

SOME PEOPLE CLIMB THE LADDER.
SOME PEOPLE ARE STILL WAITING FOR THE NEXT RUNG.

PROMOTION PENDING

Meenakshi Shashank Patwa



BlueRose ONE .com
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Meenakshi Shashank Patwa 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRose ONE over
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7825-355-3

Cover Design: Sharvi Singh
Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: July 2026

Contents

Preface	1
PART 1 — THE ANNOUNCEMENT	5
Chapter 1 — Monday Townhall	7
Chapter 2 — The Chosen Three	16
Chapter 3 — “We Are Like Family”	24
Chapter 4 — Glass Cabin Dreams.....	32
Chapter 5 — Coffee Machine Intelligence	41
Chapter 6 — Visibility Matters	51
Chapter 7 — Reply-All Disaster.....	59
Chapter 9 — The Leadership Workshop.....	69
PART 2 — THE GAME BEGINS	81
Chapter 10 — Calendar Politics	83
Chapter 11 — Friday Appreciation Mail.....	93
Chapter 12 — The Silent Competition	103
Chapter 13 — “Quick Sync?”	113
Chapter 14 — Performance vs Perception.....	125
Chapter 15 — Lunch With the Vice President	135
Chapter 16 — Work Wife, Work Husband.....	146
Chapter 17 — The PowerPoint Champion.....	156

Chapter 18 — Utilization Report	166
PART 3 — CRACKS IN THE MASK.....	175
Chapter 19 — Missed Anniversary.....	177
Chapter 20 — “I Need This Promotion”	187
Chapter 21 — Sick Leave	197
Chapter 22 — The Mentor	208
Chapter 23 — HR Confidential	218
Chapter 24 — The Appraisal Draft.....	228
Chapter 25 — LinkedIn Smiles	239
Chapter 26 — Weekend Calls.....	249
Chapter 27 — Escalated	259
PART 4 — THE COST OF WINNING.....	269
Chapter 28 — Leadership Dinner	271
Chapter 29 — The Presentation	284
Chapter 30 — Internal Feedback	296
Chapter 31 — The Breakdown.....	307
Chapter 32 — Promotion Pending	318
Chapter 33 — Rumors Floor 7.....	328
Chapter 34 — The Decision Mail	337
PART 5 — AFTER THE APPLAUSE.....	347
Chapter 35 — Corner Office Silence	349
Chapter 36 — Resignation Letter	360
Chapter 37 — New Targets	371
Chapter 38 — “Can We Have a Quick Chat?”	381
Chapter 39 — Exit Interview	392
 Endnote	 420

Preface

There is a particular kind of silence that exists inside corporate offices after 9 PM.

The keyboards still click.

The fluorescent lights still glow.

Coffee machines still hum in empty corridors.

And somewhere between unfinished presentations, unread emails, and performance dashboards, people quietly begin disappearing from themselves.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

This book was born from observing that silence.

Over the years, I met people who were brilliant, hardworking, ambitious, and deeply committed to their careers. They chased promotions, recognition, stability, and the version of success they had been taught to admire. Some achieved it. Some came very close. Some sacrificed everything trying to reach it.

But almost all of them shared one thing in common:

They were tired in ways sleep could not fix.

The world often speaks about corporate life in extremes. Either it is glorified as the ultimate symbol of ambition and achievement, or it is mocked through jokes and internet memes. The reality, however, is far more human than either version.

Most offices are not filled with villains.

They are filled with ordinary people trying to survive pressure while pretending they are handling it better than they actually are.

Managers trying to protect targets and teams at the same time.
Employees trying to remain valuable without collapsing internally.

Leaders carrying expectations they no longer know how to escape from.

Young professionals slowly confusing burnout with commitment because nobody ever taught them the difference.

This story is fictional.

But the emotions inside it are not.

You may recognize the late-night calls.

The endless presentations.

The carefully worded feedback meetings.

The invisible competition between coworkers who genuinely like each other.

The exhaustion hidden behind professional smiles.

The strange guilt people feel while resting.

You may even recognize yourself.

At its heart, this is not a story about promotions.

It is a story about identity.

About what happens when people spend so much time becoming professionally successful that they slowly forget who they are outside work. About friendships formed under pressure. About ambition, validation, loneliness, survival, and the quiet realization that achievement means very little if peace disappears while pursuing it.

Arjun, Sameer, Neha, Ashwin, Vikram, and the many people inside Floor 7 are not isolated characters. They represent different responses to the same system. Some adapt to it. Some resist it. Some rise within it. Some walk away from it. And some spend years trying to understand whether success and self-preservation can exist together at all.

This book does not argue against ambition.

Ambition can build extraordinary things.

But ambition without boundaries can slowly consume the very person chasing it.

If this story leaves you with anything, I hope it is this:

Your career is an important part of your life.

It should never become the only proof that your life matters.

And if, somewhere during these pages, you pause and ask yourself whether you still recognize the person you became while chasing success then this book has already done its job.

**PART 1 —
THE ANNOUNCEMENT**

Chapter 1 —

Monday Townhall

Monday mornings in the office always felt slightly dishonest.

The smiles were too quick.

The greetings too energetic.

The coffee too necessary.

By 8:45 AM, Floor 7 of **Axion Global Services** was already glowing with artificial light and unfinished stress.

Employees moved through the aisles carrying laptops, badges, and private anxieties carefully hidden behind professional expressions.

Near the far corner of the operations bay, Arjun sat staring at a spreadsheet that had stopped making sense twenty minutes ago.

Not because the numbers were complicated.

Because he hadn't slept properly in three days.

His inbox kept expanding faster than his ability to reduce it, and somewhere in the middle of reviewing a client escalation at 1:12 AM, he had accidentally started wondering whether this was what adulthood permanently felt like.

“Bro.”

Arjun looked up.

Sameer dropped into the chair beside him holding two paper cups of coffee.

“You looked emotionally unavailable, so I bought caffeine.”

Arjun accepted the cup without protest.

“That’s friendship now?”

“No,” Sameer said. “Friendship is pretending this company won’t kill us slowly.”

Arjun laughed despite himself.

That was Sameer’s talent.

He could make exhaustion sound temporary.

A few desks away, Neha was trying to reconnect to a conference room projector while simultaneously answering messages on Microsoft Teams.

“Who disconnected the HDMI again?” she muttered.

“Nobody knows,” Sameer replied loudly. “The projector chooses its own victims.”

Neha rolled her eyes without looking at him.

“Some of us are working.”

“Some of us,” Sameer said proudly, “are preserving office morale.”

The three of them had never officially become friends.

Corporate friendships rarely happen through declarations.

They happen through repetition.

Shared deadlines.

Shared complaints.

Shared survival.

Over time, they had simply become part of each other's daily rhythm.

Arjun—the dependable one.

Sameer—the politically fluent one.

Neha—the person who quietly fixed everything before anyone noticed it was broken.

Different personalities. Different ambitions.

Same office.

Same pressure.

At 9:02 AM, the company-wide message appeared on every screen.

MANDATORY TOWNHALL — 9:30 AM — ALL EMPLOYEES

A collective sigh moved across the floor.

Nobody liked town halls.

Town halls were where leadership used words like *vision*, *growth*, and *exciting transformation* before announcing extra work.

Sameer leaned back in his chair.

“Place your bets.”

“On what?” Neha asked.

“What disaster is being announced today.”

Arjun didn’t look up from his laptop.

“Budget cuts.”

“Too depressing.”

“Restructuring.”

“Too realistic.”

Neha finally managed to fix the projector.

“Maybe they’re just updating quarterly targets.”

Sameer stared at her.

“You still have hope. That’s adorable.”

By 9:28 AM, the auditorium was full.

Rows of employees sat beneath dim white lights while soft instrumental music played through ceiling speakers like an apology.

Arjun sat beside Sameer in the middle row.

Neha squeezed into the seat beside them carrying her notebook and half-finished coffee.

Around them, whispers floated quietly through the room.

“Something big is coming.”

“My manager sounded nervous.”

“Heard leadership from Singapore is joining remotely.”

“Maybe acquisitions?”

“Maybe layoffs?”

Corporate fear spreads fastest through incomplete information.

Then the lights dimmed slightly.

The CEO walked onto the stage.

And instantly, the room straightened itself.

That always fascinated Neha.

Power changes posture before it changes decisions.

The CEO adjusted the microphone.

Behind him, the company logo glowed across a massive presentation screen.

He smiled calmly.

The kind of calm that only senior leadership and airline pilots seem capable of performing.

“Good morning, everyone.”

The audience responded automatically.

“Good morning.”

A rehearsed chorus of employment.

The presentation began normally.

Revenue growth.

Regional expansion.

Client wins.

Slides filled with upward arrows and smiling stock images.

Sameer leaned toward Arjun and whispered:

“If one more slide says ‘synergy,’ I’m resigning publicly.”

Neha bit back a laugh.

Then the CEO stopped changing slides.

The room became quieter.

Even the air conditioning suddenly sounded louder.

“We are entering an important phase as an organization,” he said.

There it was.

The sentence before the sentence.

Everybody felt it.

“As part of our expansion strategy, we will be creating a new Regional Director position effective this quarter.”

Silence.

One second.

Two seconds.

Then applause exploded across the auditorium.

Not emotional applause.

Professional applause.

People clapped while thinking.

And the thinking was louder than the clapping.

Arjun felt his heartbeat shift slightly.

Regional Director.

That was not a small role.

That was life-changing salary.

Life-changing visibility.

Life-changing authority.

Around the auditorium, employees had already started calculating invisible hierarchies.

Who was close to leadership?

Who had influence?

Who had visibility?

Who was already being positioned?

Sameer stopped clapping first.

Not because he wasn't interested.

Because he was observing the room.

Who looked confident.
Who looked nervous.
Who suddenly started sitting straighter.
That was information too.

Neha noticed something else.
Managers were clapping differently than employees.
Less surprised.
More controlled.
Which meant some people already knew.
And if some people already knew...
Then the race had started long before the announcement.

The CEO continued speaking, but most people had already stopped listening.
The atmosphere had changed.
The room no longer felt united.
It felt divided invisibly into possibilities.

Sameer leaned closer toward Arjun.
Quietly, almost casually, he said:
“You know they’re already evaluating people, right?”
Arjun looked toward the stage.

“Probably.”

Neha heard both of them.

Neither of them realized she did.

On the stage, the CEO smiled confidently beneath the glowing company logo.

But across the auditorium, something far more powerful had already begun.

Ambition.

Silent. Polite. Dangerous.

And none of them understood yet,

that this single announcement was about to change not only their careers...

but the way they looked at each other forever.

Chapter 2 —

The Chosen Three

By Tuesday morning, the office had developed a new sound.

Not louder.

But sharper.

Conversations paused when certain people walked by.

Managers suddenly remembered names they normally forgot.

Even greetings carried evaluation in them now.

The announcement had done what promotions always do in corporate life:

It had turned ordinary employees into possible outcomes.

Arjun noticed the change first in his inbox.

At 8:17 AM, his manager forwarded a client appreciation mail with a short message underneath:

“Excellent ownership on this. Let’s discuss growth trajectory soon.”

Growth trajectory.

Corporate language never says promotion directly.

It circles around it like an expensive perfume.

Across the aisle, Sameer was already in a video call before most people logged in.

He sat relaxed in his chair, sleeves folded neatly, voice calm.

“No, don’t position it as a delay,” he was saying. “Position it as strategic sequencing.”

Neha looked up from her laptop.

“How do you talk like LinkedIn posts in real life?”

Sameer muted the call.

“Leadership skill.”

“That’s not leadership,” Arjun said dryly. “That’s verbal fraud.”

Sameer grinned.

“Exactly. Leadership.”

Neha laughed softly and returned to her screen, but her eyes drifted across the floor.

Something was different today.

People were performing professionalism harder than usual.

Employees who normally disappeared quietly into cubicles were suddenly volunteering opinions in meetings.

Managers were “checking in” more frequently.

Even the coffee machine area had become politically active.

At 10:30 AM, Floor 7 gathered for the weekly operations review meeting.

The conference room was too cold, too bright, and smelled faintly of stress and whiteboard marker ink.

Arjun sat near the middle of the table reviewing numbers on his laptop.

Sameer entered two minutes later, confidently late in the way only socially intelligent employees can manage without consequences.

Behind him came Neha carrying printed reports.

The last chair beside Arjun was empty.

She took it.

Their manager, Vikram, stood near the screen adjusting slides.

Vikram had mastered the art of looking permanently disappointed without specifying why.

“Let’s begin,” he said.

The slide changed.

Metrics appeared.

Targets. Utilization. Client satisfaction—

The holy trinity of corporate suffering.

Halfway through the meeting, a client escalation issue came up.

The room immediately became quieter.

Escalations changed oxygen levels.

Vikram looked around.

“Who handled the recovery on the Phoenix account?”

Arjun answered quietly.

“I did.”

Vikram nodded.

“The client specifically appreciated the turnaround.”

A few heads turned toward Arjun.

Not dramatically.

But enough.

Recognition in meetings behaves like currency.

And everybody notices where it lands.

Sameer leaned back slightly, watching the room instead of the slide.

He noticed three things immediately:

- senior managers nodded when Arjun spoke,
- junior employees suddenly looked more attentive toward him,
- and Vikram did not move to the next slide immediately afterward.

That pause mattered.

Because pauses create emphasis.

Then Vikram said the sentence that changed the atmosphere again.

“We need more people with leadership ownership like that.”

Silence.

Tiny.

Almost invisible.

But everybody heard it.

Neha glanced briefly toward Arjun.

He looked uncomfortable.

Not modest.

Uncomfortable.

Like public praise felt too visible on him.

Sameer noticed that too.

And quietly stored it away.

The meeting moved on, but something had already shifted.

When people spoke now, they spoke more carefully.

Every comment sounded slightly auditioned.

Every idea carried ambition hidden beneath collaboration.

Later, near the pantry, the gossip began evolving into structure.

“I think leadership already has favourites.”

“Obviously.”

“Arjun’s name is definitely in discussion.”

“No chance. Sameer has stronger visibility.”

“What about Neha?”

“She’s good, but too quiet.”

Neha froze briefly outside the pantry door when she heard that.

Too quiet.

Funny how offices mistake calmness for absence.

Inside, Sameer was stealing someone else’s yogurt from the fridge.

“Technically,” he said while examining the label, “if nobody claims it for 24 hours, it becomes public property.”

“That’s not law,” Arjun replied.

“That’s survival.”

Neha entered and dropped her reports onto the counter.

“You know people are discussing us now.”

Sameer looked delighted.

“Oh good. I was worried productivity might happen today.”

Arjun frowned slightly.

“It’s stupid.”

“No,” Sameer said calmly, finally serious. “It’s predictable.”

For a moment, the three of them stood quietly near the coffee machine while the office buzzed around them.

Printers hummed.

Phones rang.

Someone somewhere was apologizing to a client loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Normal office life.

Except it wasn’t normal anymore.

Because now every interaction carried invisible comparison.

Neha crossed her arms.

“You really think they’ve already started evaluating people?”

Sameer looked at her.

“They started before the townhall.”

Arjun sighed.

“I hate this part.”

“What part?”

“The part where everyone stops acting normal.”

Sameer smiled faintly.

“Corporate life is people pretending not to compete while competing professionally.”

Neha studied both of them quietly.

Arjun—the strongest performer on the floor, completely unaware of how visible his competence had become.

Sameer—the kind of person who could walk into any room and somehow leave with influence.

And somewhere between them...

she felt herself standing in a place nobody noticed properly yet.

Which, strangely enough, made her more dangerous than both.

By evening, the office had unofficially decided something.

No emails confirmed it.

No leadership announcement declared it.

But everybody knew.

Three names had begun circulating more than others.

Arjun.

Sameer.

Neha.

The hardworking performer.

The politically fluent operator.

The emotionally intelligent stabilizer.

Three different paths toward power.

One is promotion.

And somewhere deep beneath the polite conversations and corporate smiles, the race had already become personal.

Chapter 3 —

“We Are Like Family”

Wednesday began with rain and an email from the HR.

The rain arrived first—soft against the glass windows of Floor 7, turning the Mumbai skyline gray and blurred.

The HR email arrived three minutes later.

Subject:

Leadership Culture Initiative — Building Our Family Together

Sameer stared at the screen for a full five seconds before laughing.

Not loudly.

Just enough for nearby employees to look up.

“Oh no,” he whispered dramatically. “They’ve started using the word family.”

Across from him, Arjun didn’t even look away from his laptop.

“That means something terrible is coming.”

Neha opened the email cautiously.

The message was filled with smiling stock photos and corporate warmth:

At Axion Global Services, we believe people are our greatest strength...

As we enter an exciting new phase of organizational growth...

We are more than colleagues. We are family.

Below that was an announcement for:

- leadership bonding circles,
- emotional wellness sessions,
- mandatory engagement Fridays,
- and “transparent communication initiatives.”

Neha looked up slowly.

“Why does this feel threatening?”

“Because,” Sameer said, spinning his chair slightly, “real families don’t schedule emotional connection through Outlook Calendar.”

Around the office, the email spread quickly.

Employees reacted exactly the way office employees always do:
public enthusiasm,
private suspicion.

“Looks positive.”

“Nice initiative.”

“Good culture focus.”

Nobody trusted it.

At 11 AM, Vikram called for an unplanned floor meeting.

That alone made people nervous.

Managers only schedule sudden meetings for three reasons:

- layoffs,
- targets,
- or damage control.

The team gathered near the central collaboration area holding coffees and emotional caution.

Vikram stood with Priya from HR beside him.

Priya smiled with the dangerous confidence of someone trained professionally to sound comforting during organizational instability.

“We just want to reinforce,” she began brightly, “that leadership deeply values every employee during this exciting transition phase.”

There it was again.

Transition phase.

The phrase floated across the room like invisible smoke.

Arjun noticed Sameer noticing it.

And Neha noticed both of them.

Priya continued.

“We want everyone to feel psychologically safe, emotionally connected, and aligned with organizational goals.”

Sameer leaned slightly toward Arjun and whispered:

“Psychologically safe means they’re about to psychologically damage us professionally.”

Neha nearly choked trying not to laugh.

Unfortunately, Priya noticed.

“Something funny?” she asked pleasantly.

Three seconds of silence.

Then Sameer smiled beautifully.

“Just happy to hear we’re family now.”

Even Vikram looked tired.

The meeting ended awkwardly.

People dispersed slowly, pretending they had not mentally translated every HR sentence into potential restructuring implications.

As the floor settled back into artificial productivity, rumors started multiplying naturally.

“They’re merging departments.”

“No, they’re changing reporting structures.”

“I heard regional leadership is unhappy.”

“I heard external hiring is coming.”

“I heard they already shortlisted candidates.”

Corporate rumours spread like rainwater through cracks—fast, shapeless, unstoppable.

Later that afternoon, the three of them ended up together in Meeting Room C during a broken projector crisis.

Again.

The projector refused to connect.

Neha crouched near the cables with visible frustration.

“Why does this machine behave like it has emotional trauma?”

“Because it works here,” Arjun replied.

Sameer sat casually on the conference table eating chips he absolutely should not have brought into the room.

“You know what’s funny?” he said.

“No,” Neha muttered. “But you’ll tell us anyway.”

Sameer pointed toward the glass walls outside where employees moved between cabins.

“The whole office feels weird today.”

Arjun nodded quietly.

“People are nervous.”

“They’re not nervous,” Sameer corrected. “They’re repositioning.”

That sentence stayed in the room.

Because it was true.

People had started behaving differently around one another.

Managers suddenly became warmer toward high performers.

Employees began speaking more carefully in meetings.

Certain people were being invited into discussions they were never invited into before.

The invisible hierarchy was shifting in real time.

Neha finally got the projector working.

The screen flickered alive.

A leadership slide appeared automatically:

TOGETHER WE GROW

Sameer stared at it.

“Every corporate slogan sounds like it was written by someone being held hostage.”

Even Arjun laughed at that.

And for a moment, things felt normal again.

Then Vikram entered the room unexpectedly.

The laughter died immediately.

Not because anyone feared him personally.

But because offices train employees to emotionally rearrange themselves the moment authority enters a room.

Vikram looked at the projector.

“Good. We need this room in ten minutes.”

Then his eyes moved briefly between the three of them.

A pause.

Small.

But noticeable.

“You three seem to be spending a lot of time together lately.”

Nobody answered immediately.

Because nobody knew what the correct answer was.

Finally Sameer smiled casually.

“Shared suffering builds community.”

Vikram almost smiled.

Almost.

Then he left.

The door closed behind him softly.

Silence lingered for a second.

Then Neha spoke quietly.

“You think he’s evaluating us already?”

Arjun leaned back in his chair.

“He definitely is.”

Sameer crushed the empty chips packet in his hand thoughtfully.

“Everybody is.”

Outside the glass walls, the office continued, moving under white artificial lights and carefully managed expressions.

Employees smiled at each other while updating resumes internally.

Managers spoke about culture while tracking performance.

HR spoke about family while preparing organizational transitions.

And somewhere inside all of it—

three people sat in a conference room slowly realizing that the promotion was no longer just an opportunity.

It was changing the way everybody looked at everybody else.

Chapter 4 —

Glass Cabin Dreams

The cabins were along the far side of Floor 7.

Glass walls. Frosted edges. Silent air conditioning.

The people inside them always looked calmer than everyone else.

Not happier.

Just protected from noise.

For years, employees had walked past those cabins carrying coffee cups and quiet ambition, imagining what life on the other side looked like.

Bigger salary.

More authority.

A seat at important meetings.

Freedom from insecurity.

At least that's what everyone told themselves.

Thursday evening arrived wrapped in exhaustion.

The office lights had dimmed into their softer nighttime setting while most employees continued pretending they still had energy left.

Near the operations bay, Arjun was staring at his screen with the hollow concentration of a man whose brain had exceeded safe operating temperature hours ago.

A Teams notification popped up.

Client Escalation Resolved Successfully

Two seconds later came another message from Vikram:

Good recovery today. Leadership appreciated the handling.

Arjun read it twice.

Leadership appreciated.

Noted by leadership.

Visible to leadership.

