsibility that had outgrown the person she used to be.

That night, the office was unusually quiet. Files lay open on her desk, but her attention had drifted elsewhere. Outside,

the city moved in its usual rhythm, indifferent to the weight carried inside that room.

Ishan stood a few feet away, watching her with the ease of someone who didn't need explanations to understand when something was off. He had changed in the years between then and now, but not in ways that erased who he had been. There were still moments when the past surfaced in his expressions, in the way he observed things others might overlook.

He noticed the distance in her first.

Not physical, but something quieter—the way she seemed present and absent at the same time.

He hesitated before speaking, aware that some silences are better left untouched, but also knowing that this one had lingered too long to be ignored.

“Do you still miss him?” he asked, his voice low enough to belong only to the room.

The question settled between them, not intrusive, not unexpected—just inevitable.

Vanshika did not answer immediately.

She let the words sit with her, not because she needed time to decide what to say, but because she needed to acknowledge what they carried. Missing Aayush was not something that came and went. It was something that had changed shape over the years, becoming quieter, less urgent, but never entirely gone.

There were days when she did not think of him at all, when work consumed everything, when decisions demanded her

full attention. And then there were moments—unexpected, unguarded—when something small would bring him back. A certain kind of silence. The way the sky looked at sunset. The memory of a sentence left unfinished.

She nodded, almost to herself before the gesture fully formed.

“Yes,” she said, and this time the word felt complete, not fragile.

There were tears in her eyes, but they did not fall immediately. It was not the kind of grief that demanded expression anymore. It had settled into something deeper, something that existed without needing to be seen.

Ishan did not respond with sympathy or reassurance. He knew better by now that some things are not meant to be comforted away.

For a moment, the room held that truth quietly between them. Vanshika looked away, her gaze drifting toward the window, where the city lights stretched endlessly, each one representing a life moving forward without pause.

She thought of Aayush then, not as he had died, but as he had been in the moments that had stayed with her—the half-smile, the way he spoke about things as though he could outthink the world itself, the strange certainty with which he had made promises that neither of them had fully understood.

He had not survived, and yet his absence had never felt like an ending. It had settled into her life in quieter, more complicated ways, shaping the person she had become and the choices she now carried with a kind of unwavering certainty. There were moments, often unannounced, when she would

recognize it—the way she spoke, the risks she was willing to take, the stubborn refusal to look away when something felt wrong—and she would know that a part of him still lived there, threaded into her decisions in ways no one else could see.

After a while, she let out a slow breath and reached for the file resting on her desk, drawing herself back into the present with a practiced steadiness that had taken years to build. It was not detachment, not quite, but something closer to discipline—the ability to keep moving even when memory insisted on pulling her backward. There was work waiting for her, responsibilities that did not pause for grief or nostalgia, and she had learned, over time, how to meet them without letting her past unravel her completely.

Still, as she turned the page and began to read, a part of her remained elsewhere, untouched by the passage of years, suspended in a moment that refused to fade. It lingered beneath an open sky, in the quiet between breaths, holding on to something that had never really left and perhaps never would.

Chapter 22

The years had taught Vanshika how to return from memory without breaking, but that morning—somewhere far behind her, in a version of life that had not yet been shaped by loss—time seemed to loosen its grip and slip backward.

It was 2020 again.

Rain fell in a steady rhythm against the city, soft but persistent, turning the morning into something slower, more intimate. The world outside Aayush's house looked washed and new, as if nothing terrible had ever happened, as if the future had not yet made its quiet, irreversible choices. Anaya stood at the gate for a brief second, brushing raindrops off her sleeves, her expression caught somewhere between mild annoyance and fond familiarity. She had done this a hundred times before—come to drag him out of bed, argue with him about being late, and somehow still end up laughing before the day properly began.

Inside, the house carried the warmth of routine. The faint smell of tea lingered in the air, and somewhere in the background, utensils clinked softly against each other. When

Anaya stepped in, Aayush's mother greeted her with the kind of affection that had long stopped being formal. There was comfort in it, in the way she smiled and asked her to sit, as though Anaya belonged there as naturally as Aayush did.

"Come in, beta," she said gently. "You're here for him, right? He's upstairs, but I don't know what he's doing today. I've been calling him, and he's not answering."

Anaya let out a small, knowing sigh, shaking her head with a half-smile that carried both irritation and familiarity. "He must be lost in something again."