Those phrases had started feeling dangerously important lately.

Sameer suddenly rolled his chair across the aisle like a man avoiding actual walking.

“Come,” he announced dramatically.

Arjun didn’t look up.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I’m working.”

“You’re decomposing.”

Neha appeared behind them holding her laptop.

“He’s right. You look like Excel has emotionally defeated you.”

Arjun sighed heavily.

“You both are incredibly irritating.”

“Yet unforgettable,” Sameer replied proudly.

Five minutes later, the three of them stood near the large glass windows overlooking the city.

Mumbai glittered outside beneath the evening rain.

Traffic lights stretched endlessly below like restless veins.

For a brief moment, nobody spoke.

The office behind them hummed softly with keyboards, printers, muted meetings, and exhaustion disguised as dedication.

Then Sameer pointed toward the corner cabins.

“You know what the funniest thing about promotions is?”

Neha folded her arms.

“What?”

“Everybody thinks the cabin changes their life.”

Arjun looked toward the largest cabin at the far end.

The Regional Director’s office.

Empty now.

Waiting.

The glass cabin reflected faint city lights across polished surfaces.

It looked powerful from a distance.

Almost cinematic.

And somehow that made it more dangerous.

Neha tilted her head slightly.

“You never imagined yourself in one of those?”

Sameer grinned.

“Of course I did. I’m middle class. Ambition is basically hereditary.”

Even Arjun smiled at that.

Then Sameer asked casually:

“What would you even do with the promotion?”

Neha answered first.

“Pay my father’s loan.”

The silence afterward arrived immediately.

Not awkward.

Real.

She looked out toward the city while speaking quietly.

“He never says anything, but... I know things are tight at home.”

Arjun looked at her differently after that.

Not with sympathy.

With understanding.

Because suddenly the promotion wasn't abstract anymore.

It had entered real life.

Sameer's voice softened slightly.

"You never mentioned that."

Neha shrugged.

"People don't usually discuss financial stress between PowerPoint presentations."

Arjun looked back toward the cabins.

For a long moment he didn't answer.

Then finally:

"I just want to stop feeling replaceable."

The words surprised even him.

Sameer turned toward him fully now.

"What?"

Arjun laughed once under his breath.

"You know the worst feeling in this place?"

Nobody interrupted.

“Giving everything to work... and still feeling like if you disappeared tomorrow, the system would adjust by Monday.”

The office lights reflected faintly in the glass around them.

Neha said nothing.

Because she understood exactly what he meant.

For the first time since the announcement, the promotion stopped sounding exciting.

And started sounding necessary.

Sameer leaned back against the window.

The humor in his expression faded slightly.

“My father still thinks promotions solve life.”

Neha looked at him.

“Don’t they?”

Sameer smiled faintly.

“No. They just upgrade the problems.”

The three of them stood quietly for a moment watching the city below.

Outside, thousands of people were still working somewhere.

Inside, thousands more were still pretending they weren’t afraid.

Then suddenly the floor lights near the cabins switched on automatically.

The empty Regional Director office illuminated softly behind the glass.

The chair.

The polished desk.

The silent monitor waiting to belong to someone.

All three of them looked at it instinctively.

And all three imagined themselves there.

Differently.

Arjun imagined stability.

No more wondering whether he mattered.

No more surviving quarter to quarter emotionally.

Neha imagined relief.

Bills paid on time.

Her parents worrying less.

Finally breathing without calculating the expenses in her head.

Sameer imagined influence.

Not power for ego.

Power to stop asking permission from people he secretly knew were less capable than him.

None of them admitted these thoughts aloud.

But ambition rarely begins loudly.

It begins privately.

Inside quiet moments beside office windows.

Behind them, employees continued typing under artificial lights.

Meetings continued.

Targets continued.

Deadlines continued.

The machine never paused for personal dreams.

Then Sameer suddenly looked at the clock.

“Oh no.”

“What?” Neha asked.

“We’ve been standing dramatically near windows for ten minutes.”

Arjun frowned.

“So?”

“That means we officially look like main characters now.”

Neha laughed so hard she nearly dropped her laptop.

Even Arjun smiled properly this time.

And somehow, that small moment mattered.

Because before the competition fully consumed them...
they were still just three exhausted employees standing together
beneath office lights,
dreaming about a glass cabin that looked, from a distance, like
salvation.

Chapter 5 —

Coffee Machine Intelligence

The coffee machine knew everything.

Not officially.

Officially, it was just a badly maintained machine near the pantry that occasionally leaked cappuccino foam like emotional damage.

But unofficially?

It was the real communication department of Axion Global Services.

Because important information never travelled through emails first.

It travelled through whispers holding paper cups.

Friday morning began with unusual energy.

People arrived earlier.

Dressed sharper.

Smiled harder.

Floor 7 looked less like an office and more like a casting audition for employability.

Near the pantry, employees gathered in small clusters pretending to discuss work while actually discussing people.

The promotion had infected the ecosystem completely now.

Arjun walked toward the coffee machine carrying his laptop charger and the emotional fatigue of a man already losing patience with corporate behavior.

Before he even reached the counter, conversations shifted.

Not stopped.

Shifted.

That was worse.

“...No, but leadership clearly trusts him.”

“Still, visibility matters more than hard work.”

“I heard Vikram already has a preferred candidate.”

Arjun quietly pressed the cappuccino button.

The machine growled like it disagreed with capitalism.

A few seconds later, Sameer appeared beside him.

“You know,” he said casually, “people become dramatically quieter around you now.”

Arjun stared ahead.

“I hate this office.”

“No you don’t.”

“I strongly dislike its continued existence.”

Sameer nodded thoughtfully.

“Fair.”

The coffee machine suddenly made a violent noise before spraying coffee slightly sideways onto the counter.

Neither reacted.

They had seen worse system failures here.

Neha entered the pantry balancing her phone between shoulder and ear.

“Yes, Ma, I transferred the money yesterday.”

Pause.

“No, don’t tell Papa I skipped dinner again.”

Another pause.

“I’m working, Ma.”

She disconnected the call and exhaled slowly before noticing the two of them watching her.

Sameer immediately looked away respectfully.

Arjun pretended to focus on the coffee machine.

That small act of pretending not to hear personal struggles that was friendship in offices.

Neha walked toward them.

“Why do both of you look emotionally unemployed?”

“Because,” Sameer replied, “the office has entered Phase Two.”

She frowned.

“What’s Phase Two?”

“Information warfare.”

Right on cue, Priyanka from Finance entered the pantry.

Priyanka was not officially part of leadership.

But she possessed something far more powerful:

access to accidental information.

And everybody knew it.

She smiled carefully at the three of them.

“Big week, huh?”

Sameer immediately straightened like a journalist sensing sources.

“What do you know?”

Priyanka sipped coffee dramatically.

“I heard leadership discussions already started.”

Arjun closed his eyes briefly.

“Of course they did.”

Neha folded her arms.

“Started about who?”

Priyanka lowered her voice slightly.

“I shouldn’t say.”

Sameer nodded solemnly.

“That means you absolutely will.”

She laughed.

Then glanced around the pantry before leaning closer.

“I heard the leadership team wants someone who can manage people emotionally, not just operationally.”

Neha looked uncomfortable immediately.

Arjun looked thoughtful.

Sameer looked entertained.

Because he already understood what was happening:

The office had started turning personality traits into strategic assets.

Before anyone could respond, another employee entered.

Then another.

Within minutes, the pantry transformed into a full corporate intelligence hub.

People weren't gathering for coffee anymore.

They were gathering for probability updates.

"...Apparently Singapore leadership likes Sameer."

"No, no, Arjun has stronger delivery numbers."

"What about Neha? Senior managers trust her."

"She's too quiet."

"She's smart."

"She doesn't network enough."

"Neither does Arjun."

"Yeah, but Arjun is visible through performance."

"Performance isn't enough."

"Nothing is enough here."

That last sentence lingered heavily in the air.

Because everybody knew it was true.

Near the counter, Sameer stirred coffee thoughtfully.

"You know what fascinates me?"

Neha looked at him carefully.

"What?"

"Nobody talks like this before promotions happen."

Arjun frowned slightly.

“What do you mean?”

Sameer leaned against the counter.

“Look around. Everybody suddenly talks about leadership qualities like they’re football analysts.”

Neha laughed softly.

“He’s right.”

Sameer continued.

“Last month nobody cared who was emotionally intelligent. Now suddenly we’re all leadership case studies.”

The pantry door opened again.

This time Vikram walked in.

Instant silence.

It happened so fast it almost sounded rehearsed.

Nobody trusted casual conversations when managers entered unexpectedly.

Vikram glanced around slowly.

He knew exactly what this room was.

Every manager does.

A place where unofficial truth spreads faster than official communication.

He walked toward the coffee machine calmly.

“You know,” he said while waiting for his coffee, “it’s interesting how productive this pantry becomes during promotion cycles.”

Nobody answered.

Even Sameer behaved himself temporarily.

Then Vikram looked directly at the three of them.

Not aggressively.

Observationally.

“You all should remember something.”

The pantry remained completely silent now.

“The people who usually get promoted...”

A pause.

“...are not always the people talking most about promotions.”

That sentence landed differently on each of them.

Arjun absorbed it seriously.

Neha analyzed it carefully.

Sameer immediately tried decoding whether it was warning, advice, or manipulation.

Probably all three.

Vikram took his coffee and left.

The moment the pantry door closed behind him—
the conversations exploded again.

Louder now.

More anxious.

Because authority had acknowledged the competition openly for
the first time.

Arjun rubbed his forehead tiredly.

“This is becoming ridiculous.”

Neha looked around the crowded pantry.

Employees whispering.

Watching each other.

Measuring reactions.

“It was always ridiculous,” she said quietly.

“We just notice it now.”

Sameer lifted his paper cup like a philosopher delivering truth.

“The coffee machine sees all.”

Neha rolled her eyes.

“You need therapy.”

“I need promotion.”

“You need both.”

They laughed.

But underneath the laughter, something had shifted again.

The office no longer felt like one team moving in the same direction.

It felt like multiple people quietly trying to become the version of themselves they believed leadership wanted to see.

And near the center of all of it—

three coworkers kept standing beside the same coffee machine,
slowly becoming competitors without fully admitting it yet.

Chapter 6 —

Visibility Matters

Monday arrived carrying exhaustion disguised as professionalism.

By 9:15 AM, Floor 7 was already drowning in meetings.

Calendar notifications flashed endlessly.

Phones vibrated across desks.

Employees walked quickly while pretending urgency was personality.

And somewhere inside the chaos, Arjun was quietly solving problems nobody would remember by next week.

He had spent most of the morning fixing a reporting disaster for the Europe team.

A broken automation script had corrupted client data overnight, and by the time most employees arrived at work, Arjun had already repaired the issue, coordinated with IT, updated operations, and prevented escalation.

No announcement.

No applause.

Just another crisis absorbed silently into the machinery.

At 11 AM, the leadership review meeting began.

Sameer walked into the conference room carrying no laptop.

That alone irritated Arjun slightly.

“How do you attend meetings without a laptop?” he whispered.

Sameer sat beside him calmly.

“I attend with confidence.”

“That’s not a skill.”

“It absolutely is.”

Across the table, Vikram connected his presentation to the screen.

Senior managers joined remotely from Singapore and Dubai.

Everyone immediately sat straighter.

International leadership always increased local acting quality.

The meeting began normally.

Targets.

Forecasts.

Revenue projections.

Corporate weather reports.

Then Vikram moved to the Europe incident slide.

Arjun looked up slightly.

Finally.

Vikram cleared his throat.

“Special thanks to the operations and coordination teams for resolving the overnight issue efficiently.”

Arjun blinked once.

Operations and coordination teams.

That was it.

No name.

No visibility.

The meeting moved on immediately.

Sameer glanced sideways toward him.

He saw it happen in real time:

not anger,

not frustration,

just quiet deflation.

The kind that hurts more because it stays professional.

Ten minutes later, another discussion started around a delayed client proposal.

This time Sameer spoke.

Calmly. Smoothly. Confidently.

“The issue isn’t execution delay,” he explained. “It’s stakeholder confidence perception. We need stronger narrative alignment before the next client touchpoint.”

The senior director on the screen nodded immediately.

“Excellent point, Sameer.”

Another manager added:

“Very strategic thinking.”

Sameer smiled politely.

Arjun looked down at the table.

Because the delayed proposal Sameer was discussing?

Arjun had actually fixed most of it over the weekend.

But Sameer had framed it.

And framing was visible.

Neha noticed the shift instantly.

Not just in Arjun.

In the room.

People remembered whoever shaped the conversation—not necessarily whoever solved the problem.

After the meeting ended, employees slowly filtered out into the corridor.

Sameer walked beside Arjun carefully.

“You okay?”

Arjun gave a short laugh.

“Yeah.”

The kind of “yeah” that means absolutely not.

They stopped near the large glass windows overlooking the city.

Behind them, employees continued discussing the meeting energetically.

Buzzwords floated through the hallway like mosquitoes.

Arjun finally spoke quietly.

“I fixed that entire issue alone yesterday.”

Sameer nodded once.

“I know.”

“But nobody even mentioned my name.”

Sameer stayed silent for a second before answering carefully.

“That’s because leadership didn’t see the problem happening.”

Arjun frowned.

“What does that even mean?”

“It means,” Sameer said gently, “the work became invisible the moment you solved it quietly.”

That sentence hit harder than Arjun expected.

Because somewhere deep down—

he already knew it was true.

Neha joined them a few seconds later carrying her notebook.

“You left your charger in the meeting room,” she said, handing it to Arjun.

Then she looked between both of them.

“What happened?”

Neither answered immediately.

Sameer finally sighed.

“He’s discovering corporate reality.”

Neha understood instantly.

For a moment, the three of them stood silently near the window while rain clouds gathered over the city again.

Then Neha spoke softly.

“You know what I realized last year?”

Arjun looked at her.

“The people who work hardest are usually too busy working to explain they’re working hard.”

That landed quietly.

Dangerously quiet.

Sameer folded his arms.

“Visibility matters.”

Arjun looked irritated now.

“So what? I should start performing work instead of doing work?”

“No,” Sameer replied calmly. “You should stop assuming leadership notices effort automatically.”

The office lights reflected softly across the glass walls around them.

Inside the cabins, senior managers spoke in low voices over expensive laptops.

Outside the cabins, employees competed for attention while pretending they only cared about teamwork.

Neha leaned against the window slightly.

“It’s weird though.”

“What?”

She looked toward the floor below where tiny headlights moved endlessly through traffic.

“The office tells us performance matters the most.”

Sameer smiled faintly.

“Performance gets you into the conversation.”

Then he looked directly at Arjun.

“Visibility decides whether people remember you inside it.”

Arjun said nothing after that.

Because for the first time since the promotion announcement—

he wasn’t questioning whether he was capable enough.

He was questioning whether capability alone had ever been enough at all.

Later that evening, the office slowly emptied.

Employees packed bags, shut laptops, and carried unfinished stress back home with them.

Near the far end of Floor 7, the Regional Director cabin remained dark and empty behind glass walls.

Waiting.

Visible.

Important.

Exactly like leadership itself.

And somewhere beneath the office lights—

three coworkers continued moving closer toward the same destination,

while slowly beginning to understand that the race was not about who worked hardest.

It was about who the organization learned to see.

Chapter 7 —

Reply-All Disaster

The disaster began at 8:42 AM.

Which was fitting.

Because most corporate catastrophes begin before people finish their first coffee.

Arjun was halfway through reviewing a client dashboard when a notification flashed across his screen.

Then another.

Then six more.

Within seconds, the entire office erupted into the unmistakable rhythm of corporate panic:

continuous email notifications.

Sameer looked up immediately.

“Oh no.”

Neha frowned from across the aisle.

“What happened?”

Sameer slowly turned his monitor toward them.

The subject line glowed like an incoming missile.

Subject:

RE: Leadership Alignment Discussion — Confidential

Sent to:

ALL INDIA OPERATIONS EMPLOYEES

Three seconds of silence.

Then the office exploded.

People started opening the email simultaneously across Floor 7.

Heads lifted above cubicles.

Chairs rolled backward.

Someone near Finance whispered, “Holy hell.”

Because attached beneath the email chain was a private leadership discussion.

About the promotion.

Arjun opened it carefully.

His stomach tightened immediately.

Inside the thread were leadership comments, candidate observations, and internal evaluation notes never meant for employee visibility.

Most of it was fragmented.

But one section was painfully clear.

“Arjun delivers excellent execution, though leadership visibility remains limited.”

Another line:

“Sameer demonstrates strong stakeholder influence and strategic communication.”

Then:

“Neha has high trust value internally but may require stronger executive presence.”

Silence spread across their row.

Not because the comments were shocking.

Because now everyone knew how leadership actually spoke when employees weren't in the room.

“Oh my God,” Neha whispered.

Sameer leaned back slowly in his chair.

“Well.”

Arjun stared at the screen without blinking.

The words visibility remains limited burned harder than he expected.

Because seeing your weakness privately suspected is one thing.

Seeing it officially documented is another.

Across the office, panic accelerated rapidly.

Employees refreshed inboxes repeatedly.

Some people pretended not to read the email while very obviously reading the email.

Others immediately started forwarding screenshots on WhatsApp like corporate war correspondents.

Then came the second disaster.

Someone replied-all.

“Please ignore previous email. Sent accidentally.”

That should have ended it.

Instead, another employee replied-all:

“Already seen by everyone.”

Then another:

“Please remove me from this thread.”

Then:

“Why am I copied here?”

Then somehow:

“Congratulations to whoever gets selected.”

The chain became uncontrollable.

Sameer covered his face with one hand.

“This is the most corporate tragedy I’ve ever witnessed.”

Even Neha laughed despite the tension.

Only Arjun remained quiet.

Within fifteen minutes, Vikram stormed out of his cabin looking visibly furious for the first time anyone could remember.

“Everyone,” he snapped sharply, “please stop replying-all.”

Too late.

The email chain had already achieved immortality.

Near the pantry, employees gathered in chaotic clusters.

Voices lowered instantly whenever managers walked nearby.

But excitement had already overtaken caution.

Because now the competition wasn’t rumor anymore.

It was documented.

“...I told you, Sameer was leadership favorite.”

“No, Arjun still has stronger performance.”

“They literally said Neha lacks executive presence.”

“What even is executive presence?”

“Expensive confidence.”

Neha stood frozen beside the coffee machine holding a paper cup she hadn’t touched.

Executive presence.

Funny phrase.

Usually used to describe confidence in men and insufficient confidence in women at the same time.

Arjun joined her quietly.

“You okay?”

She shrugged lightly.

“Depends. Do I suddenly become executive if I start interrupting people in meetings?”

That made him smile faintly.

But not for long.

Because his own sentence still sat heavily in his mind.

Leadership visibility remains limited.

A few feet away, Sameer was being cornered by three employees pretending casual curiosity.

“So... looks like leadership really values your communication skills.”

Sameer smiled politely.

“Looks like leadership accidentally exposed everyone’s blood pressure.”

Despite the humor, he felt uneasy too.

Because the email had revealed something dangerous:

leadership already had narratives about all of them.

And narratives, once documented, become difficult to escape.

By afternoon, HR entered full damage-control mode.

An emergency mail arrived:

We request employees to maintain professionalism and avoid speculation regarding confidential internal communications.

Which naturally caused even more speculation.

At 3 PM, Vikram called the three of them into Meeting Room B.

The atmosphere inside felt heavier than usual.

The blinds were partially closed.

Bad sign.

Vikram looked exhausted.

“I assume all of you saw the email.”

Nobody answered.

Because there was no point pretending otherwise.

He sighed deeply.

“That discussion was incomplete and taken out of context.”

Sameer nodded carefully.

“Understood.”

But everyone knew context rarely matters once perception forms.

Vikram looked directly at Arjun first.

“Your contribution is highly valued.”

Corporate sentence.

Technically positive.

Emotionally empty.

Then toward Neha.

“Executive presence can be developed.”

Another corporate sentence.

Meaning:

you are not there yet.

Finally he looked toward Sameer.

“You should all avoid reading too much into internal observations.”

Sameer almost smiled.

Because internal observations were literally how promotions happen.

The meeting ended awkwardly.

No resolution.

No reassurance.

Just professional discomfort distributed equally across the room.

Outside, the office continued buzzing violently.

The reply-all chain had become legendary already.

Employees would talk about it for years.

But beneath the humor, something irreversible had happened.

The invisible competition was now visible.

The private evaluations were now public.

And worst of all—

the three of them could no longer pretend they didn’t know exactly how leadership saw them.

That evening, as rain battered the office windows again, Arjun stood quietly near the glass overlooking the city.

Neha joined him.

Then Sameer.

None of them spoke immediately.

Below them, Mumbai moved endlessly through traffic and noise and ambition.

Inside Floor 7, the office lights glowed against glass cabins and tired faces.

And somewhere between embarrassment, ambition, and silence—

three coworkers realized the promotion had stopped being exciting.

Now it was personal.

Chapter 9 —

The Leadership Workshop

The invitation arrived on Thursday morning.

MANDATORY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

Building Future Leaders at Axion Global Services

Venue: Orchid Hall

Duration: Full Day

Sameer stared at the mail for exactly three seconds before standing up dramatically.

“It has begun.”

Arjun didn’t look away from his screen.

“What now?”

“The ritual.”

Neha frowned.

“What ritual?”

Sameer spread his arms theatrically.

“The annual corporate performance where employees pretend to be visionary leaders while management silently judges who deserves better salaries.”

By 10 AM, Orchid Hall was filled with employees wearing business-casual clothing and emotional caution.

Round tables had been arranged across the ballroom with water bottles, notepads, and motivational quote cards nobody would take home willingly.

A giant screen displayed:

**LEADERS DON'T CREATE FOLLOWERS. THEY
CREATE MORE LEADERS.**

Sameer whispered to Neha:

“Every corporate quote sounds like it escaped from LinkedIn against its will.”

The workshop facilitator walked onto the stage with the dangerous energy of a man who loved audience participation.

“GOOD MORNING FUTURE LEADERS!”

The room responded weakly.

“GOOD MORNING.”

“No no-no!” the facilitator shouted enthusiastically. “I CAN'T FEEL THE ENERGY!”

Arjun closed his eyes briefly.

“This is how hostage situations begin.”

Neha nearly laughed into her coffee.

The facilitator’s name was Karan.

He wore a wireless microphone, white sneakers, and the confidence of someone who had never updated an operational report at 2 AM.

“Today,” Karan announced proudly, “we break mental barriers!”

Sameer leaned toward Arjun.

“My mental barrier is wanting to leave.”

At first, the workshop felt harmless.

Icebreakers.

Leadership games.

Communication exercises.

But slowly, something underneath the surface began changing.

Because this wasn’t really training.

It was observation.

Senior leadership sat quietly along the back row of the ballroom.

Watching.

Evaluating.

Noting who spoke confidently.

Who took control naturally.

Who disappeared into silence.

The workshop had become another battlefield.

During the first group activity, employees were divided into teams.

Fate—or corporate cruelty—placed Arjun, Sameer, and Neha together.

Alongside them sat:

- Priyanka from Finance,
 - Rohit from Sales,
 - and an aggressively enthusiastic employee named Manav who used the word “synergy” voluntarily.
-

The task appeared on screen:

Design a future growth strategy for Axion Global Services.

Sameer looked horrified.

“They made PowerPoint into a team-building exercise.”

Immediately, chaos began.

Rohit dominated conversation volume.

Manav started drawing meaningless arrows on chart paper.

Priyanka checked whether this workshop counted toward performance reviews.

Meanwhile, Arjun had already started structuring the actual solution logically.

And Neha quietly organized everyone's scattered ideas into something usable.

Sameer noticed leadership watching nearby tables carefully.

Especially tables where conflict emerged.

Interesting.

Very interesting.

Twenty minutes later, their table had naturally fallen into roles without discussing them.

Arjun built the operational framework.

Neha connected everything cohesively.

Sameer handled presentation positioning.

And somehow it worked disturbingly well.

Then came the real test.

Karan clapped excitedly.

“Each team will now present to leadership!”

The room collectively suffered emotionally.

As employees prepared presentations desperately, Sameer adjusted his sleeves calmly.

Arjun looked at him suspiciously.

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Sameer said, “this isn’t about ideas.”

Neha looked up.

“What is it about then?”

He smiled faintly.

“Presence.”

When their turn arrived, the six of them walked onto the stage beneath painfully bright lights.

The projector glowed behind them.

Leadership watched silently from the back.

Arjun began presenting first.

Clear. Detailed. Intelligent.

He explained process improvements with precision.

And within two minutes, half the room mentally checked out.

Not because he was wrong.

Because he sounded like work.

Sameer noticed immediately.

So he stepped forward smoothly.

“What Arjun is describing,” he said confidently, “isn’t just operational efficiency.”

He paused deliberately.

“It’s organizational resilience.”

The room shifted slightly.

Leadership looked up again.

Sameer continued.

“Because future-ready organizations don’t just solve problems faster. They create trust faster.”

Neha watched the transformation happen in real time.

Same content.

Different framing.

Completely different impact.

Then unexpectedly, Karan interrupted.

“Excellent insights! But let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet.”

His eyes landed on Neha.

“Tell us your leadership philosophy.”

The room turned toward her instantly.

Neha froze for half a second.

Not visibly.

But internally.

Public speaking never scared her.

Being evaluated while pretending not to notice did.

She stepped forward slowly.

The projector light reflected softly against the stage floor.

For a moment, the ballroom felt painfully quiet.

Then she spoke.

“I think people misunderstand leadership.”

No dramatic voice.

No performance.

Just honesty.

“Most employees already know what to do.”

The room stayed attentive now.

“They don’t need constant motivation speeches.”

A few employees exchanged amused glances.

“They need clarity. Trust. And managers who don’t create fear every time something goes wrong.”

Somewhere near the back, even Vikram looked slightly impressed.

Neha continued calmly.

“The best leaders I’ve worked with weren’t the loudest people in meetings.”

Her eyes moved briefly toward Sameer and Arjun.

“They were the people who made difficult work feel survivable.”

Silence.

Real silence this time.

Not disengagement.

Attention.

When the presentation ended, applause spread naturally across the ballroom.

Not polite applause.

Interested applause.

As they walked off stage, Sameer leaned toward her.

“That,” he whispered, “was executive presence.”

Neha rolled her eyes immediately.

But she smiled anyway.

The workshop ended around 6 PM.

Employees left emotionally exhausted from performing leadership all day.

Near the hotel exit, the three of them paused together beneath the evening lights.

Cars moved endlessly outside.

Rain had started again.

Arjun looked toward Neha.

“You were good today.”

She shrugged awkwardly.

“So were you.”

Sameer looked between both of them thoughtfully.

Then said quietly:

“You know what’s funny?”

“What?” Neha asked.

He smiled faintly.

“The company invited us here to build leadership.”

A pause.

“But all they really did...”

His eyes moved toward the senior leaders leaving the ballroom.

“...was show us we’re already being measured.”

And somewhere beneath the polished presentations, motivational slogans, and fake workshop enthusiasm—

the competition became sharper.

More personal.

More visible.

The game had officially begun.

PART 2 —
THE GAME BEGINS

Chapter 10 —

Calendar Politics

The first meeting cancellation felt accidental.

The second felt strategic.

By the third week after the leadership workshop, everyone on Floor 7 understood something dangerous:

Meetings were no longer for collaboration.

They were for positioning.

Monday morning.

9:03 AM.

Arjun opened his calendar and frowned.

A client alignment meeting had been moved from 11 AM to 8 PM.

Again.

Right on top of another review session he was already supposed to attend.

He rubbed his forehead tiredly.

“This makes no sense.”

Across the aisle, Sameer didn't even look surprised.

“Congratulations.”

“For what?”

“You've entered calendar warfare.”

Neha looked up from her laptop.

“Calendar warfare?”

Sameer spun his monitor dramatically toward them.

His Outlook calendar looked like a crime scene.

Colored blocks everywhere.

Double bookings.

Invisible gaps smaller than emotional recovery periods.

“Meetings,” he announced solemnly, “are now weapons.”

At first, Arjun thought he was exaggerating.

Then the week unfolded.

And he realized Sameer was absolutely right.

People had started using meeting invitations strategically.

Certain employees were suddenly excluded from “important discussions.”

Others were copied into meetings they had no reason attending, did it purely for visibility.

Managers scheduled calls during lunch hours to test responsiveness.

Senior leadership sessions mysteriously included the same few names repeatedly.

The office no longer operated on work flow.

It operated on access.

At 11 AM, Vikram called for a project strategy discussion.

Arjun arrived carrying reports and operational updates.

Neha joined two minutes later.

Sameer entered last, calm as always.

Then Arjun noticed something strange.

Rohit from Sales was there.

Manav from the workshop was there.

Two random people from Transformation were there.

But Priyanka from Finance whose numbers the meeting actually required was missing.

Arjun leaned toward Sameer.

“Why is half this room even here?”

Sameer smiled faintly.

“Visibility.”

The meeting began.

For forty painful minutes, employees repeated variations of:

- “We should align strategically.”
- “Let’s create synergy.”
- “Need stronger cross-functional collaboration.”

Meanwhile, the actual problem remained completely unsolved.

Neha quietly typed notes while watching the room carefully.

Nobody was discussing work anymore.

They were performing importance.

Then Vikram asked:

“Thoughts?”

Immediately Rohit jumped in.

Aggressive confidence. Minimal substance.

Sameer waited.

He always waited.

Because socially intelligent people understand timing matters more than speed.

Finally, after everyone exhausted themselves professionally, Sameer spoke calmly.

“What we’re actually missing is ownership clarity.”

The room shifted slightly.

Attention focused naturally toward him.

He continued smoothly:

“Too many parallel conversations. No centralized accountability structure.”

Simple.

Clear.

Useful.

Within seconds, leadership engagement increased visibly.

Vikram nodded.

“Exactly.”

Arjun stared quietly at the table.

Because he had literally written the same thing in an email two days earlier.

Nobody acknowledged it then.

Now it sounded strategic because it had been spoken inside the correct room.

That realization stayed with him long after the meeting ended.

Near the pantry later, Priyanka looked annoyed.

“I wasn’t invited to the strategy review.”

Neha frowned.

“But your data was discussed.”

“Exactly.”

Sameer stirred coffee thoughtfully.

“Meetings aren’t about information anymore.”

All three looked at him.

“They’re about association.”

The coffee machine hissed violently like it agreed.

By Wednesday, the behavior escalated.

Employees had started checking who attended which meetings more carefully than actual meeting outcomes.

People measured importance through calendar visibility.

Even lunch invitations became political.

At 1 PM, Arjun returned from grabbing coffee and froze briefly.

Through the glass conference room wall, he saw Sameer sitting beside Vikram and two senior directors.

No meeting invite.

No prior mention.

Just there.

Visible.

Sameer noticed him through the glass.

For one second, both looked at each other.

Then the meeting room blinds closed automatically.

That hurt more than Arjun expected.

Not betrayal.

Not even jealousy exactly.

Just the quiet realization that influence creates access before merit catches up.

Later that evening, Sameer found Arjun alone near the windows.

Mumbai glowed outside beneath orange sunset haze.

“You’re angry.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re speaking in short sentences. That’s your angry version.”

Arjun stayed silent.

Sameer sighed softly.

“The meeting wasn’t what you think.”

“Then what was it?”

“A discussion.”

“A discussion I wasn’t invited to.”

That sentence landed heavily.

Because now the competition had entered a new phase.

Not open hostility.

Selective inclusion.

Sameer leaned against the glass wall.

“You know why meetings matter so much here?”

Arjun didn’t answer.

“Because meetings create narrative proximity.”

Arjun frowned.

“What does that even mean?”

“It means leadership starts trusting people they see repeatedly during decision-making moments.”

He paused.

“Even if those people aren’t necessarily the smartest in the room.”

Arjun looked away toward the city lights below.

Cars moved endlessly through traffic.

Everybody trying to reach somewhere faster than someone else.

Meanwhile inside Floor 7—

employees were learning a brutal truth about corporate life: being excluded quietly damages ambition more effectively than criticism ever could.

The next morning, Neha found both of them sitting unusually silent near the pantry.

She looked between them carefully.

“What happened now?”

Sameer answered first.

“Calendar politics.”

She sighed immediately.

“Oh God.”

Then she sat beside them and opened her laptop.

For a moment, none of them spoke.

Around them, employees moved quickly between meeting rooms carrying notebooks and strategic expressions.

Finally Neha said quietly:

“You know what scares me most?”

Both looked at her.

“We’ve all started caring more about where we’re invited...”

She glanced around the office slowly.

“...than whether the work itself even matters anymore.”

Neither disagreed.

Because somewhere between visibility, meetings, access, and ambition—

the office had quietly stopped becoming a workplace.

It was becoming a game board.

And everybody was learning the rules at the same time.

Chapter 11 —

Friday Appreciation Mail

The email arrived at 6:12 PM on a Friday.

Which made it immediately dangerous.

Because nothing good ever comes from leadership communication after business hours.

Most employees on Floor 7 were already mentally halfway home.

Laptops remained open, but concentration had dissolved into survival mode.

People were pretending to finish work while secretly calculating train timings, dinner plans, and emotional recovery schedules for the weekend.

Then Outlook notifications began flashing across the floor.

One after another.

Heads lifted instantly.

Subject:

Special Appreciation — Outstanding Leadership Contribution

Sent by:

Regional Operations Head

Visible to:

Entire India Leadership Group

Sameer looked up first.

“Oh, this is going to ruin somebody’s weekend.”

Arjun opened the email slowly.

And there it was.

We would like to specially recognize Sameer Malhotra for his exceptional stakeholder management and leadership maturity demonstrated during recent strategic discussions...

Below that came phrases every ambitious employee secretly memorizes:

- *strong executive alignment*
 - *cross-functional influence*
 - *future leadership capability*
 - *high visibility contribution*
-

Silence spread across their row.

Not dramatic silence.

Measured silence.

This kind of silence, offices produce when everybody starts recalculating hierarchy simultaneously.

A few desks away, Rohit immediately leaned toward another employee.

“Told you.”

Near Finance, Priyanka stared openly at the screen.

“Wow.”

Neha glanced toward Sameer carefully.

He looked calm.

Too calm.

Which meant even he hadn’t expected the mail.

Then his Teams notifications exploded.

Congratulations!

Well deserved!

Leadership material!

Party pending!

Corporate congratulations are fascinating.

Half support.

Half strategic networking.

Sameer rubbed his forehead.

“This is bad.”

Arjun looked at him blankly.

“Most people wouldn’t call public appreciation from leadership bad.”

Sameer lowered his voice.

“It changes the room.”

And it did.

Immediately.

Within twenty minutes, the office atmosphere shifted visibly.

Employees who normally ignored Sameer suddenly became warmer.

Managers smiled longer during conversations.

People started inviting him into discussions unnecessarily.

Even body language around him changed subtly.

Recognition creates gravity.

Meanwhile, Arjun sat staring at his laptop screen without reading anything properly.

Not because he disliked Sameer.

That made it worse.

Because he genuinely believed Sameer was talented.
But somewhere deep underneath professionalism—
something uncomfortable had started growing.
Comparison.

Neha noticed immediately.
Not through words.
Through silence.
Arjun had become quieter since the mail arrived.
More withdrawn.

She walked over slowly.
“You okay?”
“Yeah.”
Another dangerous “yeah.”

Across the floor, Sameer was trapped in conversation with two
senior managers suddenly interested in his “career aspirations.”
He smiled politely while internally dying.
Because he understood something nobody else fully saw yet:
public appreciation creates enemies faster than promotions do.

At 7 PM, most employees finally left.

But the three of them remained.

Again.

The office lights dimmed slightly into evening mode.

Outside the windows, Mumbai glowed beneath wet roads and restless traffic.

Neha stood near Arjun's desk.

"You should go home."

"In a bit."

"You've been staring at the same spreadsheet for ten minutes."

He sighed quietly.

"That obvious?"

"Yes."

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Arjun finally leaned back in his chair.

"You know what's stupid?"

"What?"

"I know the mail shouldn't bother me."

Neha stayed silent carefully.

Because this was one of those conversations where people stop speaking if interrupted too quickly.

“I’m happy for him,” Arjun continued softly.

“I know.”

“But...”

He looked toward the far side of the office where Sameer was still speaking with leadership.

“...it’s weird watching someone become visible in real time.”

That sentence lingered heavily between them.

Because Neha understood exactly what he meant.

The office treated visibility like proof of value.

And once somebody became visible—

everybody else automatically felt slightly dimmer beside them.

A few minutes later, Sameer finally escaped the managers and walked toward them carrying three vending-machine coffees.

“Emergency peace offering,” he announced.

Neither responded immediately.

He stopped.

Then sighed.

“Oh no.”

Neha accepted her coffee slowly.

Arjun took his without looking up.

Sameer studied both of them carefully.

Then sat on the edge of the desk.

“You guys realize I didn’t send the email myself, right?”

That broke the tension slightly.

Even Arjun smiled faintly.

But Sameer’s expression softened afterward.

“I know how this looks.”

Arjun finally looked at him.

“Looks like leadership likes you.”

Sameer nodded once.

“Yeah.”

No false modesty.

No pretending otherwise.

That honesty somehow made things harder.

Then Sameer said quietly:

“You know what nobody tells you about office recognition?”

Neither answered.

“It isolates you faster than failure.”

The office hummed softly around them.

Cleaning staff moved silently through empty rows.

The Regional Director cabin remained dark at the far end of the floor.

Still waiting.

Still watching over all of them like a silent promise.

Neha looked between both men carefully.

One becoming more visible.

One feeling increasingly unseen.

And somewhere in the middle—

their friendship had begun carrying the weight of competition now.

Sameer stared out toward the city lights.

“When leadership publicly appreciates someone...”

He paused thoughtfully.

“...they’re not just rewarding performance.”

The office reflected softly in the glass around them.

“They’re informing the organization who to pay attention to.”

Nobody spoke after that.

Because they all knew something had changed tonight.

Not officially.

Emotionally.

The balance between them had shifted slightly.

And once ambition enters friendship—

even silence starts meaning different things.

Chapter 12 —

The Silent Competition

After the appreciation mail, nobody mentioned the promotion directly anymore.

That was the strange part.

The office became quieter about it exactly when the competition became most intense.

No open discussions.

No visible campaigning.

No obvious rivalry.

Just subtle shifts in behavior that slowly poisoned normalcy.

Monday morning arrived carrying artificial politeness.

Employees smiled more carefully now.

Conversations sounded softer.

Even jokes felt measured as if everybody had unconsciously started protecting their professional image from invisible observers.

Arjun noticed it first during the weekly review meeting.
Before, interruptions used to happen naturally.
Now everyone waited strategically before speaking.
People no longer wanted to sound wrong in front of leadership.
Every sentence felt curated.

Sameer, meanwhile, had become impossible to ignore.
Not intentionally.
Systemically.
Managers now included him in discussions automatically.
Senior leaders stopped by his desk casually.
Even employees from other departments suddenly knew his name.
Public appreciation had transformed him from employee into possibility.

And the office treated possible future leaders differently.

At 11 AM, Neha walked into Meeting Room D carrying updated reports.
Inside, Vikram and Sameer were already discussing quarterly planning.

The moment she entered, both stopped talking briefly.

Tiny pause.

Tiny silence.

But she noticed it immediately.

Because employees always notice the silences they were not included in.

“You needed the revised numbers?” she asked calmly.

Vikram nodded.

“Yes. Leave them here.”

She placed the files on the table.

As she turned to leave, Sameer spoke casually.

“You joining the strategy review later?”

Neha paused slightly.

“What strategy review?”

Another silence.

Smaller this time.

But sharper.

Vikram looked mildly uncomfortable.

“We finalized attendees yesterday.”

Neha nodded once.

Professional smile.

“Right.”

Then she walked out calmly.

The moment the door closed behind her, Sameer exhaled quietly.

“You forgot to include her?”

Vikram rubbed his forehead.

“It wasn’t intentional.”

But both knew intent barely matters in office politics.

Perception survives longer.

Outside, Neha continued walking normally through the corridor.

But something inside her had shifted.

Not anger.

Recognition.

The competition was no longer invisible.

It had entered access structures now.

At lunch, the three of them sat together again for the first time in days.

Yet even this felt different.

They were not in their usual relaxed selves. They seemed more alert. More aware.

Sameer tried first.

“So... exciting week ahead.”

Neha looked at him blankly.

“Is it?”

Arjun immediately sensed danger.

And silently focused on opening his food container with unnecessary concentration.

Sameer sighed softly.

“You’re upset about the meeting.”

“No,” Neha replied calmly.

“I’m upset because I found out the meeting existed while walking into it accidentally.”

Silence.

Heavy now.

Real.

Around them, the cafeteria buzzed with office conversations and tray sounds and exhausted laughter.

But at their table, the air felt tight.

“I didn’t know you weren’t included,” Sameer said carefully.

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

Neha finally looked directly at him.

“The point is everybody suddenly acts differently around people leadership likes.”

That landed harder than Sameer expected.

Because it was true.

Arjun stayed quiet.

Mostly because he agreed with both of them.

Which was emotionally inconvenient.

Neha leaned back slightly.

“You know what’s funny?”

Nobody answered.

“A month ago we all complained about work together.”

She looked around the cafeteria.

“Now every conversation feels... evaluated.”

Again, nobody disagreed.

Because the office atmosphere had fundamentally changed.

Employees were no longer simply coworkers.

They were potential competitors hiding inside collaboration.

That afternoon, the silent competition intensified further.

Arjun noticed Rohit suddenly volunteering for difficult client tasks he normally avoided.

Prianka from Finance had started staying visibly late near leadership cabins.

Even Manav, the human embodiment of PowerPoint enthusiasm, was suddenly scheduling “strategic alignment discussions” with anyone senior enough to matter.

The entire floor had become performative.

But the strangest part?

Nobody openly admitted ambition.

Everybody behaved as though promotions happened accidentally to humble, hardworking people.

At 6 PM, Arjun found Sameer alone near the windows overlooking the city.

The office lights reflected softly against the glass.

“You ever feel weird about this?” Arjun asked quietly.

Sameer looked at him.

“All the time.”

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Arjun continued.

“I don’t even know what we’re doing anymore.”

Sameer smiled faintly.

“We’re competing professionally while pretending we’re not.”

Below them, traffic crawled endlessly through Mumbai streets.

Thousands of people trying to reach somewhere before somebody else did.

Arjun folded his arms.

“You know what I hate the most?”

“What?”

“That this competition doesn’t even make me dislike you.”

Sameer looked genuinely surprised by that.

Arjun stared out toward the city lights.

“That would’ve been easier.”

The honesty of that sentence stayed between them quietly.

Because the real problem wasn’t rivalry.

It was emotional complexity.

They still respected each other.
Still laughed together.
Still survived office chaos together.
And yet underneath all of it—
both wanted the same future.

Later that evening, Neha stood alone near the pantry waiting for coffee.

The office had mostly emptied now.
Only ambition remained after 8 PM.

Priyanka walked in beside her.

“You okay?”

Neha shrugged lightly.

“Everybody keeps asking me that lately.”

Priyanka smiled sympathetically.

“That’s because the whole office feels tense.”

Neha stared at the coffee machine while it struggled mechanically.

“No,” she said softly.

“The whole office feels careful.”

And that was the perfect word for it.

Careful.

People now monitored:

- how much they spoke,
- who they supported,
- where they sat,
- who they were seen with,
- when they left,
- what they reacted to.

The competition had become silent.

Which somehow made it more exhausting.

Near the far end of Floor 7, the Regional Director cabin remained dark behind glass walls.

Waiting patiently while employees slowly changed themselves trying to deserve it.

And somewhere beneath the office lights—

three friends were learning the most dangerous phase of ambition:

the moment rivalry stops being visible...

and starts living quietly inside everyday interactions.

Chapter 13 — “Quick Sync?”

There are three phrases capable of ruining an employee’s nervous system instantly:

- “Can we talk?”
- “Need a small favor.”
- And the most dangerous of all:

“Quick sync?”