His mother nodded, amused in a way only a mother could be. "Go check on him, will you? Maybe he'll listen to you."

There was something almost ordinary about the request, something so simple that it carried no weight of what it would eventually become. Anaya agreed without thinking twice, slipping off her shoes and making her way upstairs, her steps light but purposeful.

As she climbed, she found herself rehearsing the same complaints she always had—how he never picked up his phone, how they were going to be late, how he had an uncanny ability to disappear into his own world when it mattered the least. Yet beneath those familiar irritations was something softer, something she never quite put into words. A quiet attachment. A presence she had grown used to, without ever imagining what it would feel like to lose it.

When she reached his door, she did not knock. She never did. She pushed it open and stepped inside, already mid-sentence. "Hey, are you ever planning to—"

The words faltered, not because something was wrong, but because something felt... different in a way she could not immediately explain.

Aayush was sitting by his desk, his back slightly hunched, completely absorbed in what he was writing. There was an intensity to him, a stillness that did not belong to the boy she had known for years. For a moment, he did not even notice her, as though the act of writing had pulled him somewhere deeper than the room itself.

“Hey,” she said again, softer this time.

He turned.

And for a fraction of a second—so brief that it could have easily been imagined—Anaya felt something shift inside her. He was not the same Aayush she once knew; he felt like someone else entirely—only the name remained the same, while the face had changed, and she realized perhaps time was not kind enough to grant him another chance, leaving him lost to it forever.

She frowned slightly, trying to shake the feeling out of her head.

“What are you doing?” she asked, stepping further into the room. “We’re going to be late for college.”

Aayush looked at her for a moment longer than usual, as if grounding himself back into the present, and then a small, almost absent-minded smile formed on his lips. It was the kind of smile that felt real and yet incomplete, like something was missing from it.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I’ll be ready.”

She walked closer, glancing at the notebook in front of him, though he instinctively shifted it slightly, not enough to hide it, but enough to suggest it was something personal. That, too, was unusual. He had never been secretive about things like this before.

“What are you writing?” she asked, curiosity edging into her tone.

“Just... something,” he replied, his voice trailing off in a way that made it clear he wasn’t going to elaborate.

Anaya studied him for a moment, a faint crease forming between her brows, as though she was trying to solve a puzzle she hadn’t even consciously acknowledged. There was no obvious change, nothing she could point to and say this is different, and yet she felt it all the same—like standing in a familiar room that somehow no longer felt entirely hers.

“You’re acting weird,” she said finally, half teasing, half serious.

“Am I?” he asked, though there was no real confusion in his voice.

“Yes,” she insisted, crossing her arms lightly. “Very.”

For a brief moment, something flickered in his expression—something like recognition, or perhaps restraint—but then it faded, replaced by something easier, something closer to who he had always been.

“Relax,” he said. “I’ll be down in five minutes.”

She rolled her eyes, the tension easing just enough for her to fall back into their usual rhythm. “You always say that, and it’s never five minutes.”

“Today it will be,” he replied.

She did not argue further. Instead, she turned and walked toward the door, pausing only for a second before stepping out, as if some part of her wanted to look back, to check again, to make sure that whatever she had felt was not real. But she didn’t. She brushed it off the way people do with things they cannot explain and continued downstairs.

Inside the room, Aayush remained seated for a few seconds after she left, his gaze lingering on the space where she had been standing. Slowly, he looked back down at the page in front of him.

The words were already there, written in a handwriting that carried more weight than it should have for someone his age.

He read them again, quietly, as if trying to understand them himself.

Not everything is meant to return. Some things only exist to change you... and then let you go.

His fingers hovered over the page for a moment before he closed the notebook, exhaling softly, as though sealing something away that did not belong in this time.

Downstairs, Anaya’s voice drifted faintly through the house, blending into the ordinary sounds of a morning that felt untouched by anything extraordinary.

And perhaps that was the strangest part of it all. Because in this version of the world, nothing had happened.

No island. No fire. No escape. No loss.

And yet, somewhere beneath the surface of it all, something had changed.

Not loudly, not in a way that could be seen or proven, but quietly enough to exist only in fragments—in instincts, in choices, in the way someone looked at another person without knowing why.

Time, it seemed, had not been kind enough to return everything. It had only been kind enough to leave behind what truly mattered.

And sometimes, that was all that remained.