Because nothing in corporate life is ever quick.

And nothing called a sync is emotionally safe.

Tuesday morning.

10:14 AM.

Arjun was finally having a productive day for the first time in weeks.

No escalations.

No meeting disasters.

No emotionally manipulative HR emails.

Just work.

Peaceful, ordinary work.

Then a Teams notification appeared.

Vikram:

Quick sync?

Arjun stared at the message like it contained a medical diagnosis.

Across the aisle, Sameer noticed immediately.

“Oh no.”

Neha looked up.

“What happened?”

Without speaking, Arjun turned his monitor slightly toward them.

Both reacted instantly.

Sameer leaned back dramatically.

“Classic.”

Neha frowned.

“What do you think it’s about?”

Sameer counted possibilities on his fingers.

“More responsibility, hidden criticism, impossible deadline, emotional manipulation, or restructuring.”

“That’s five things.”

“Yes,” Sameer replied calmly. “Corporate life believes in variety.”

At 10:30 AM, Arjun entered Meeting Room F.

The blinds were half closed.

Always suspicious.

Vikram sat alone at the table reviewing something on his laptop.

He looked up and smiled slightly.

“Relax. Nothing serious.”

Which naturally made Arjun more nervous.

“Sit.”

Arjun sat carefully.

The air conditioning hummed softly in the background while office noise blurred faintly through the glass walls.

Vikram folded his hands.

“How are you feeling lately?”

Arjun blinked once.

That was never a safe question.

“I’m fine.”

“Workload manageable?”

“Yes.”

“Career-wise happy?”

That one landed differently.

Arjun answered carefully.

“I’m focused on doing good work.”

Vikram smiled faintly.

“Diplomatic answer.”

Years in corporate life had taught employees something important:

honest answers are rarely operationally efficient.

Vikram leaned back slightly.

“You know leadership sees strong potential in you.”

Potential.

The most psychologically dangerous compliment in offices.

It means:

you are good enough to work harder,
but not successful enough to relax yet.

Arjun nodded politely.

“Thank you.”

Then came the real sentence.

“But...”

There it was.

The corporate knife always arrives politely.

“You need stronger executive visibility.”

The reply-all email all over again.

Just softer this time.

Vikram continued calmly.

“You do excellent work, Arjun. Nobody questions that.”

Then why does it never feel enough?

The thought arrived instantly inside his head.

“You tend to stay operationally buried.”

Arjun frowned slightly.

“I focus on solving issues.”

“Exactly.”

Vikram pointed gently toward him.

“You solve problems quietly.”

A pause.

“Leadership notices people who shape conversations, not just outcomes.”

That sentence hurt because it was true.

And truths become painful exactly when repetition confirms them.

Outside the glass walls, employees continued moving through the office carrying laptops and unresolved stress.

Inside Meeting Room F, Arjun sat silently realizing something uncomfortable:

hard work had never guaranteed visibility.

At 11:07 AM, he walked back toward the operations floor.

Sameer immediately spun around in his chair.

“How dead are we?”

Arjun dropped into his seat heavily.

“I got professionally diagnosed with insufficient visibility.”

Neha winced sympathetically.

“Oh.”

Sameer leaned back thoughtfully.

“What exactly did he say?”

“That leadership notices people who shape conversations.”

Sameer nodded slowly.

“Yeah.”

Arjun looked irritated instantly.

“Don’t ‘yeah’ me.”

“I’m not saying it’s fair.”

“You agree with it though.”

Sameer stayed quiet for a moment.

Then:

“Yes.”

The honesty made it worse.

Neha closed her laptop gently.

“You know what’s frustrating?”

Both looked at her.

“The company tells people to focus on work.”

She folded her arms.

“Then rewards people for being seen working.”

Sameer pointed toward her immediately.

“That. Exactly that.”

For a while, the three of them sat quietly beneath the glow of office lights while employees moved endlessly around them.

The floor sounded different lately.

Less relaxed.

More alert.

Like everybody was waiting for something invisible to happen.

Then, at 2 PM, another “quick sync” happened.

This time for Neha.

Priya HR:

Hi Neha 😏 Quick sync when free?

The smiley face somehow made it more threatening.

“Oh God,” Neha whispered.

Sameer burst out laughing immediately.

“The emoji means emotional damage.”

Fifteen minutes later, Neha sat inside a small HR meeting room trying not to overanalyze furniture placement.

Priya smiled warmly across the table.

“How are you doing?”

Again with the dangerous questions.

“I’m okay.”

“We’ve heard wonderful feedback about you.”

Positive opening.

Potentially manipulative middle section pending.

Priya crossed her legs elegantly.

“You’re very respected internally.”

Respected internally.

Translation:

not visible externally.

Then came the sentence.

“We’d love to see you contribute more visibly in leadership environments.”

There it was again.

Visibility.

The office’s favorite invisible metric.

Neha smiled professionally while internally screaming.

“What exactly does that mean?”

Priya gave the kind of answer only HR can produce:

“We’d love to see you own space more confidently.”

Neha left the room thirty minutes later emotionally exhausted despite nothing technically negative happening.

That was another special corporate skill:

making employees feel evaluated while pretending to support them.

Back at the desk, Sameer immediately looked up.

“You survived?”

“Barely.”

Arjun handed her coffee silently.

She accepted it gratefully.

“What was yours about?” Arjun asked.

Neha sat down heavily.

“Apparently I need to ‘own space more confidently.’”

Sameer blinked once.

“What does that even mean?”

“No idea.”

“Maybe stand wider during meetings.”

Despite everything, she laughed.

Then all three became quiet again.

Because now a pattern was emerging clearly.

Leadership wasn't just evaluating performance anymore.

They were evaluating personality presentation.

At 6 PM, the office slowly dimmed into evening mode again.

Outside, rain slid down the glass windows in silver streaks.

Inside, employees stayed late pretending productivity while secretly analyzing every interaction with management.

Sameer stood near the windows watching the city below.

“You know what the problem with corporate feedback is?”

Arjun looked up tiredly.

“What?”

“It's vague enough to create anxiety forever.”

Neha joined them beside the glass.

For a moment, the three stood silently watching traffic lights blur through the rain.

Then Arjun spoke quietly.

“They keep telling us to become more visible.”

Sameer nodded.

“Yeah.”

Arjun looked toward the dark Regional Director cabin at the end of the floor.

“But nobody explains how to do that...”

The office reflected faintly across the glass around them.

“...without slowly becoming fake.”

And none of them had an answer for that.

Chapter 14 —

Performance vs Perception

By the end of the month, Arjun had become the most dependable invisible person in the office.

Everybody trusted him.

Clients trusted him.

Teams trusted him.

Managers relied on him during crises.

But trust and visibility are not the same currency in corporate life.

And slowly, painfully, he was beginning to understand the difference.

Thursday started with another escalation.

A European client had threatened to pull a major account after a reporting failure triggered billing discrepancies across three regions.

The operations floor entered immediate panic mode.

Phones rang constantly.
Managers walked faster.
Emails multiplied like infection.

At 8:40 AM, Vikram called urgently across the floor.

“Arjun.”

No greeting.

No explanation.

Just the tone companies use when they need competent people quickly.

Within minutes, Arjun had already identified the issue.

A data synchronization error between regional systems.

Fixable.

Complex, but fixable.

By noon, while half the office remained confused, Arjun had coordinated with IT, corrected the reporting structure, reassured the client team, and stabilized the escalation.

Quietly.

Efficiently.

Without drama.

At 1 PM, leadership held an emergency review call.

Sameer joined from Meeting Room B.

Neha attended remotely from another client session.

Arjun sat in the corner beside the operations screen, exhausted but prepared.

Senior leadership from Singapore appeared on video.

Tense faces.

Controlled voices.

The Regional Head spoke first.

“Good recovery effort from the India team.”

Then his eyes moved toward Sameer.

“Sameer, excellent stakeholder handling during the client conversation.”

Sameer nodded politely.

“Thank you.”

Arjun looked down slowly at his notebook.

Not angry.

Just tired.

Because he had spent four straight hours solving the actual problem.

But Sameer had handled the presentation call with leadership.

And leadership remembers whoever speaks during relief—not whoever suffers during repair.

Neha noticed it immediately through the screen.

Arjun hadn't spoken once during the meeting.

Not because he lacked answers.

Because nobody had asked him questions.

After the call ended, Sameer walked back toward the operations bay feeling uneasy.

He found Arjun already working again.

Of course he was.

"You should've explained the technical recovery yourself,"

Sameer said quietly.

Arjun kept typing.

"Nobody asked."

"You could've jumped in."

Arjun finally looked at him.

"And say what? 'Excuse me leadership, please notice me while I save the system'?"

That landed harder than Sameer expected.

Around them, the office slowly relaxed as the crisis passed.

Employees resumed normal conversations.

Managers regained artificial calm.

Corporate memory resets quickly after danger disappears.

Neha arrived at their desks twenty minutes later.

“How bad was it?”

Sameer answered carefully.

“We survived.”

But Neha looked directly at Arjun instead.

Because she already knew survival wasn’t the real issue anymore.

At 4 PM, another leadership appreciation mail arrived.

Not company-wide this time.

Smaller circulation.

Still visible enough.

Special thanks to Sameer Malhotra for ensuring strong client confidence management during today’s escalation.

The moment the mail arrived, Arjun stopped typing completely.

Just for one second.

But Neha saw it.

So did Sameer.

Nobody spoke immediately.

The office noise continued around them—
phones,
keyboards,
forced laughter.

But inside their small section of Floor 7, something heavier
settled quietly into place.

Finally Sameer stood up abruptly.

“This is ridiculous.”

Arjun remained calm.

“No, it’s normal.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

Arjun gave a faint tired smile.

“Welcome to corporate life.”

Then he stood, picked up his coffee mug, and walked toward the
pantry alone.

The pantry was empty.

Rain tapped softly against the windows nearby while the coffee
machine struggled mechanically through another cappuccino
request.

Arjun leaned against the counter quietly.

Exhaustion sat heavily inside him now.

Not physical exhaustion.

Something worse.

The exhaustion of realizing effort and recognition are not connected equally.

A few minutes later, Neha entered softly.

She didn't speak immediately.

Just stood beside him while the coffee machine made disturbing noises.

Then she asked quietly:

“You okay?”

This time he answered honestly.

“No.”

The honesty startled even him slightly.

Neha waited patiently.

So he continued.

“I don't know what else I'm supposed to do anymore.”

The office lights reflected dimly across the pantry glass.

“I solve problems. I stay late. I fix disasters.”

His jaw tightened slightly.

“And somehow I still feel professionally invisible.”

Neha looked down at her untouched coffee.

“You know what I think?”

He looked at her tiredly.

“I think companies reward perception because perception scales faster than effort.”

She paused carefully.

“One visible conversation can influence leadership more than ten invisible nights of work.”

That sentence hurt because it explained everything too clearly.

A few feet away, Sameer stood outside the pantry entrance unnoticed for a moment.

Listening.

Not intentionally.

Just frozen there by guilt.

Because this was the uncomfortable truth nobody wanted to admit:

he *was* good at perception.
Good at framing ideas.
Good at speaking upward.
Good at making leadership feel confident.
And none of that was fake.
But neither was Arjun's work.

The problem was—
corporate systems rarely reward value equally.
They reward what leadership emotionally experiences directly.

Sameer finally stepped inside quietly.
Neither reacted.
The air already felt emotionally full.

"I never asked for those mails," he said softly.
Arjun nodded once.
"I know."
"And I know you did most of the actual recovery today."
Another pause.
Then Arjun looked at him carefully.
"You know what the worst part is?"
"What?"

“I don’t even think you’re undeserving.”

That sentence nearly broke something inside Sameer.

Because resentment would’ve been easier.

This was respect mixed with disappointment.

Far more painful.

Outside the pantry windows, Mumbai moved beneath gray evening sky and endless traffic.

Inside Floor 7, employees continued chasing visibility beneath fluorescent lights.

And somewhere between performance and perception—

three coworkers were beginning to realize the promotion wasn’t simply testing capability anymore.

It was testing identity.

Who gets seen.

Who gets remembered.

Who slowly disappears despite carrying the weight.

Chapter 15 —

Lunch With the Vice President

The panic began at 11:06 AM.

Which was impressive timing, considering most corporate panic usually waits until after lunch.

A calendar invite appeared suddenly across several leadership inboxes.

Short. Simple. Devastating.

Lunch Discussion — VP Operations

Attendees:

- Vikram Mehra
 - Sameer Malhotra
-

Nothing else.

No agenda.

No explanation.

No context.

Which naturally made it the most important thing happening in the office.

Within minutes, Floor 7 transformed into a live psychological experiment.

People pretended not to notice while absolutely noticing.

Conversations slowed around Sameer's desk.

Employees passing by casually checked his screen like investigative journalists.

Even the coffee machine area became unusually active.

Priyanka arrived first.

“So...”

Sameer looked up cautiously.

“So?”

“You're having lunch with the Vice President.”

He blinked once.

“I am apparently.”

Two more employees appeared nearby pretending to refill water bottles.

Nobody drinks this much water voluntarily.

Arjun stayed focused on his screen.

Or at least pretended to.

Inside, something uncomfortable tightened quietly.

Because everybody already knew what the office would assume.

‘The chosen one’.

Neha walked over holding a notebook.

“You didn’t mention this.”

“I found out thirty seconds ago.”

“Do you know what it’s about?”

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“In this company?”

He gestured toward the entire floor.

“It could be promotion discussion or hostage negotiation.”

Despite the joke, tension had already started spreading.

Because access changes perception faster than performance ever does.

And lunch with senior leadership?

That was elite-level visibility.

By noon, rumors had evolved aggressively.

“I heard the VP specifically requested him.”

“No, Vikram recommended him.”

“This means the decision is finalized.”

“Maybe they’re creating another role.”

“Maybe they’re restructuring.”

“Maybe we should all resign.”

Corporate rumor escalation follows no logical rules.

Meanwhile, Sameer himself looked increasingly uncomfortable.

Because he understood the optics perfectly.

One lunch had already altered the emotional temperature of the office.

At 12:45 PM, Vikram emerged from his cabin.

“Ready?”

Sameer stood.

Every nearby employee subconsciously looked up at the exact same moment.

The synchronization was terrifying.

As they walked toward the elevators together, the entire floor quietly watched.

Not openly.

Professionally secretly.

The elevator doors closed.

And immediately the office exploded into analysis.

Near the pantry, Rohit spoke first.

“Well. That’s pretty much confirmation.”

Priyanka frowned.

“Maybe not.”

“Come on. VP lunches don’t happen randomly.”

Across the floor, Arjun continued working silently.

Too silently.

Neha watched him carefully.

Then finally walked over.

“You’re overthinking.”

He gave a faint humorless smile.

“Probably.”

But they both knew he wasn’t.

Because promotions in corporate life rarely happen through official announcements first.

They happen socially.

Through signals.

Access.

Association.

And lunch with the Vice President was the loudest signal possible.

At the restaurant, Sameer sat across from Vikram and the VP of Operations beneath warm hotel lighting and expensive corporate calm.

The Vice President smiled politely.

“How long have you been with Axion?”

“Five years.”

“Good growth.”

The conversation remained casual at first.

Too casual.

Which made Sameer even more alert.

They discussed clients.

Leadership.

Expansion plans.

Then finally the VP leaned back slightly.

“What do you think this organization needs most right now?”

There it was.

The real interview had started.

Sameer answered carefully.

“Clarity.”

The VP looked interested.

Sameer continued.

“We have capable people. But too much decision-making happens emotionally instead of structurally.”

Vikram watched quietly.

Sameer spoke calmly now, naturally.

Not performing.

Just sharp.

“People lose trust when expectations change depending on visibility instead of consistency.”

The VP nodded slowly.

Interesting.

Very interesting.

Back at the office, meanwhile, the emotional atmosphere kept deteriorating.

By 2 PM, employees had already mentally promoted Sameer.

Some reacted strategically.

Others resentfully.

Most just became quieter around him.

Neha finally sat beside Arjun near the windows.

“You know this doesn’t automatically mean anything.”

He nodded.

“I know.”

But his voice lacked conviction.

Outside, Mumbai shimmered beneath humid afternoon haze.

Inside, the office buzzed with restrained anxiety.

Then Arjun asked quietly:

“Do you ever feel like this place decides who matters before the process even starts?”

Neha looked at him carefully.

“Sometimes.”

He laughed softly under his breath.

“Feels stupid competing against perception.”

That sentence lingered heavily between them.

Because both knew the truth:

sometimes the race ends emotionally long before it ends officially.

At 3:40 PM, Sameer returned.

The office noticed instantly.

Like animals sensing weather changes.

People greeted him differently now.

More carefully.

More warmly.

More strategically.

Even employees who disliked him suddenly behaved professionally enthusiastic.

Sameer hated it immediately.

Because the office no longer looked at him like coworker.

Now they looked at him like outcome.

He walked toward his desk where Arjun and Neha sat waiting quietly.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Sameer sighed dramatically.

“I swear to God if one more person asks how lunch went, I’m resigning publicly.”

Neha laughed softly.

Arjun smiled faintly despite himself.

The tension loosened slightly.

Just slightly.

“How was it?” Neha asked eventually.

Sameer dropped into his chair.

“Honestly?”

Both looked at him.

“Mostly expensive salad and psychological evaluation.”

That made Arjun laugh properly for the first time all day.

Then Sameer looked at him carefully.

“It wasn’t a promotion discussion.”

Arjun nodded.

But again—

the problem wasn’t truth anymore.

It was perception.

And perception had already spread through the building faster than any clarification ever could.

That evening, as employees packed bags and whispered theories near elevators, the office atmosphere remained unsettled.

One lunch had changed alliances.
Changed assumptions.
Changed emotional balance.

Near the far end of Floor 7, the empty Regional Director cabin reflected the office lights silently across its glass walls.

Waiting.

Always waiting.

And somewhere beneath those fluorescent lights—
three coworkers continued moving toward the same destination,
while the organization slowly taught them that in corporate life,
being invited to the table matters almost as much as what you
bring to it.

Chapter 16 —

Work Wife, Work Husband

By the second month of the promotion race, people had started emotionally outsourcing their lives to the office.

Nobody admitted it directly.

But you could see it everywhere.

Employees knew each other's coffee preferences better than family birthdays.

Managers knew who was going through breakups before HR did.

People spent more waking hours under office lights than inside their own homes.

And somewhere between deadlines and exhaustion—

professional relationships had started becoming dangerously personal.

Thursday evening.

8:17 PM.

Half of the office had technically gone home.

The other half remained trapped inside “just one more thing.”

Near the operations bay, Neha sat beside Arjun reviewing client numbers on his screen.

Both looked exhausted.

Sameer rolled his chair past them slowly and stopped dramatically.

“You two are becoming one of those office pairs.”

Neither looked up.

“What office pairs?” Neha asked.

Sameer lowered his voice theatrically.

“Work wife. Work husband.”

Arjun finally looked up.

“Oh God.”

Neha threw a paper ball at Sameer immediately.

“You need hobbies.”

“I have hobbies,” Sameer replied calmly.

“Surviving capitalism creatively.”

Despite the joke, the phrase lingered awkwardly.

Because everyone in corporate life understood exactly what he meant.

The office creates emotional proximity unnaturally fast.
People start depending on each other professionally first.
Then emotionally without noticing.

Later that night, the three of them sat near the pantry sharing vending machine coffee and collective exhaustion.
The floor around them was unusually quiet.
Only the truly ambitious and the deeply trapped remained after 8 PM.

Priyanka joined them carrying noodles.
“I just cancelled dinner with my mother again.”
Sameer pointed at her instantly.
“See? Emotional outsourcing.”
She frowned.
“What?”
“We all live here now.”

Nobody argued.
Because the office had slowly invaded every boundary already.

Neha opened her laptop again.
“I need to finish this deck before tomorrow.”

Arjun looked at her.

“You’ve been working since morning.”

“So have you.”

“That’s not a defence.”

Sameer watched both silently for a second.

Then smirked.

“This is exactly how work marriages begin.”

Neha groaned loudly.

“Please stop talking.”

But again—

the joke stayed.

Because lately, Arjun and Neha had become inseparable professionally.

They reviewed each other’s work instinctively.

Stayed late together.

Understood each other’s moods without explanation.

The office had started noticing.

And offices always notice emotional patterns faster than actual productivity.

The next morning, rumors began casually.

Not malicious.

Just corporate curiosity disguised as entertainment.

“I think Arjun likes Neha.”

“No, they’re just always together.”

“Same thing.”

“Honestly they already sound married during meetings.”

“Poor people. Imagine romance starting in operations.”

Meanwhile, neither Arjun nor Neha realized how visible their closeness had become.

Because emotional dependency develops quietly.

Especially inside stressful environments.

At lunch, Sameer sat across from both of them studying their interaction with open amusement.

Neha passed Arjun her fries automatically without asking.

Arjun adjusted her presentation formatting while she spoke.

Neither noticed.

Sameer noticed everything.

“You know what fascinates me?” he asked.

Neha narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“What now?”

“You both behave like divorced parents during client escalations.”

Arjun nearly choked on water laughing.

Even Neha smiled reluctantly.

Then Sameer’s expression softened slightly.

“Seriously though...”

Both looked at him.

“Be careful.”

The humor disappeared from the table quietly.

Neha frowned.

“About what?”

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“This office confuses emotional support with emotional ownership.”

That sentence landed differently.

More real.

Because everyone had seen it happen before.

People becoming each other’s survival systems inside corporate pressure cookers.

Late-night calls becoming emotional dependency.
Professional comfort becoming blurred attachment.

Not always romantic.

Sometimes worse.

Because unclear relationships create emotional chaos nobody
knows how to name properly.

That evening, Arjun stayed unusually late fixing a client issue.
Around 9 PM, the office had nearly emptied completely.
Only a few scattered monitors still glowed across Floor 7.

Neha walked over quietly carrying two coffees.

“You’re still working?”

“Need to finish this.”

She placed one coffee beside him.

“You missed dinner again.”

He gave a tired smile.

“You noticed?”

“You look like a spreadsheet is draining your life force.”

For a moment, the atmosphere felt strangely calm.

Outside the windows, Mumbai shimmered beneath rain-soaked
streets and moving headlights.

Inside, the office finally felt human once the politics left for the day.

Then Arjun asked quietly:

“Why are you still here?”

Neha looked toward the empty floor.

“Didn’t feel like going home yet.”

The honesty of that answer surprised both of them slightly.

Silence settled softly between them.

Not awkward.

Comfortable.

Dangerously comfortable.

Then suddenly Sameer’s voice echoed from behind them.

“Oh my God.”

Both turned instantly.

Sameer stood near the pantry entrance holding chips.

“You’re literally standing near office windows sharing emotional silence.”

Neha covered her face immediately.

Arjun laughed helplessly.

“You are unbearable.”

“I am observant.”

Sameer walked toward them dramatically.

“I’m telling you right now—this office survives entirely on unresolved emotional tension.”

Neha pointed at him.

“You watch too many shows.”

“No,” Sameer replied proudly. “I survive long meetings by profiling human behavior.”

The three of them stood together near the glass windows overlooking the city.

For a moment, things almost felt normal again.

Just tired coworkers surviving another impossible week together.

Then Sameer looked toward the dark Regional Director cabin at the far end of the floor.

“You know what’s scary?”

“What?” Arjun asked.

“The higher people climb here...”

He paused thoughtfully.

“...the lonelier they become.”

Nobody joked after that.

Because all three had started noticing it already.

Senior leaders ate lunch alone.

Worked alone.

Carried stress alone.

The office rewarded ambition—

but quietly isolated people as payment.

Below them, Mumbai continued moving endlessly through rain and traffic and survival.

Inside Floor 7, relationships blurred slowly beneath fluorescent lights and emotional exhaustion.

And somewhere between friendship, dependency, ambition, and loneliness—

three coworkers kept holding each other together,

while the office slowly pulled them toward competition at the same time.

Chapter 17 —

The PowerPoint Champion

Every office has one.

The employee who survives entirely through presentation skills.

Not execution.

Not technical expertise.

Not leadership.

Slides.

Beautiful, animated, aggressively confident slides.

At Axion Global Services, that employee was Manav.

Manav spoke in bullet points even during casual conversation.

He used phrases like:

- “driving alignment,”
- “unlocking value,”
- and “strategic acceleration”

without irony.

Nobody fully understood what he actually did all day.

But somehow he remained visible in every important meeting.

Monday morning began with crisis.

Again.

A client transformation proposal was due by evening, and the assigned team had completely failed to prepare a usable deck.

Naturally, panic spread instantly.

Because corporate organizations can survive operational collapse surprisingly well—

but never bad presentations.

At 10:12 AM, Vikram emerged from his cabin looking stressed.

“Who can rebuild this presentation before the leadership review?”

Silence.

Employees suddenly became deeply committed to avoiding eye contact.

Then Manav stood slowly.

Like a superhero whose only power was transitions and formatting.

“I’ll handle it.”

Sameer leaned toward Neha immediately.

“The devil works hard.”

Neha whispered back:

“But PowerPoint works harder.”

Within an hour, Meeting Room C transformed into a war zone.

Laptops open.

Coffee everywhere.

Deadlines collapsing emotionally.

Arjun focused on fixing actual numbers and operational logic.

Neha rebuilt structure and flow.

Meanwhile, Manav floated around the room adjusting fonts with terrifying confidence.

“You need stronger visual storytelling,” Manav announced dramatically.

Arjun stared at him.

“It’s a utilization report.”

“Exactly.”

By afternoon, the original disastrous presentation had transformed completely.

Smooth transitions.

Professional icons.

Cinematic animations.

Dark blue gradient backgrounds that somehow looked expensive.

The content itself remained average.

But now it looked important.

And in corporate life, appearance often arrives before substance.

At 4 PM, leadership entered for review.

Senior directors settled around the conference table while the projector glowed against dimmed lights.

Manav stood near the screen like a man about to perform theater.

The presentation began.

And disturbingly—
it worked.

Leadership nodded repeatedly.

Not at insights.

At delivery.

At confidence.

At polished framing.

Arjun sat quietly near the back watching senior leaders react positively to ideas they had ignored previously when presented plainly.

The exact same data suddenly looked “strategic” because it had motion graphics.

Then came the moment that emotionally damaged him slightly.

The VP smiled toward Manav.

“Excellent presentation.”

Presentation.

Not solution.

Not strategy.

Presentation.

Sameer noticed Arjun’s expression immediately.

Because he was noticing it more often lately.

That quiet exhaustion people develop when they realize the system rewards packaging as much as effort.

After the meeting ended, Manav walked out glowing with victory.

“Well,” he announced proudly, “leadership loved the narrative architecture.”

Neha blinked slowly.

“That phrase should be illegal.”

Even Sameer laughed.

But underneath the humor, something uncomfortable lingered.

Because everybody had witnessed the same thing:

presentation quality had emotionally influenced leadership more than operational depth.

Later that evening, the three of them sat near the windows again while the office slowly emptied around them.

Rain tapped softly against the glass.

Mumbai shimmered below beneath blurred lights and restless traffic.

Arjun looked genuinely disturbed.

“I spent four hours fixing those numbers.”

Sameer nodded.

“I know.”

“And all leadership remembers the slide design.”

Neha sighed quietly.

“It’s not just slide design.”

Both looked at her.

“It’s confidence.”

That silence lasted longer.

Because she was right.

Neha folded her arms thoughtfully.

“People trust information more when it’s presented confidently.”

Sameer pointed at her immediately.

“Yes.”

Arjun frowned.

“That’s insane.”

“It’s human,” Sameer corrected gently.

The office lights reflected softly across the glass walls around them.

Inside cabins, senior managers still attended late-night calls beneath white artificial lighting.

Outside cabins, employees kept trying to look important enough to survive another quarter.

Arjun leaned back tiredly.

“So what’s now? Everybody just becomes performers?”

Sameer smiled faintly.

“Corporate life isn’t school.”

“What does that mean?”

“In school, effort and correctness usually matter.”

He glanced toward the dark conference rooms.

“In companies, perception decides whether people even listen long enough to notice correctness.”

That sentence settled heavily into the silence.

Because lately, every lesson inside the office seemed to point toward the same brutal truth:

being valuable and being perceived as valuable are completely different skill sets.

Near the pantry later, Priyanka joined them carrying coffee.

“You know what scares me?”

“What?” Neha asked.

“That Manav might actually get promoted someday.”

Sameer gasped dramatically.

“He already speaks like middle management. Evolution is happening.”

Even Arjun laughed properly this time.

But then Priyanka added quietly:

“The worst part is... I’m not even sure the system is wrong.”

The humor faded immediately.

Because they all understood something now that nobody wanted to admit openly:

presentations matter because leadership cannot personally verify everything.

They reward whoever creates confidence fastest.

And confidence often looks like competence from a distance.

At 9 PM, the office had nearly emptied completely.

Only a few scattered screens remained glowing across Floor 7.

Manav walked past carrying his laptop proudly.

“Great work today, team.”

Then he paused dramatically.

“But especially on storytelling.”

After he disappeared, silence remained for exactly two seconds.

Then Sameer whispered:

“If he says storytelling one more time, I’m escalating to HR.”

Neha burst out laughing.

Even Arjun smiled helplessly.

And for one brief moment beneath fluorescent lights and endless deadlines—

the pressure loosened slightly.

Because humor was the only thing keeping them human anymore.

Far across the floor, the empty Regional Director cabin reflected the office lights silently through glass walls.

Waiting patiently while employees slowly transformed themselves into whatever the organization rewarded most.

Even if they no longer recognized the difference between performance—

and performance theater.

Chapter 18 —

Utilization Report

The spreadsheet arrived on a Tuesday morning.

And somehow, everyone knew it would ruin lives before even opening it.

Subject:

Utilization Efficiency Tracking — Leadership Visibility Initiative

Attached:

- Weekly utilization metrics
- Productivity dashboards
- Comparative performance ranking

Sameer read the mail once and sighed deeply.

“They’ve started measuring existence.”

Across Floor 7, the emotional atmosphere collapsed immediately.

Employees stopped working temporarily to examine how management had decided to quantify human value this week.

The spreadsheet tracked:

- billable hours,
- meeting participation,
- response times,
- client engagement,
- weekend availability,
- after-hours collaboration.

Even breathing probably had a KPI hidden somewhere.

Neha opened the dashboard slowly.

“Oh my God.”

Beside her, Arjun stared at the rankings silently.

Employees had been color-coded.

Green for high utilization.

Yellow for average.

Red for “improvement opportunity.”

Corporate language for public psychological damage.

And there it was.

At the top section:

Sameer Malhotra — High Leadership Engagement

Arjun Sharma — Strong Operational Utilization

Neha Kapoor — Stable Contribution Metrics

None of those descriptions felt human anymore.

Near the pantry, chaos erupted immediately.

“This data makes no sense.”

“How is weekend availability a metric?”

“Who tracks response time after midnight?”

“They measured meeting attendance?”

“That’s because meetings replaced actual work.”

The office had entered metric paranoia.

Employees now refreshed dashboards more frequently than actual project updates.

Because once companies quantify people—

people start performing for numbers instead of purpose.

At 11 AM, Vikram held a review session about the new utilization model.

The conference room looked emotionally exhausted before the meeting even began.

Vikram stood beside the projector.

“Leadership wants stronger accountability visibility.”

Sameer whispered toward Neha:

“Translation: spreadsheets have become management.”

The screen displayed graphs and percentages like a financial horror film.

Utilization scores.

Productivity heat maps.

Engagement trends.

Not a single metric measured emotional exhaustion.

Then came the most dangerous slide.

Comparative Contribution Analysis

Employees shifted visibly in their seats.

Nobody enjoys seeing their professional worth ranked beside coworkers publicly.

Especially coworkers they secretly compete against.

Vikram continued calmly.

“These metrics are not punitive.”

Which meant they absolutely would become punitive eventually.

Arjun studied the dashboard carefully.

Something bothered him immediately.

Employees with higher meeting participation scores ranked better overall—

even if their actual operational output was lower.

Sameer noticed it too.

And instantly understood the consequence.

The system had accidentally rewarded visibility over effectiveness again.

Within hours, behavior across the office changed dramatically.

Employees started scheduling unnecessary meetings to increase participation scores.

People remained “active” on Teams late into the night.

Emails suddenly arrived at 11:47 PM with phrases like:

- “Just circling back.”
- “Keeping momentum going.”
- “Thoughts?”

Nobody was working more.

They were gaming measurement systems.

By evening, the office barely resembled a workplace anymore.
It felt like a simulation of productivity.

Neha walked toward the pantry carrying her laptop and emotional disappointment.

She found Priyanka staring blankly at the dashboard screen.

“I spent three hours helping another team yesterday,” Priyanka muttered.

“It doesn’t even count because it wasn’t billable.”

Neha sat beside her quietly.

“That’s the problem with metrics.”

Priyanka looked tired.

“What?”

“They only measure visible contribution.”

At the far end of the pantry, Sameer overheard and laughed softly.

“Congratulations,” he announced.

“We’ve officially transformed human effort into decorative Excel categories.”

Even Arjun smiled faintly at that.

But underneath the humor, frustration kept growing.

Because the office was slowly teaching employees a dangerous lesson:

optics matter more than meaning.

That night, around 8:30 PM, the three of them remained on Floor 7 again.

The office lights dimmed into evening mode.

Outside, Mumbai glowed beneath wet streets and endless traffic.

Inside, exhausted employees chased utilization percentages like survival scores.

Arjun stared at the dashboard one more time.

“You know what’s insane?”

“What?” Neha asked quietly.

“I spent years thinking good work speaks for itself.”

Sameer leaned back in his chair.

“And now?”

Arjun looked toward the glowing metrics screen.

“Now I think good work needs marketing.”

Silence followed.

Because nobody could argue anymore.

Then Sameer opened his own dashboard and burst out laughing suddenly.

“What?”

He turned the screen toward them dramatically.

His “high engagement” score had increased because he attended six meetings yesterday.

The meetings themselves had achieved absolutely nothing.

Neha shook her head slowly.

“This system is broken.”

“No,” Sameer corrected.

“It’s functioning exactly how corporate systems function.”

A pause.

Then he added softly:

“They reward measurable visibility because measuring real value takes effort.”

That sentence lingered heavily inside the nearly empty office.

The air conditioning hummed softly.

Cleaning staff moved through distant rows.

Somewhere far away, a Teams notification echoed into silence.

Arjun leaned back and closed his eyes briefly.

“You know what scares me?”

Neither answered.

“We’re all adapting to this.”

And that was the most dangerous part.

Not the spreadsheets.

Not the rankings.

Not the fake productivity.

Adaptation.

Employees were slowly reshaping behavior around metrics they privately hated.

Because survival inside organizations often depends less on belief—

and more on adjustment.

Near the far end of Floor 7, the Regional Director cabin remained dark behind silent glass walls.

Waiting.

Always waiting.

And somewhere beneath fluorescent lights and endless dashboards—

three coworkers continued drifting deeper into a system that no longer measured who worked hardest.

Only who looked measurable enough to matter.

PART 3 —
CRACKS IN THE MASK

Chapter 19 —

Missed Anniversary

Arjun forgot his anniversary on a Wednesday.

Not completely.

That would've been easier to explain.

He remembered it twice during the day.

And still missed it.

The first reminder came at 8:12 AM.

His wife, Kavya, had sent a message while he was inside an escalation call.

Don't stay too late today 

He smiled when he saw it.

Really smiled.

For the first time all morning.

Then another Teams notification appeared immediately after.

Then another.

Then a client escalation.

Then Vikram asking for revised projections before noon.

And the day swallowed him whole.

By afternoon, the office had entered controlled chaos again.

A regional reporting mismatch had triggered leadership panic ahead of quarterly reviews.

Employees rushed between meeting rooms carrying laptops and emotional instability.

At 4 PM, Neha stopped beside Arjun's desk.

"You haven't eaten."

"I'm fine."

"You've said that four times today."

"I'm consistently fine."

She narrowed her eyes.

"You look like your soul has buffering issues."

Despite everything, he laughed softly.

Then his phone buzzed again.

Kavya.

Calling.

He stared at the screen for two seconds before letting it ring and disconnect automatically.

Not intentionally cruel.

Reflexed.

Because Vikram had just entered the floor.

“Need everyone in Meeting Room B,” Vikram announced sharply.

“Leadership wants revised numbers tonight.”

Tonight.

Of course.

The meeting stretched endlessly.

Forecast discussions.

Utilization debates.

Client risk projections.

Sameer sat beside Arjun quietly watching him deteriorate in real time.

By 7 PM, Arjun had stopped blinking normally.

By 8 PM, even his coffee looked exhausted.

Then Sameer glanced at his phone.

His expression changed immediately.

“Oh no.”

Neha looked up.

“What happened?”

Sameer slowly turned toward Arjun.

“What date is today?”

Arjun frowned tiredly.

“Wednesday.”

“No. What date?”

Silence.

Then realization hit.

Hard.

Arjun grabbed his phone instantly.

Eight missed calls.

Three messages.

Are you coming?

Reservation was for 8 PM.

Then finally:

Happy anniversary, Arjun.

No anger.

Somehow worse.

For a moment, the office noise disappeared completely around him.

The lights.

The meetings.

The conversations.

Everything faded behind a sudden wave of guilt so sharp it physically hurt.

Neha looked devastated for him.

“Oh God.”

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“Leave.”

Arjun stood immediately.

Then stopped.

Because Vikram was still speaking at the front of the room.

Discussing quarterly planning like nobody inside the building had personal lives.

Arjun hesitated.

One second.

Two seconds.

That hesitation scared him more than anything else.

Because once upon a time, he would've left without thinking.

Now his brain automatically calculated visibility consequences first.

Sameer noticed it instantly.

And for the first time in weeks, his voice lost all humor completely.

“Arjun.”

He looked at him directly.

“Go home.”

Something inside that sentence finally broke the paralysis.

Arjun grabbed his laptop and walked out quickly.

No explanation.

No apology to management.

Just guilt carrying him toward elevators.

The cab ride home felt endless.

Mumbai traffic crawled beneath orange streetlights and rain-soaked roads while anxiety tightened inside his chest.

He kept staring at Kavya’s last message repeatedly.

Happy anniversary.

So polite.

So disappointed.

When he finally reached home, the apartment lights were dim.
The dining table was still set.
Candles melted halfway down beside untouched food.
The silence hurt immediately.

Kavya sat near the window wearing the same clothes she had probably spent hours getting ready in.
She looked tired more than angry.
That made it worse.

“I’m sorry,” Arjun said instantly.
No defense.
No explanation.
Just truth.

Kavya looked at him quietly.
“You remembered, didn’t you?”
That question hit harder than shouting would have.
Because she already knew him too well.

He nodded slowly.
“Yes.”

“And still stayed.”

Silence.

Rain tapped softly against the apartment windows.

Arjun sat down heavily across from her.

“I got pulled into meetings and—”

Kavya smiled faintly.

Not happy.

Just tired.

“You always get pulled into meetings.”

That sentence carried months inside it.

Maybe years.

Back at the office meanwhile, Sameer and Neha sat through the rest of the leadership review in unusual silence.

Even Vikram seemed exhausted now.

Slides continued changing on the projector.

Numbers continued filling screens.

But something emotionally important had already happened tonight.

After the meeting ended around 10 PM, Neha packed her laptop quietly.

“You think he’s okay?”

Sameer stared toward the empty chair beside Arjun’s desk.

“No.”

They walked slowly toward the elevators together.

The office looked colder late at night.

More artificial.

As if once enough people leave, the building stops pretending to care about humans entirely.

Neha pressed the elevator button softly.

“You know what scares me?”

Sameer looked at her.

“We all talk about promotions like they’ll fix our lives.”

The elevator doors reflected tired office lights back at them.

“But half the people chasing them are already losing the lives they had.”

Sameer said nothing.

Because lately, even he had started wondering whether ambition quietly consumes people long before success arrives.

At home, Arjun and Kavya sat across from each other in heavy silence.

The untouched anniversary dinner remained between them like evidence.

Finally Kavya spoke softly.

“I know your work matters.”

He looked up slowly.

“But sometimes...”

Her voice almost broke there.

“...it feels like I’m competing with your office for pieces of you.”

That sentence stayed inside him long after the conversation ended.

Long after midnight.

Long after the apartment lights turned off.

And somewhere high above the city—

Floor 7 remained glowing in the dark,

filled with employees still typing beneath fluorescent lights,

still chasing promotions,

while slowly sacrificing moments they would never get back again.

Chapter 20 —

“I Need This Promotion”

The sentence came out at 11:43 PM.

Quietly.

Unexpectedly.

And once spoken, it changed everything between them.

The office was nearly empty.

Again.

Only a handful of screens still glowed across Floor 7 while rain blurred the city outside into streaks of silver and orange.

The air conditioning hummed softly through the silence like background exhaustion.

Neha sat alone in Meeting Room C reviewing budget forecasts for a client presentation scheduled the next morning.

Or at least pretending to review them.

Truthfully, she had reread the same slide six times without understanding a word.

Her mind was elsewhere.

Bills.

Home.

Her father's medical expenses.

Her younger brother's college fees.

Numbers followed her outside Excel now.

A soft knock interrupted the silence.

Sameer entered holding two vending-machine coffees.

"I brought emergency survival liquid."

Neha smiled faintly.

"You say that like we're trapped in a war zone."

Sameer looked around the empty office.

"We are."

He sat across from her casually.

For a moment, neither spoke.

The office felt strangely peaceful after most people left.

Politics sleeps briefly after 10 PM.

Only tired honesty survives.

Sameer studied her quietly.

“You’ve been different lately.”

Neha didn’t look up.

“Tired.”

“No. Heavy.”

That word landed accurately.

Too accurately.

She closed the laptop slowly.

Outside the glass walls, scattered employees moved through dim office lights carrying invisible stress home with them.

Then she asked suddenly:

“You ever calculate your salary before sleeping?”

Sameer frowned slightly.

“What?”

“Like... mentally dividing expenses.”

She laughed softly under her breath.

“Rent. Loans. Family. Savings.”

A pause.

“Then wondering how many years of your life equal financial stability.”

Sameer's expression changed immediately.

The humor disappeared.

Because this conversation had stepped outside office politics now.

Into real life.

Neha stared toward the rain outside.

"My father's treatment costs increased again."

The sentence came out calmly.

Too calmly.

Like something repeated privately too many times already.

Sameer stayed silent.

Listening properly now.

"I haven't told anyone at work," she continued.

"Obviously."

"You just told me."

She smiled faintly.

"You're emotionally unemployed enough to listen."

That made him laugh softly.

Just enough to keep her talking.

Neha folded her arms tightly.

“The promotion would change everything for my family.”

The office lights reflected faintly across the meeting room glass.

“I know everyone keeps pretending this is about ambition or leadership or growth...”

Her voice lowered slightly.

“...but for some of us, it’s survival.”

That sentence settled heavily into the room.

Because suddenly the competition looked different again.

Not ego.

Not prestige.

Necessity.

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“You should tell Arjun.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because he already looks like he’s carrying the weight of existence every day.”

She paused.

“And because once people know you need something badly...”

Her eyes drifted toward the empty office floor.

“...they start seeing desperation before capability.”

That was the cruelest part of corporate life.

Organizations love ambition.

But visible desperation makes people uncomfortable.

At midnight, Arjun walked past Meeting Room C and noticed the lights still on.

He paused when he saw both of them inside.

Then entered quietly.

“You two still alive?”

“Debatable,” Sameer replied.

Arjun sat beside them heavily.

His face still carried traces of the anniversary fight from the previous night.

Not visible sadness exactly.

Just emotional exhaustion settling deeper into him.

For a few minutes, all three sat together in silence while rain tapped softly against the windows.

The city outside looked endless.

Restless.

Hungry.

Then Arjun suddenly laughed once under his breath.

“What?”

He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“You know what’s funny?”

Neither answered.

“I used to think promotions were about validation.”

He stared at the glowing office floor.

“Now I think they’re about fear.”

Neha looked at him carefully.

“What kind of fear?”

“Falling behind.”

The honesty of the answer surprised all three of them.

Arjun leaned back slowly.

“My father worked thirty years in the same company.”

His voice softened slightly.

“They replaced him in two weeks after retirement.”

Silence.

“He gave everything to work.”

A faint smile.

“And afterward... it was like the company barely remembered he existed.”

Sameer looked down quietly.

Because every corporate employee secretly fears becoming professionally forgettable.

Then Neha spoke softly.

“I need this promotion.”

The words came out before she could stop them.

Raw this time.

Real.

Both men looked at her immediately.

And for the first time since the competition began—the emotional masks disappeared completely.

Neha looked away toward the rain-soaked windows.

“My father’s treatment, my family, my loans...”

Her voice tightened slightly.

“I can’t keep pretending this is just career growth.”

Nobody tried comforting her immediately.

Because sometimes reality deserves silence before reassurance.

Finally Sameer spoke quietly.

“My mother still thinks I’m successful because I wear formal clothes.”

That made Neha laugh softly through tired eyes.

So he continued.

“She doesn’t know I calculate EMIs during leadership meetings.”

Even Arjun smiled faintly.

Then he looked toward the empty Regional Director cabin at the far end of the floor.

Dark behind glass walls.

Waiting.

Always waiting.

“You know what scares me most?” he asked quietly.

“What?” Neha said.

“That even after getting promoted...”

He paused.

“...I’m not sure any of us actually become less afraid.”

The office hummed softly around them.

Distant printers.

Late-night notifications.

Artificial lighting reflecting against glass walls.

The entire building felt like a machine powered by invisible anxiety.

And somewhere inside that silence—

three coworkers finally stopped pretending the competition was only professional.

Because beneath every presentation, every meeting, every late-night email—

real lives were quietly depending on the outcome.

Chapter 21 —

Sick Leave

Sameer collapsed during a leadership call.

Not dramatically.

Corporate breakdowns rarely look cinematic.

There was no shouting.

No falling unconscious.

No heroic ambulance sequence.

Just a quiet moment where his body finally stopped cooperating with his ambition.

It happened on a Monday morning.

Of course it was Monday.

The office had returned from the weekend carrying artificial energy and unresolved exhaustion.

Employees discussed productivity while secretly recovering emotionally from the previous week.

At 10:05 AM, Sameer stood inside Meeting Room B presenting quarterly stakeholder updates to regional leadership.

He looked polished as always.

Confident voice.

Sharp responses.

Perfectly structured slides.

The ideal corporate high-potential employee.

But Neha noticed something immediately.

His hands were trembling slightly.

She frowned from across the conference table.

“You okay?”

Sameer nodded once.

“Didn’t sleep properly.”

Which was technically true.

He hadn’t slept properly in months.

The presentation continued.

Leadership asked questions.

Sameer answered smoothly.

Vikram nodded approvingly.

Then halfway through explaining client retention strategy—

Sameer suddenly stopped speaking.

Silence.

Tiny at first.

Then strange.

He blinked once.

Twice.

His expression shifted like his brain had temporarily disconnected from the room.

“Sameer?” Vikram asked carefully.

The projector light reflected across Sameer’s pale face.

He tried speaking again.

Nothing came out properly.

Then he sat down abruptly.

Too abruptly.

Neha stood immediately.

“Hey.”

Arjun was already moving across the room before anyone else reacted.

Sameer pressed his fingers against his forehead tightly.

“I’m fine.”

Classic corporate final words before collapse.

But he wasn’t fine.

His breathing had become uneven.

His face looked drained completely.

The room’s artificial lighting suddenly made him appear frighteningly fragile.

Vikram finally closed the laptop.

“Meeting adjourned.”

Leadership disconnected awkwardly from the call one by one.

No organization ever knows how to professionally process visible human weakness.

Ten minutes later, Sameer sat in the medical room downstairs while a company doctor checked his blood pressure.

“Severe exhaustion,” the doctor said calmly.

“Stress levels are extremely high.”

Sameer laughed weakly.

“Perfect. Very on-brand.”

Nobody laughed back.

Neha stood near the wall with folded arms.

Angry now.

Not at him.

At the entire situation.

The doctor removed the monitor carefully.

“You need rest.”

Sameer nodded absentmindedly.

“I’ll join remotely later.”

Three seconds of silence followed.

Then even the doctor looked offended.

Arjun stared at him.

“You almost passed out.”

“I’m okay now.”

“You literally forgot how language works for a minute.”

Sameer pointed weakly toward him.

“Very dramatic wording.”

But beneath the humor, fear had already entered the room quietly.

Because for the first time—

their stress had become physically visible.

By afternoon, rumors spread across Floor 7 instantly.

“Sameer had a panic attack.”

“No, blood pressure issue.”

“I heard he collapsed during the VP call.”

“Burnout.”

“Probably promotion pressure.”

The office consumed human vulnerability faster than gossip ever should.

At 3 PM, Sameer joined a Teams call from home.

Of course he did.

Camera off.

Voice tired.

Still working.

Neha stared at the screen in disbelief.

“You should not be online.”

His voice crackled softly through speakers.

“I’m just listening.”

Arjun muted himself instantly and texted privately:

Are you insane?

Sameer replied almost immediately.

Professionally? Yes.

The meeting continued around them.

Forecasts.

Deadlines.

Utilization discussions.

As if nothing meaningful had happened earlier.

That was another terrifying thing about corporate life:

the machine pauses briefly for human damage—

then resumes immediately.

Later that evening, Neha called Sameer directly.

He answered after two rings.

“You sound alive,” she said.

“Strong start.”

She sat near her apartment window staring at Mumbai traffic below while rain tapped softly against the glass.

“You scared us today.”

Silence.

Then finally:

“Sorry.”

The softness in his voice surprised her.

Because Sameer usually covered discomfort with humor immediately.

Tonight he sounded tired beyond performance.

“I thought I had control over it,” he admitted quietly.

“What?”

“The stress.”

A pause.

“I thought if I stayed ahead of everything long enough...”

His voice faded slightly.

“...my body would cooperate.”

Neha closed her eyes briefly.

Because every employee secretly believes that lie at some point.

That endurance is infinite if ambition is strong enough.

Meanwhile, Arjun sat alone at home pretending to work while Kavya slept in the other room.

But his mind kept replaying the morning.

Sameer forgetting words mid-presentation.

The exhaustion in his face.

The reflexive need to keep working afterward.

Then something unsettling occurred to him.

Nobody in the office had been truly shocked.

Concerned, yes.

But not shocked.

As if everyone had unconsciously accepted burnout as normal collateral damage for success.

The next morning, Sameer returned to work.

Naturally.

Despite medical advice.

Despite exhaustion.

Despite common sense.

The moment he entered Floor 7, employees looked up instantly.

Some concerned.

Some curious.

Some simply measuring whether weakness had changed his status.

Sameer smiled casually while walking toward his desk.

“Good news,” he announced loudly.

“I survived capitalism.”

A few people laughed nervously.

But Neha didn't.

Neither did Arjun.

Because both could see it clearly now:

the office had started taking pieces from all of them.

Sleep.

Relationships.

Health.

Peace.

And somehow the system still called it professional growth.

That evening, the three of them stood near the windows again
beneath dim office lighting.

Outside, Mumbai moved endlessly through rain and headlights.

Inside, Floor 7 glowed like a machine that never truly powered
down.

Sameer stared quietly at his reflection in the glass.

"You know the worst part?"

"What?" Arjun asked softly.

"I still want the promotion."

Silence.

Because they understood exactly what he meant.

Even after the stress.
Even after the collapse.
Even after seeing the cost clearly—
ambition remained.

Neha folded her arms tightly.

“That’s the trap.”

The office lights reflected faintly across the windows around them.

“The system hurts people...”

She looked toward the dark Regional Director cabin.

“...then convinces them the reward is worth the damage.”

And somewhere beneath fluorescent lights and endless deadlines—

three exhausted coworkers kept standing inside the machine,
still chasing the very thing slowly breaking them apart.

Chapter 22 —

The Mentor

Most employees stopped noticing Mr. Iyer years ago.

Which was ironic.

Because he noticed everything.

He sat near the far corner of Floor 7 beside the old archive cabinets nobody used anymore.

No glass cabin.

No leadership title.

No dramatic corporate presence.

Just a quiet senior employee with silver hair, neatly ironed shirts, and thirty-two years inside the same organization.

New employees assumed he was irrelevant.

Experienced employees knew better.

Because every office has one person who understands the system too deeply to worship it anymore.

At Axion, that person was Mr. Iyer.

Wednesday evening.

8:05 PM.

The office had entered its usual late-night state:
half productivity,
half emotional decay.

Arjun sat alone near the windows reviewing escalation reports while trying unsuccessfully to ignore the exhaustion inside his own body.

Sameer looked pale again despite pretending otherwise.

Neha had been staring at the same email draft for fifteen minutes.

The pressure was no longer episodic now.

It had become atmospheric.

Then Mr. Iyer walked slowly past their desks carrying a steel coffee tumbler.

He paused briefly.

“Young people are still here?”

Sameer looked up dramatically.

“Sir, capitalism refuses to release us.”

Mr. Iyer smiled faintly.

“Ah. Promotion season.”

That caught all three off guard instantly.

Because nobody discussed the competition openly anymore.

Yet somehow he already knew.

Of course he knew.

People like Mr. Iyer always know.

Without invitation, he pulled a chair nearby and sat beside them quietly.

The office lights hummed softly overhead.

Rain streaked down the windows beyond the glowing city skyline.

Mr. Iyer looked around at all three carefully.

“You know the funny thing about promotions?”

Sameer leaned back.

“What?”

“They never arrive on the same day as happiness.”

Silence followed the sentence like a shadow.

Neha closed her laptop slowly.

Arjun looked genuinely interested for the first time all evening.

Mr. Iyer took a slow sip of coffee.

“When I was your age...”

He smiled softly at the memory.

“...I thought every designation would finally make me feel secure.”

The office around them blurred into distant keyboard sounds and late-night calls.

“Senior Analyst. Manager. Senior Manager.”

A pause.

“Every promotion felt important for exactly two weeks.”

Sameer frowned slightly.

“Then what happens?”

Mr. Iyer laughed quietly.

“They give you a bigger chair and new anxieties.”

Even Arjun smiled faintly.

But the older man’s eyes remained calm.

Too calm.

Like someone who had already fought battles they were only beginning to understand.

“You know what this office does exceptionally well?” Mr. Iyer continued.

“It convinces intelligent people that exhaustion is achievement.”

That sentence landed heavily.

Especially after Sameer’s collapse.

Mr. Iyer looked directly at him now.

“You should rest more.”

Sameer blinked once.

“How did you—”

“I’ve worked here longer than you’ve been alive.”

A faint smile.

“I can recognize burnout from walking posture now.”

Neha laughed softly despite herself.

But Mr. Iyer’s expression turned thoughtful again.

“Careful, all of you.”

The mood shifted quietly.

Arjun leaned forward slightly.

“About what?”

Mr. Iyer looked toward the dark Regional Director cabin at the far end of the floor.

“About building your identity entirely around work.”

The office lights reflected across his glasses softly.

“Companies restructure faster than humans recover.”

Nobody spoke after that.

Because suddenly the office felt strangely temporary.

All these late nights.

All these politics.

All these sacrifices.

Temporary.

Mr. Iyer folded his hands over the coffee tumbler.

“You know who gets hurt most in corporate life?”

Sameer answered automatically.

“Hardworking people?”

“No.”

The older man shook his head gently.

“The people who believe the company will love them back.”

Silence again.

Deeper this time.

Somewhere nearby, a Teams notification echoed through the nearly empty office.

Nobody moved.

Neha looked at him carefully.

“Then why stay thirty-two years?”

That question hung in the air quietly.

Mr. Iyer smiled faintly toward the windows.

“Because work matters.”

A pause.

“But it should never become the only thing that matters.”

The simplicity of that answer unsettled them more than any dramatic speech could have.

Mr. Iyer stood slowly, joints stiff from age and decades of office chairs.

Then he looked directly at Arjun.

“You remind me of myself.”

Arjun blinked.

“That’s either encouraging or terrifying.”

“It’s both.”

Then he turned toward Sameer.

“You’re clever.”

Sameer nodded proudly.

“I’ve been told.”

Mr. Iyer smiled.

“Yes. But clever people sometimes confuse being needed with being valued.”

That wiped the humor off Sameer’s face immediately.

Finally he looked at Neha.

“And you...”

He paused thoughtfully.

“...carry responsibility too quietly.”

Neha looked away instinctively.

Which told him he was correct.

The office felt unusually still now.

Like the building itself was listening.

Mr. Iyer adjusted his sleeves gently.

“One more thing.”

All three looked at him.

“Promotions don’t fix emptiness.”

The words landed softly.

Without drama.
Without judgment.
Just truth.

Then he walked away slowly toward the elevators carrying his steel tumbler and decades of understanding with him.

For several moments, none of them spoke.

Outside, Mumbai shimmered beneath rain and headlights and endless ambition.

Inside, Floor 7 remained glowing beneath fluorescent lights and invisible pressure.

Finally Sameer broke the silence quietly.

“Well.”

Arjun looked at him.

“That was emotionally devastating.”

Even Neha laughed softly.

But the laughter faded quickly.

Because somewhere deep inside all three of them—

Mr. Iyer’s words had found the exact fears they were trying not to name aloud.

Near the far end of the office, the empty Regional Director cabin reflected their tired silhouettes through dark glass.

Waiting.

Always waiting.

And somewhere beneath corporate ambition and endless performance—

three employees had finally met someone who survived the climb long enough to understand its cost.

Chapter 23 —

HR Confidential

The meeting invitation arrived at 9:03 AM.

And like all HR invitations, it immediately destroyed productivity across the floor.

Subject:

Confidential Discussion

From:

Priya — Human Resources

Attendees:

Neha Kapoor

That single word—

Confidential

—spread through Floor 7 faster than a system outage.

Within minutes, theories emerged everywhere.

“Is she getting promoted?”

“No, confidential means complaint.”

“Maybe restructuring.”

“Maybe salary correction.”

“Maybe leadership feedback.”

Corporate employees can build conspiracy models from absolutely nothing.

Neha stared at the invitation with visible suspicion.

Sameer leaned toward her slowly.

“Run.”

She frowned.

“It’s just HR.”

“That’s what people say before emotional trauma.”

Even Arjun looked uneasy.

Because nobody trusted unexplained HR meetings.

Not even HR trusted HR meetings.

At 11 AM, Neha walked toward the HR cabin carrying the emotional energy of someone approaching airport security.

The glass walls felt unusually transparent today.

Employees pretended to work while secretly tracking her movement through reflections.

Inside the cabin, Priya smiled warmly.

Which somehow made things worse.

“Hi Neha. Relax.”

Dangerous phrase.

The room smelled faintly of coffee and corporate diplomacy.

Motivational posters hung neatly behind Priya’s desk:

- *People First*
- *Culture Matters*
- *Growth Through Trust*

Neha suddenly felt profoundly unsafe.

“Nothing negative,” Priya assured gently.

“We just wanted a leadership feedback conversation.”

There it was again.

Leadership.

The office’s favorite psychological weapon.

Neha sat carefully.

“What kind of feedback?”

Priya folded her hands elegantly.

“You’re highly respected across teams.”

Always the opening line.

Compliment first.

Concern second.

Confusion third.

“You’re dependable, collaborative, emotionally mature...”

Priya smiled professionally.

“But some senior stakeholders feel you hold back in high-visibility environments.”

Neha blinked slowly.

There it was again.

Visibility.

The office had become obsessed with it.

“What exactly does that mean?” Neha asked calmly.

Priya gave the kind of answer that sounded meaningful while explaining nothing.

“You have strong leadership energy internally.”

A pause.

“But externally you sometimes disappear behind stronger personalities.”

Neha immediately pictured:

- Sameer speaking confidently during meetings,
- Manav presenting animated slides like TED Talks,
- Arjun silently solving disasters nobody acknowledged properly.

The office rewarded noise differently from depth.

Priya continued gently.

“We’d like to see you become more strategically assertive.”

Neha almost laughed.

Every corporate feedback session eventually invents new personality settings for employees.

Meanwhile, outside the HR cabin, the office had already become a live rumor market.

Priyanka appeared beside Sameer’s desk carrying coffee.

“So?”

Sameer looked offended.

“She’s been inside for seven minutes.”

“That’s enough time for career destruction.”

Arjun remained quiet.

But even he kept glancing toward the glass HR cabin unconsciously.

Because once someone enters HR, the entire office emotionally follows them inside.

At 11:42 AM, Neha exited finally.

Every nearby employee looked busy with terrifying speed.

The synchronization was almost athletic.

Sameer immediately rolled his chair toward her.

“You survived?”

“Barely.”

“What happened?”

She dropped into her seat heavily.

“I got professionally analyzed by corporate astrology.”

Even Arjun laughed softly.

Neha opened her laptop dramatically.

“Apparently I need stronger strategic assertiveness in high-visibility leadership environments.”

Sameer stared blankly.

“That sentence should require government approval before usage.”

Then Neha leaned closer.

“You know what the scary part is?”

“What?”

“They talk like personality itself is a performance metric.”

Silence.

Because she was right.

The office no longer evaluated just work.

Now it evaluated:

- tone,
- confidence,
- presence,
- visibility,
- energy,
- influence.

Employees weren't simply performing tasks anymore.

They were performing versions of themselves.

That afternoon, another rumor wave hit Floor 7.

Someone claimed HR was collecting confidential promotion feedback.

Someone else claimed leadership had already shortlisted candidates secretly.

Another employee insisted there would be organizational restructuring after the promotion.

Nobody knew anything.

But uncertainty itself had become entertainment.

At 4 PM, Sameer entered the pantry and found Priya from HR making coffee.

He pointed at her immediately.

“You people are dangerous.”

Priya looked amused.

“We’re literally just HR.”

“That’s exactly what makes it terrifying.”

She laughed softly.

Then looked at him carefully.

“You know the funny thing?”

“What?”

“Employees tell HR things they wouldn’t tell family.”

That sentence stayed with him longer than expected.
Because lately the office had indeed become emotionally invasive.
People cried in meeting rooms.
Confessed burnout during one-on-ones.
Shared fears disguised as career conversations.
The organization knew things about employees even their own
homes sometimes didn't.

That evening, the three of them stood near the windows again
while rain painted silver lines down the glass.
The city below moved endlessly beneath headlights and survival.

Neha folded her arms tightly.
“You know what I realized today?”
Arjun looked at her.
“What?”
“This company doesn't just want work.”
The office lights reflected faintly around them.
“It wants personality optimization.”

Sameer nodded slowly.
“They don't promote people anymore.”
A pause.

“They promote narratives.”

Silence settled heavily after that.

Because all three understood the implication.

The competition was no longer only about capability.

Now it was about becoming the version of yourself leadership found easiest to believe in.

Near the far end of Floor 7, the Regional Director cabin remained dark behind silent glass walls.

Waiting patiently.

Watching employees slowly reshape themselves beneath fluorescent lights and invisible pressure.

And somewhere inside that machine—

three coworkers were beginning to wonder whether success required becoming someone slightly artificial first.

Chapter 24 —

The Appraisal Draft

The document was never supposed to be seen.

That was the first problem.

The second problem was that once employees discovered it existed—

nobody could think about anything else.

It began with a printing mistake.

Which, in corporate life, is how most disasters begin.

At 6:40 PM, the printer near Meeting Room D jammed during a leadership review.

Normally nobody cared about printer issues.

But this time, several confidential appraisal drafts remained half-printed inside the tray before the machine froze completely.

And before anyone from management retrieved them—

Rohit found them.

Which was essentially the worst possible outcome after public internet access.

By 6:52 PM, whispers had already spread across Floor 7.

“There’s a ranking document.”

“No way.”

“I’m serious.”

“Who’s on top?”

“I only saw partial pages.”

“Send photo.”

“Already deleted.”

Which obviously meant screenshots existed everywhere now.

At 7 PM, Sameer walked toward the pantry and immediately sensed unusual energy in the office.

Employees looked overly alert.

Conversations stopped abruptly when managers passed nearby.

Even Priyanka looked emotionally invested in espionage.

“What happened?” he asked cautiously.

Priyanka lowered her voice dramatically.

“There’s an appraisal ranking draft.”

Sameer froze.

“Oh no.”

Across the floor, Arjun and Neha were already hearing fragments of the same rumor.

Supposedly the document contained:

- promotion readiness ratings,
- leadership evaluations,
- internal rankings,
- succession recommendations.

Essentially the emotional nuclear codes of corporate life.

Then came the most dangerous phrase possible:

“I heard your names were there.”

By 7:15 PM, productivity across Floor 7 had completely collapsed.

Nobody worked anymore.

Employees refreshed Teams messages and private chats like investigative journalists during a political scandal.

Sameer finally cornered Rohit near the vending machines.

“You saw it?”

Rohit looked delighted by his own relevance.

“Partial pages.”

“And?”

Rohit lowered his voice further.

“Leadership categories.”

Sameer folded his arms impatiently.

“Speak human language.”

Rohit smirked.

“There were labels beside names.”

Silence.

Then:

- *High Potential*
 - *Operationally Strong*
 - *Needs Executive Presence*
 - *Technically Dependable*
 - *Limited Leadership Visibility*
-

Sameer felt immediate nausea.

Because those phrases sounded exactly like leadership language.

Which meant the document was probably real.

“And whose names?” he asked carefully.

Rohit hesitated.

“I only remember some.”

Of course he did.

Selective memory—the strongest power in office politics.

Meanwhile, Neha sat frozen at her desk staring blankly at her monitor while employees around her whispered constantly.

She hated this.

Not the competition.

The reduction.

The idea that months of work, stress, sacrifice, and identity could be compressed into one cold leadership adjective.

At 8 PM, Vikram finally emerged from his cabin visibly irritated.

“Everybody focus on work.”

Which confirmed the document existed instantly.

The office went silent.

The dangerous kind.

The kind where nobody believes authority anymore.

Ten minutes later, the three of them gathered inside an empty meeting room.

The atmosphere felt tense immediately.

Sameer shut the door quietly.

“This is getting out of control.”

Arjun leaned against the table.

“It was always out of control.”

Neha looked exhausted.

“I don’t even want to know what’s written.”

Sameer looked at her carefully.

“That’s a lie.”

She looked away instantly.

Because it was true.

Everyone wanted to know.

Even if the answer hurt.

Especially if the answer hurt.

Arjun sat slowly.

“You know what scares me?”

Neither answered.

“That leadership already decided versions of us privately.”

The fluorescent lights buzzed softly overhead.

“Before the promotion is even announced.”

Silence followed.

Because all three had already started sensing it.

The meetings.

The feedback.

The visibility conversations.

Leadership wasn't discovering employees anymore.

They were categorizing them.

Then Sameer spoke quietly.

“I guarantee my label says something like ‘strong influence skills.’”

Neha gave a tired smile.

“And mine probably says ‘stable collaborative contributor.’”

All three looked toward Arjun automatically.

He laughed softly under his breath.

“Operationally strong.”

Nobody denied it.

Because that one hurt precisely due to accuracy.

The office had slowly assigned identities to all of them:

- Sameer — visible leader
- Arjun — dependable executor
- Neha — emotionally intelligent support system

And the terrifying part?

Even they had started believing those versions.

Outside the meeting room glass, employees continued moving through Floor 7 pretending normalcy while secretly craving information.

The atmosphere felt infected now.

Every interaction carried hidden interpretation.

At 9 PM, Priya from HR entered the meeting room unexpectedly.

All three straightened instinctively.

She sighed immediately.

“Relax. I’m not here to terminate anyone.”

“That’s exactly what someone from HR would say,” Sameer replied.

Even she laughed softly.

Then her expression became serious again.

“The appraisal document wasn’t finalized.”

None of them spoke.

Because unfinished judgment still hurts like judgment.

Priya leaned against the table carefully.

“You need to understand something.”

The office lights reflected faintly across the glass walls behind her.

“Leadership discussions are more subjective than employees realize.”

Arjun frowned.

“What does that mean?”

“It means...”

She chose her words carefully.

“...people are often evaluated based on how they make leadership feel.”

That sentence settled into the room heavily.

Not work alone.

Not numbers alone.

Feeling.

Priya looked toward Sameer.

“Confidence creates safety.”

Toward Arjun.

“Reliability creates dependence.”

Toward Neha.

“Emotional maturity creates trust.”

Then she paused.

“But organizations often confuse these qualities with complete identity.”

For several seconds, nobody spoke.

Because suddenly the competition felt strangely unfair and deeply human at the same time.

After Priya left, the room remained quiet.

Outside, rain blurred the city into moving lights and reflections.

Inside, the office continued glowing beneath fluorescent pressure and invisible rankings.

Finally Neha spoke softly.

“You know what’s terrifying?”

“What?” Sameer asked.

“That somewhere in a leadership folder...”

She looked toward the dark Regional Director cabin.

“...there’s already a written version of who they think we are.”

And somewhere high above Mumbai—
inside confidential documents and private discussions—
three exhausted employees had already started becoming
corporate narratives instead of people.

Chapter 25 —

LinkedIn Smiles

The first post appeared on a Sunday morning.

Which immediately made it suspicious.

Nobody genuinely inspirational wakes up at 7 AM thinking about leadership lessons unless career anxiety is involved.

LinkedIn Post — Manav Sethi

“True leaders don’t manage people. They inspire possibility.”

Grateful for another week of learning, growth, and strategic collaboration at Axion Global Services.

*#Leadership #GrowthMindset #CorporateJourney
#MondayMotivation*

Attached:

- one black-and-white office photo,
- folded arms,
- thoughtful side profile,

- laptop intentionally blurred in background.
-

Sameer stared at the post from his apartment couch in complete silence.

Then forwarded it instantly to the group chat.

Sameer:

He poses like he negotiates world peace through PowerPoint.

Within seconds, Neha replied.

Neha:

Why is every LinkedIn photo either airport, conference room, or fake candid laptop stare?

Then finally Arjun responded.

Arjun:

I think corporate people slowly become motivational quotes before death.

For the first time in days, all three laughed properly.

But by Monday morning, the office had transformed into a social media theater.

Because promotion season had officially reached LinkedIn.

Employees who never posted before suddenly became “thought leaders.”

The operations floor looked normal externally—
emails,
calls,
meetings.

But internally, everyone had started curating public versions of themselves online.

Priyanka posted about:

Women in Leadership.

Rohit uploaded a photo from a client call captioned:

Driving Impact Through Collaboration.

Someone from Finance wrote an emotional paragraph about resilience after attending one webinar.

And somehow every post contained:

- gratitude,
- growth,
- leadership,
- inspiration,
- and at least one coffee mug.

At 11 AM, Sameer walked into the pantry holding his phone like evidence from a crime scene.

“You need to see this.”

Neha looked up cautiously.

“What now?”

He showed her another LinkedIn post.

“Success is not about designation. It’s about creating value.”

Posted by:

A Senior Manager currently fighting three people for designation.

Neha burst out laughing.

Arjun looked genuinely disturbed.

“Why does everybody sound spiritually enlightened online while emotionally collapsing offline?”

Sameer pointed at him dramatically.

“Because LinkedIn is corporate Instagram for exhausted professionals.”

The office had started performing optimism publicly.

Even employees privately terrified about appraisals now posted:

- smiling office selfies,

- inspirational leadership threads,
- humble-brag achievement stories.

The contrast felt almost surreal.

At lunch, the conversation turned dangerous.

Priyanka looked toward Sameer carefully.

“You should post more.”

He frowned.

“Why?”

“Visibility.”

There it was again.

The office’s favorite religion.

Priyanka leaned forward.

“Leadership notices external presence now.”

Neha nearly choked on water.

“You’re telling me promotions have social media marketing now?”

“Everything has marketing now.”

Arjun stayed unusually quiet during lunch.

Because secretly—

he had opened LinkedIn three times that morning already.

And every time, the same uncomfortable feeling returned.

Everyone else looked ahead.

Polished.

Confident.

Successful.

Meanwhile he felt tired all the time.

That evening, while waiting for a client call, Arjun scrolled through LinkedIn again.

Post after post blurred together:

- smiling leadership photos,
- conference selfies,
- inspirational stories about resilience,
- career gratitude essays written by emotionally exhausted people.

Then suddenly he saw Sameer's profile.

Professional photo.

Strong headline.

Confident summaries.

For a brief moment, insecurity hit him sharply.

Because Sameer understood visibility naturally.

Even online.

"You're doom-scrolling LinkedIn again, aren't you?"

Arjun looked up instantly.

Neha stood beside his desk holding coffee.

“How did you know?”

“You look emotionally attacked.”

She sat beside him quietly.

For a few moments, both watched employees moving across Floor 7 beneath bright office lighting.

Then Arjun spoke softly.

“Do you ever feel like everybody else understands the game better?”

Neha smiled faintly.

“All the time.”

He turned the screen slightly toward her.

“How do people look this confident constantly?”

Neha studied the posts silently.

Then laughed softly under her breath.

“Half these people cry during quarterly reviews.”

That made him smile slightly.

Then her expression softened.

“LinkedIn is just professional theater.”

A pause.

“People post the version of themselves they hope becomes true someday.”

That sentence stayed with him.

Because maybe she was right.

Maybe nobody actually felt as successful as they appeared online.

Maybe everybody was performing confidence while privately negotiating fear.

At 7 PM, Sameer finally committed social media violence himself.

LinkedIn Post — Sameer Malhotra

*“Leadership is not about being the loudest person in the room.
It’s about helping others survive the room.”*

Attached:

a simple office skyline photo.

No face.

No pose.

No hashtags.

The post exploded internally by morning.

Employees suddenly treated him even more like future leadership material.

Because corporate environments mistake calm self-awareness for executive energy instantly.

Sameer regretted it immediately.

“I posted one thoughtful sentence.”

Neha smirked.

“And now HR thinks you meditate before meetings.”

Even Arjun laughed.

But underneath the humor, something uncomfortable remained.

Because visibility was expanding beyond office walls now.

Employees were branding themselves constantly.

Not just as workers—

but as narratives.

That night, near the windows overlooking Mumbai, the three of them stood quietly while rain blurred city lights into silver streaks below.

Floor 7 had mostly emptied again.

Only ambition remained awake after 9 PM.

Neha looked toward the glowing phones in their hands.

“You know what’s sad?”

“What?” Sameer asked.

“We don’t even get to be tired privately anymore.”

The office lights reflected faintly across the glass around them.

“Now we have to look inspired online too.”

Silence followed.

Because everyone understood the exhaustion of performing success continuously.

At work.

In meetings.

On calls.

Online.

Far across the office, the empty Regional Director cabin stood dark behind silent glass walls.

Waiting.

Always waiting.

And somewhere between ambition, insecurity, and curated confidence—

three exhausted employees kept smiling professionally,

while slowly forgetting what authenticity felt like without witnesses.

Chapter 26 —

Weekend Calls

The call came at 8:14 PM on a Saturday.

Which meant nobody answered it emotionally.

Only professionally.

Arjun stared at his vibrating phone from across the living room while Kavya quietly served dinner onto two plates.

The screen glowed against the table.

Vikram Calling

Silence settled instantly inside the apartment.

Not dramatic silence.

Familiar silence.

The kind couples develop after work invades too many evenings.

Kavya didn't look angry anymore when office calls happened.

That phase had passed months ago.

Now she just looked tired.

Which hurt more.

“You should answer,” she said softly.

Not because she wanted him to.

Because both already knew he would.

Arjun picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

Vikram’s voice arrived immediately.

“Sorry, quick escalation.”

No apology ever survives after the phrase quick escalation.

Within thirty seconds, Arjun was already discussing client impact assessments while his dinner cooled quietly behind him.

Kavya sat across the table pretending to eat.

Pretending not to listen.

Pretending this was normal.

At another part of the city, Sameer was inside a multiplex theater when his own phone vibrated.

He glanced at the screen and closed his eyes immediately.

Leadership Escalation Group

Twenty-seven unread messages.

His friend beside him frowned.

“You’re not seriously answering work during the movie?”

Sameer stood slowly.

“Corporate survival has no interval break.”

Meanwhile, Neha sat at a hospital pharmacy billing counter beside her father when her Teams notification appeared.

Urgent Client Alignment Needed Tonight

She stared at the screen in disbelief.

Then laughed softly under her breath.

Not because it was funny.

Because exhaustion sometimes exits the body looking like laughter.

By 9 PM, all three were online again.

Saturday night.

Laptop screens glowing.

Faces tired.

Lives paused.

The office had learned the final stage of control:

employees no longer needed to physically be at work for work to own them.

The Teams call opened one by one.

Sameer joined first from a dim parking area outside the theater.

Neha joined from the hospital waiting corridor.

Arjun joined from his dining table while untouched food sat beside him.

Nobody mentioned where they were.

That was the unwritten rule.

The organization preferred the illusion that employees existed only inside professional readiness.

Vikram appeared on screen looking equally exhausted.

“Sorry everyone.”

Again—

a corporate apology with no actual escape attached.

The client escalation itself turned out to be manageable.

Not urgent enough for Saturday.

Just urgent enough for leadership anxiety.

Which, in corporate life, becomes everyone else’s emergency automatically.

For ninety minutes, they discussed:

- timelines,
- communication gaps,
- risk mitigation,
- stakeholder confidence.

Meanwhile:

- Kavya ate dinner alone,
- Sameer missed half the movie,
- Neha's father slept in a hospital chair nearby.

The office remained invisible inside the call.

Its consequences did not.

At 10:37 PM, the meeting finally ended.

One by one, cameras disappeared.

Nobody spoke after the formal goodbye.

Nobody had energy left for fake positivity.

Sameer remained seated inside his parked car for several minutes afterward.

Rain slid down the windshield in silver lines while the city glowed beyond blurred traffic lights.

Then his phone buzzed again.

Message from his mother.

Coming home late again?

He stared at it quietly.

Then typed:

Work call.

Three words.

Entire lifestyle.

At home, Arjun finally closed his laptop.

Kavya was already washing dishes silently.

The untouched anniversary wound still lingered invisibly between them.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

Again.

Always again.

Kavya kept washing dishes for a moment before answering.

“You know what’s strange?”

He looked at her carefully.

“I don’t even get angry anymore when work interrupts.”

Water ran softly through the sink.

“That scares me more.”

Because acceptance sometimes signals emotional surrender, not peace.

Meanwhile, Neha sat beside her sleeping father in the hospital corridor.

The fluorescent lights overhead looked painfully similar to office lighting.

Same emotional temperature.

Same exhaustion.

Her laptop still rested open beside her.

She suddenly realized something terrifying:

she no longer remembered the last weekend she had fully disconnected from work emotionally.

Not checked emails secretly.

Not worried about Monday.

Not prepared mentally for escalations.

Disconnected.

Sunday morning arrived carrying no actual rest.

Employees across the city opened laptops “just briefly.”

Messages continued.

Calls continued.

Pressure continued.

The office no longer respected weekends.

Because modern corporate culture had discovered something powerful:

employees carrying phones become permanently reachable psychologically.

By Sunday evening, the three of them met again on a Teams call preparing for Monday reviews.

All looked exhausted in different ways.

Sameer rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“You know what’s impressive?”

“What?” Neha asked.

“This company somehow monetized our guilt.”

Arjun looked up.

“What do you mean?”

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“We feel guilty for not answering.”

Silence.

Because he was right.

The office had trained them carefully.

To respond quickly.

Stay available.

Remain committed.

Until boundaries started feeling unprofessional.

Neha looked toward the rain outside her apartment window.

“My father asked me today if weekends still exist in corporate jobs.”

A faint smile crossed her face.

“I genuinely didn’t know how to answer.”

Nobody laughed.

Because all three already understood the truth.

The company didn’t officially demand every weekend.

It simply rewarded the people who surrendered them most consistently.

Late Sunday night, Floor 7 remained dark and empty physically.

But phones continued buzzing across the city.

Emails continued arriving.

Presentations continued updating.

The office no longer needed walls anymore.

It lived inside employees now.

And somewhere between notifications, missed dinners, hospital corridors, and endless availability—

three exhausted coworkers slowly realized something dangerous:
the company was no longer just taking their time.

It was taking their ability to stop working mentally.

Chapter 27 —

Escalated

The client escalation began at 9:17 AM.

By 9:26 AM, it had already become political.

The problem itself was manageable.

A reporting mismatch.

Delayed deliverables.

Incorrect forecasting numbers sent to a major client.

Nothing catastrophic.

At least initially.

But inside corporate organizations, crises are rarely dangerous because of the issue itself.

They become dangerous because everyone sees opportunity inside them.

Opportunity to:

- protect themselves,

- expose rivals,
- gain visibility,
- shift blame upward or downward strategically.

And today, Floor 7 smelled blood.

The escalation mail arrived with terrifying professionalism.

Subject:

Urgent: Client Concern Regarding Reporting Accuracy

Marked:

- Senior Leadership
- Delivery Heads
- Regional Operations
- Vikram

And most importantly—

CC:

People who absolutely did not need to be involved.

Which meant the situation had officially entered public execution territory.

The office atmosphere changed instantly.

Conversations lowered.

Keyboards accelerated.

Managers started walking faster.

Nothing creates artificial productivity like fear.

Arjun opened the report carefully.

His stomach tightened immediately.

The forecasting inconsistency originated from data submitted by another department—

but the final approval trail included his team.

Which meant responsibility could now be redistributed creatively.

Across the floor, Sameer was already analyzing the political damage instead of the technical issue.

Because he understood something Arjun still resisted emotionally:

in escalations, perception becomes more important than truth very quickly.

Neha looked between both of them.

“How bad?”

Arjun rubbed his forehead slowly.

“Fixable.”

Sameer nodded once.

“Politically?”

Silence.

Then Arjun answered honestly.

“Dangerous.”

At 10 AM, Vikram called an emergency meeting.

The conference room filled rapidly with managers carrying laptops and carefully controlled expressions.

Nobody wanted responsibility.

Everybody wanted visibility.

The projector displayed client complaints in cold bullet points while leadership discussed “ownership gaps.”

Corporate language always sounds strangely clean compared to actual human panic.

Then came the first betrayal.

A professional and perfectly phrased betrayal.

One senior manager leaned back calmly.

“We did raise concerns earlier regarding operational validation timelines.”

Arjun looked up immediately.

That statement was technically true.

But incomplete.

The concerns had been vague and never formally escalated.

Now, suddenly, they were being reframed as ignored warnings.

Sameer noticed it instantly.

His jaw tightened slightly.

Because this was how corporate sabotage actually happened.

Not through obvious attacks.

Through selective framing.

Another manager added carefully:

“There may have been overdependence on execution assumptions.”

Again—

technically harmless language.

But strategically devastating.

Because everybody in the room understood who execution referred to.

Arjun.

Neha watched him silently.

He sat very still now.

Too still.

Like someone realizing the room had quietly shifted against him.

Vikram finally looked toward Arjun directly.

“Can your team resolve this by evening?”

Not:

What caused this?

Not:

Who missed validation?

Just:

Can your team fix it?

And that was the moment Arjun fully understood corporate leadership.

The person closest to the fire becomes responsible for extinguishing it—

even if they didn’t start it.

“Yes,” he answered calmly.

Because refusing ownership would look worse politically than unfair responsibility.

The meeting ended shortly afterward.

But the damage had already begun spreading invisibly across the office.

By lunch, rumors evolved rapidly.

“Leadership is unhappy with operations.”

“I heard Arjun’s team messed up badly.”

“No, another department caused it.”

“Doesn’t matter. Leadership only sees final ownership.”

Exactly.

In the pantry, Sameer cornered one of the managers privately.

“You threw Arjun under the bus in there.”

The manager looked offended instantly.

“No one’s blaming anyone.”

“That’s impressive,” Sameer replied calmly.

“You blamed him without using his name once.”

The manager smiled thinly.

“Leadership notices accountability.”

Sameer’s expression hardened slightly.

“No. Leadership notices narratives.”

Back at their desks, Arjun worked mechanically through revised data models while emails continued flooding in relentlessly.

Corrective actions.

Updated reports.

Urgent validations.

His screen blurred occasionally from exhaustion.

But he kept working.

Because now this wasn't only about fixing a client issue anymore.

It was about survival.

Neha sat beside him quietly.

"You okay?"

"I'm working."

"That wasn't my question."

He stopped typing briefly.

Then exhaled slowly.

"They needed someone visible to absorb this."

The office lights reflected faintly across his tired face.

"And I was available."

That sentence stayed with her.

Because it explained corporate life too accurately.

At 5 PM, leadership requested another update call.

This time, Arjun presented the corrective solution directly.

No dramatic slides.

No performance.

Just clear operational recovery.

The client calmed down almost immediately.

The issue truly had been manageable all along.

After the call ended, leadership thanked the team professionally.

But something ugly remained underneath the resolution.

Because everybody remembered who had looked weak during the escalation.

And who had looked politically useful.

That evening, Floor 7 felt emotionally colder than usual.

Rain hammered against the windows while exhausted employees packed laptops quietly.

The office had witnessed blood in the water today.

That changes environments.

Near the windows, the three of them stood together again.

Sameer looked furious still.

“You solved the entire thing.”

Arjun shrugged tiredly.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It absolutely matters.”

“No,” Arjun corrected softly.

“The story matters.”

Silence followed.

Because he had learned the lesson now too.

Neha folded her arms tightly.

“You know the worst part?”

Both looked at her.

“Everyone in that meeting knew what was happening.”

The office lights shimmered faintly across the dark glass around them.

“And still nobody stopped it.”

Because corporate politics survives through passive participation.

Most people don’t attack directly.

They simply stay quiet while someone else becomes convenient damage.

Far across Floor 7, the empty Regional Director cabin stood dark behind silent glass walls.

Waiting.

Always waiting.

And somewhere between accountability, visibility, and carefully worded betrayal—three exhausted coworkers finally understood the real danger of corporate life:

mistakes can be fixed.

Narratives are much harder to survive.

**PART 4 —
THE COST OF WINNING**

Chapter 28 — *Leadership Dinner*

The invitation arrived Thursday afternoon.

And immediately changed the emotional temperature of Floor 7.

Subject:

Leadership Networking Dinner

Venue:

The Imperial Orchid Hotel

Attendees:

Regional Leadership, Senior Management, Selected High-Potential Employees

Selected.

That word alone created silent violence across the office.

Employees checked attendee lists discreetly.

Then not discreetly.

Conversations shifted instantly:

- who got invited,
- who didn't,
- what it meant,
- whether it indicated promotion direction.

Because in corporate culture, exclusion always speaks louder than inclusion.

At 3 PM, Sameer walked toward Arjun's desk holding the invitation dramatically.

"Well."

Arjun looked up.

"We've been chosen for executive feeding rituals."

Neha received hers moments later.

She stared at the screen carefully.

Not excitement.

Relief.

Tiny, quiet relief.

Because invitations meant visibility.

Visibility meant relevance.

Relevance meant survival.

Across the floor, employees not invited suddenly became professionally indifferent.

“Oh, those dinners are meaningless.”

“Just networking politics.”

“Mostly fake conversations.”

All of which was true.

And still painful.

By evening, Floor 7 had transformed into an unofficial fashion consultation center.

People suddenly discussed:

- blazers,
- watches,
- shoes,
- “executive presence.”

Because leadership dinners are never about food.

They are auditions disguised as social events.

At 7 PM, the Imperial Orchid Hotel glowed beneath golden lights and expensive silence.

The lobby smelled like polished marble and corporate ambition.

Employees arrived carefully dressed in versions of themselves designed for leadership approval.

Sameer adjusted his blazer while entering beside Arjun.

“You know what fascinates me?”

“What?”

“Middle management always dresses like they might accidentally meet investors.”

Even Arjun laughed softly.

But underneath the humor, tension remained.

Because tonight mattered.

Everyone knew it mattered.

Inside the banquet hall, senior leaders stood in carefully arranged conversational circles holding drinks and strategic smiles.

The atmosphere felt polished.

Controlled.

Artificially relaxed.

Like a networking documentary about emotionally exhausted adults.

Neha entered moments later wearing a simple dark blue dress that immediately shifted several conversations unintentionally.

Not because she was trying to impress anyone.

Because confidence becomes visible when someone stops performing it aggressively.

Sameer leaned toward Arjun slowly.

“Oh, leadership is definitely noticing now.”

Neha rolled her eyes instantly.

“You’re unbearable.”

“I’m observant.”

The evening began politely.

Small talk.

Career discussions.

Industry trends.

Everyone laughed slightly louder than normal.

Leadership dinners operate on invisible scoring systems nobody openly acknowledges.

At one table, Manav was already performing executive charisma aggressively.

“Strategic alignment is really about human-centered transformation.”

A senior director nodded thoughtfully despite understanding absolutely nothing.

Sameer whispered toward Neha:

“If he says transformation one more time, the hotel itself will get promoted.”

She nearly laughed into her drink.

Meanwhile, Arjun stood near a group of senior managers discussing operational recovery strategies after the recent escalation.

For the first time in weeks, leadership listened to him carefully.

Not because he had changed.

Because surviving crises increases professional legitimacy instantly.

Then Regional Director Ashwin Mehra arrived.

And the entire room subtly reorganized itself around his presence.

Ashwin wasn't loud.

Didn't need to be.

People with real authority rarely perform power openly.

The room simply adjusts around them naturally.

Conversations sharpened immediately.

Postures improved.

Laughter became measured.

Even senior managers suddenly looked eager for validation.

Ashwin moved through the room calmly greeting employees one by one.

Then eventually stopped near their group.

“Arjun.”

Arjun straightened slightly.

“Sir.”

“Good recovery work on the escalation.”

Simple sentence.

Massive impact.

Because public recognition from leadership changes office dynamics overnight.

Ashwin then turned toward Neha.

“I’ve heard strong things about your stakeholder management.”

Neha smiled politely.

“Thank you, sir.”

And finally toward Sameer.

“You understand influence well.”

Sameer blinked once.

“That sounds either complimentary or threatening.”

For one dangerous second—

Ashwin laughed properly.

The surrounding managers looked stunned.

Leadership laughter is rare currency inside organizations.

And Sameer had just earned some publicly.

The evening shifted after that.

Subtly.

But permanently.

Employees nearby now viewed the three of them differently.

Closer to leadership.

More visible.

Potentially shortlisted.

Later during dinner, the three sat briefly together at the edge of the ballroom while executives continued networking nearby.

Soft piano music floated through the hall.

Mumbai glittered beyond massive glass windows beneath the night sky.

Neha looked around quietly.

“You know what’s strange?”

“What?” Arjun asked.

“Everybody here is pretending to be relaxed.”

Sameer nodded.

“Corporate networking is basically professional theater with appetizers.”

But then his expression softened slightly.

“You can actually feel the competition tonight.”

And he was right.

It moved invisibly through the room:
through smiles,
through conversations,
through every introduction and compliment.

At another table, Vikram spoke privately with senior leadership while occasionally glancing toward their group – evaluating and measuring them.

Even tonight, the competition continued silently.

Then came the most dangerous moment of the evening.

Ashwin approached their table again unexpectedly.

“Walk with me.”

He looked directly at Arjun.

The ballroom noise faded instantly around them.

Because everybody nearby noticed.

Leadership walking privately with employees becomes office mythology by morning.

As Arjun followed Ashwin toward the balcony area overlooking the city, Sameer leaned back slowly.

“Well.”

Neha stared toward them carefully.

“That’s significant.”

Outside, cool night air replaced ballroom warmth.

Mumbai stretched endlessly below in rivers of headlights and glowing buildings.

Ashwin stood beside the railing quietly for several moments before speaking.

“You work hard.”

Arjun nodded cautiously.

“Yes, sir.”

“But hard work alone doesn’t create leaders.”

There it was.

Another test disguised as advice.

Ashwin looked toward the city.

“Leadership requires emotional control during uncertainty.”

A pause.

“People watch how you carry pressure.”

The words felt pointed somehow.

Maybe referencing the escalation.

Maybe everything else.

Then Ashwin turned toward him directly.

“You have capability.”

Silence.

“But capability without visibility often gets trapped at operational levels.”

That sentence hit harder than intended.

Because it confirmed every fear growing inside Arjun for months now.

Inside the ballroom, Sameer and Neha watched through glass walls while executives moved around them beneath golden lights.

“You think he’ll get it?” Neha asked quietly.

Sameer stared toward the balcony.

“I think leadership already knows who they want.”

The softness in his voice made her uneasy.

When Arjun returned fifteen minutes later, he looked thoughtful.

Not excited.

Heavy.

“What happened?” Sameer asked immediately.

Arjun loosened his tie slowly.

“He said leadership is about visibility under pressure.”

Sameer laughed once under his breath.

“Of course he did.”

But nobody joked after that.

Because the message beneath the message felt clear now.

The promotion race was no longer just about work.

It was about perception during performance.

Near midnight, the leadership dinner slowly ended.

Employees left carrying:

business cards,

networking smiles,

professional validation,

and fresh insecurities.

Outside the hotel, rain had started again.

Soft at first.

Then heavier.

Mumbai glowed beneath wet streets and blurred headlights while exhausted professionals disappeared into cabs carrying ambition home with them.

And somewhere between expensive dinners, leadership conversations, and invisible evaluations—

three coworkers slowly realized the competition had entered its final stage now.

Not public.

Personal.

Chapter 29 —

The Presentation

The presentation was scheduled for Friday.

Which meant nobody slept properly on Thursday night.

By 8 AM, Floor 7 already felt electrically tense.

Laptops opened faster.

Coffee disappeared quicker.

Voices lowered instinctively.

Today, the final candidates would present growth strategies directly to regional leadership.

Officially, it was called:

Strategic Expansion Review.

Unofficially:

The audition.

Three names had quietly emerged without formal announcement:

- Arjun Sharma

- Sameer Malhotra
- Neha Kapoor

Nobody needed confirmation anymore.

The office had already decided who mattered.

At 9:15 AM, Sameer adjusted his presentation slides for the seventh time.

Not because they needed improvement.

Because anxiety disguises itself as optimization in corporate environments.

Nearby, Neha sat unusually calm.

Which somehow worried everyone more.

She wasn't rehearsing aggressively.

Wasn't pacing.

Wasn't performing stress.

She simply reviewed notes quietly while sipping coffee.

Sameer stared at her suspiciously.

"How are you not panicking?"

Neha looked up calmly.

"Oh, I'm panicking internally."

A pause.

“I just don’t believe leadership deserves to watch it.”

Even Arjun smiled faintly at that.

But underneath the smile, exhaustion remained visible.

The escalation incident had changed him slightly.

He looked sharper now.

More aware.

Less innocent about how the organization worked.

At 10 AM sharp, the presentations began.

Leadership occupied the large conference room at the center of Floor 7.

Glass walls.

Dim projector lighting.

Bottled water lined neatly across the table.

Corporate judgment architecture.

Ashwin Mehra sat at the center beside senior directors and HR leadership.

His calmness was dense, unreadable.

The kind of expression executives develop after years of professionally evaluating human ambition.

Outside the room, employees pretended not to care while secretly tracking timing obsessively.

Every passing minute became interpretive analysis.

“Long presentation means they’re impressed.”

“No, long means difficult questions.”

“No questions means already rejected.”

The office had become a psychological casino.

Inside the room, Sameer presented first.

And immediately owned the room.

He spoke smoothly.

Confidently, and

Strategically.

Not overly technical.

Not overly emotional.

Exactly calibrated executive energy.

His presentation focused on:

- client retention,
- leadership culture,
- cross-functional influence,
- scalable visibility frameworks.

Half the room nodded constantly.

Because Sameer understood something essential:
leadership enjoys hearing itself reflected back intelligently.

Even Ashwin looked engaged.
Which everyone noticed instantly.

Sameer moved naturally through questions.
He carried a charm that was controlled yet quick.
By the time he finished, the room felt lighter somehow.
Like leadership had enjoyed being led briefly themselves.

Outside, whispers exploded immediately after he exited.
“How was it?”
Sameer adjusted his sleeves casually.
“Either I’m getting promoted or psychologically manipulated.”

Then came Arjun.

The atmosphere shifted the moment he began speaking.
Less performance.
More substance.

His presentation focused on:

- operational resilience,
- execution failures,
- recovery architecture,
- long-term delivery stability.

Real solutions.

Real numbers.

Real strategy.

Leadership listened carefully.

But differently.

Not emotionally.

Intellectually.

Arjun answered every question with precision.

No vague corporate vocabulary.

No performance theatrics.

Just clarity.

At one point, Ashwin interrupted him.

“You focus heavily on operational depth.”

Arjun nodded.

“Because sustainable growth collapses without operational trust.”

The answer landed well.

But something subtle changed in the room afterward.
Because leadership admires operational excellence—
yet often promotes visionary confidence faster.

Still, by the end, even senior directors looked impressed.
Objectively, it may have been the strongest presentation
technically.
Which immediately made everyone nervous for him.

Because corporate success and technical superiority are not
always emotionally aligned.

Finally came Neha.
And unexpectedly—
the room changed completely.

She didn't present like a manager.
She spoke like someone who actually understood people.

Her strategy focused on:

- employee retention,
- client relationship psychology,
- burnout risk,

- sustainable leadership culture.

Not soft ideas.

Human ones.

For the first time all day, the room became genuinely quiet.

Not polite listening.

Real listening.

Neha spoke calmly without performance.

No corporate acting.

No executive mimicry.

Just intelligence delivered without insecurity.

Then she said something that visibly unsettled leadership.

“Organizations don’t lose good employees suddenly.”

A pause.

“They lose them slowly through accumulated emotional exhaustion.”

Silence.

Even Ashwin stopped writing notes briefly.

Neha continued carefully.

“If growth strategies ignore internal sustainability...”

The projector light reflected softly across her composed expression.

“...then expansion eventually becomes expensive instability.”

Nobody interrupted her after that.

Because suddenly this wasn't a presentation anymore.

It felt like truth entering the room accidentally.

Outside the conference room, employees waited like families outside surgery wards.

Coffee cups.

Whispers.

Fake casualness.

The entire floor felt suspended emotionally.

When Neha finally emerged, Sameer stood immediately.

“How was it?”

She exhaled slowly.

“I think I accidentally gave leadership therapy.”

Even Arjun laughed properly at that.

But beneath the humor, uncertainty remained crushing.
Because now all three understood something terrifying:
they had each represented different versions of leadership
entirely.

Sameer:
visibility and influence.

Arjun:
execution and reliability.

Neha:
emotional intelligence and sustainability.

The problem?

Organizations rarely know which version they truly value until
crisis arrives.

At 6 PM, leadership remained inside the conference room
reviewing notes privately while employees across Floor 7
pretended normalcy.

Nobody worked properly anymore.

How could they?

Their futures were being discussed thirty feet away behind glass
walls.

Near sunset, the three sat quietly beside the windows overlooking Mumbai.

The city below pulsed endlessly beneath rain and headlights.

Sameer broke the silence first.

“You know what’s funny?”

“What?” Arjun asked.

“We all gave completely different presentations.”

Neha nodded slowly.

“Because we all became different people trying to survive this place.”

Silence settled heavily after that.

Because somewhere during the competition,

they had stopped merely chasing promotion.

They had started revealing who they actually were beneath pressure.

Far across Floor 7, the conference room lights still glowed behind frosted glass.

Leadership continued discussing futures calmly while employees carried panic silently.

And somewhere between strategy slides, executive questions, and invisible judgment—

Three exhausted coworkers waited to discover whether
organizations reward:
competence,
charisma,
or humanity the most?

Chapter 30 —

Internal Feedback

The feedback process began on Monday morning.

Quietly.

Which made it more dangerous.

No official announcement.

No formal meeting.

Just private conversations suddenly happening everywhere across Floor 7.

Managers closing glass cabin doors.

HR walking around more carefully.

Employees speaking in lowered voices.

The office had entered evaluation mode.

At 10:20 AM, Priyanka appeared beside Sameer's desk holding coffee and gossip simultaneously.

"They're collecting internal feedback."

Sameer looked up slowly.

“From whom?”

“Everyone.”

Silence.

Then:

“Oh no.”

Because peer feedback inside corporate organizations is never truly about honesty.

It’s about perception history.

Who helped whom?

Who offended whom?

Who felt threatening?

Who felt safe?

Entire careers can shift based on emotional residue people leave behind unknowingly.

Within hours, Floor 7 transformed into a behavioral museum.

Employees suddenly became:

- extra polite,
- strategically visible,
- emotionally diplomatic.

People smiled more carefully now.

Even sarcasm reduced temporarily.

Neha sat reviewing reports when Priya from HR appeared near her desk.

“Do you have ten minutes?”

There it was.

The sentence every employee fears regardless of innocence.

Inside the small meeting room of the HR, Priya smiled professionally.

“We’re conducting leadership alignment feedback discussions.”

Corporate language always sounds like AI trying to imitate empathy.

Neha sat carefully.

“What exactly are you asking people?”

Priya folded her hands.

“Collaboration style. Leadership readiness. Team influence.”

A pause.

“General perception.”

That phrase unsettled Neha immediately.

Because perception has no measurable boundaries.

“How anonymous is this?” she asked calmly.

Priya gave the kind of smile that answers nothing directly.

“Feedback is confidential.”

Meaning:

not anonymous enough emotionally.

Meanwhile, Sameer entered his own feedback session with dramatically inappropriate confidence.

“Before we begin,” he announced while sitting down, “I’d like immunity.”

Priya sighed immediately.

“You’re impossible.”

“Professionally adaptive.”

Despite the humor, even Sameer looked tense underneath.

Because jokes stop protecting people once careers become involved.

“Tell me about Arjun,” Priya asked first.

There it was.

The real test.

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“What kind of answer are you looking for?”

“An honest one.”

He laughed softly under his breath.

“No organization actually wants fully honest feedback.”

Priya didn’t deny it.

The room became quieter after that.

More real.

Finally Sameer spoke carefully.

“Arjun is the most dependable person on this floor.”

A pause.

“He absorbs pressure without making noise about it.”

Priya wrote notes silently.

Then she asked:

“And leadership readiness?”

Sameer stared toward the glass wall thoughtfully.

“He already leads.”

Another pause.

“The problem is he still thinks work alone should speak for him.”

That sentence stayed hanging between them heavily.

Because it sounded less like criticism,
and more like sadness.

At another meeting room nearby, Arjun sat through his own
feedback conversation feeling emotionally exhausted already.

“What’s your experience working with Neha?” the manager
asked.

Arjun answered instantly.

“She’s the reason half this floor still functions emotionally.”

The manager smiled faintly.

“That’s unusually specific.”

“Because it’s true.”

He looked down briefly before continuing.

“She notices people before problems.”

Silence.

“In this office, that matters more than leadership realizes.”

The manager wrote something down slowly.

And for the first time, Arjun wondered how many invisible
qualities organizations fail to measure simply because they don’t
fit neatly inside presentations.

By afternoon, tension across Floor 7 became almost physical.

Employees analyzed each other differently now.

Every interaction carried hidden meaning.

Did that compliment sound genuine?

Was that support strategic?

Did someone mention your name positively in feedback?

The paranoia was exhausting.

At lunch, the three finally sat together again near the windows.

None looked relaxed anymore.

Sameer opened a water bottle dramatically.

“I hate peer evaluations.”

Neha nodded instantly.

“It turns relationships into politics.”

Arjun stayed quiet for a moment.

Then:

“It also reveals what people actually think of you.”

Silence followed.

Because that was the truly frightening part.

Neha looked toward the bustling office floor.

“You know what’s strange?”

“What?” Sameer asked.

“We spend months competing with each other...”

The office lights reflected softly across the windows beside them.

“...but when someone asks me about either of you, my instinct is still to protect you.”

That sentence shifted something quietly between them.

Because despite the competition—

real loyalty had formed accidentally.

Late nights.

Escalations.

Burnout.

Survival.

The office had pushed them together while simultaneously forcing them to compete.

Sameer smiled faintly.

“That’s because trauma creates family.”

Neha laughed softly.

“Terrifying sentence.”

“Accurate sentence.”

Across the floor, leadership meetings continued behind closed glass cabins while employees carried invisible anxiety through ordinary tasks.

Everyone sensed the final decision approaching now.

And uncertainty changes people.

Some become kinder.

Some become colder.

Some become performative versions of both.

At 6 PM, Vikram stopped beside Arjun's desk unexpectedly.

"Walk with me."

The phrase instantly raised stress levels by 40%.

They walked slowly through the quieter end of Floor 7 while evening rain blurred the city outside.

Vikram kept his voice calm.

"You've earned respect here."

Arjun nodded cautiously.

"Thank you."

"But leadership has concerns."

There it was.

Always there it was.

“What kind of concerns?” Arjun asked carefully.

Vikram looked toward the glass cabins ahead.

“You carry pressure internally.”

A pause.

“Senior roles require visible confidence during uncertainty.”

Arjun almost laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because he had solved crisis after crisis quietly while others performed certainty theatrically.

And somehow that still translated into insufficient visibility.

Vikram stopped walking.

“You’re extremely capable.”

The office lights reflected softly across the empty corridor.

“But capability alone doesn’t always inspire organizations.”

That sentence followed Arjun long after the conversation ended.

Near the windows later that evening, the three stood together again beneath dim office lights while Mumbai shimmered endlessly below.

Sameer looked tired now.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

“You know what this process actually measures?”

“What?” Neha asked softly.

He looked around Floor 7 slowly.

“Who makes the company feel safest about the future.”

Nobody argued.

Because that explained everything too perfectly.

Far across the office, the Regional Director cabin remained illuminated tonight.

For once, not dark.

A shadow moved behind the glass walls.

Leadership still discussing.

Still evaluating.

Still deciding.

And somewhere beneath professional feedback and carefully worded perceptions—

three exhausted coworkers were slowly discovering how organizations truly choose who rises:

not just by work,

but by emotional impression,

narrative,

and who seems easiest to imagine wearing authority.

Chapter 31 —

The Breakdown

Arjun cried in the parking basement.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

Just silently inside his car beneath flickering white lights while rain hammered against the concrete outside.

It happened on a Wednesday.

Three days before the promotion announcement.

Three days before the office would officially decide whose exhaustion had been most valuable.

The morning had already begun badly.

Kavya barely spoke during breakfast anymore.

Not out of anger.

Distance.

The quieter kind of damage.

Then came another escalation call.

Another leadership review.

Another subtle conversation about visibility and executive readiness.

Every sentence now felt like evaluation disguised as feedback.

By evening, Arjun's body had entered autopilot completely.

He answered emails automatically.

Attended meetings automatically.

Nodded during conversations without emotionally processing anything anymore.

Even Sameer noticed it.

At 7 PM, Sameer stopped beside his desk.

"You haven't blinked properly in twenty minutes."

"I'm working."

"No. You're dissolving professionally."

Arjun almost smiled.

Almost.

But even humor required energy now.

Floor 7 looked strangely haunted late that evening.

Half-empty desks.

Cold office lighting.

Rain streaking across giant glass windows.

The office felt less like a workplace now—

more like a machine slowly grinding people into promotion candidates.

At 8:30 PM, Vikram requested revised strategic projections before morning leadership review.

Again.

Something inside Arjun finally cracked quietly.

Not because of the work itself.

Because there was never an end.

Every solved crisis created another expectation.

Every sacrifice became baseline behavior.

Every late night became proof you could survive more late nights.

He stared at the screen for several seconds too long.

Then suddenly stood up.

Without explanation.

Without his laptop.

And walked out.

Sameer watched him leave immediately.

The speed.

The silence.

Wrong.

“Where’s he going?” Neha asked softly.

Sameer already grabbed his phone.

“I don’t know.”

The elevator ride down felt unreal to Arjun.

Like his brain had temporarily disconnected from the office entirely.

The polished walls.

The soft music.

The fake calmness.

Everything suddenly felt unbearable.

By the time he reached the basement parking lot, his hands were shaking visibly.

He unlocked his car mechanically and sat inside without turning the engine on.

Then silence hit.

Complete silence.

And suddenly—

everything arrived at once.

The missed anniversary.

The hospital bills Neha mentioned.

Sameer collapsing during meetings.

Kavya eating dinner alone.

Leadership feedback.

Visibility conversations.

Weekend calls.

Endless pressure.

Months of emotional compression finally ruptured.

His breathing became uneven.

He pressed his palms against his eyes tightly.

But the tears came anyway.

Quiet.

Exhausted.

Human.

Not because of one specific event.

Because he had spent so long surviving that his body no longer remembered how to stop carrying pressure.

Upstairs meanwhile, Sameer and Neha searched the floor quietly.

Meeting rooms.

Pantry.

Terrace access.

Nothing.

Then Sameer stopped suddenly.

“The basement.”

Ten minutes later, they found his car near the far end of the parking level beneath dim fluorescent lights.

Rain echoed faintly through the concrete structure.

Neha approached first carefully.

She saw him immediately through the windshield.

Head lowered.

Hands trembling slightly.

Her expression changed instantly.

“Oh God.”

Sameer opened the passenger-side door gently.

Neither joked.

Neither forced conversation.

Because some moments deserve dignity before comfort.

Arjun looked embarrassed immediately.

Which somehow made it worse.

“I’m fine.”

Classic final sentence before emotional collapse.

Neha crouched slightly beside the open door.

“No you’re not.”

And something about hearing that without judgment finally broke the last remaining wall inside him.

“I’m tired,” he whispered.

Not dramatic.

Just true.

The rain outside grew heavier.

Water streaked through the parking entrance while distant traffic hummed somewhere beyond the concrete walls.

Sameer sat quietly beside him inside the car.

For once, no sarcasm arrived.

No humor.

No deflection.

Only understanding.

Arjun stared blankly ahead.

“I don’t even know what I’m chasing anymore.”

Silence.

Then quietly:

“I used to think if I worked hard enough...”

His voice tightened slightly.

“...everything else would eventually feel stable.”

Neha looked away briefly.

Because everyone inside that car had believed the same thing once.

Arjun laughed weakly through exhaustion.

“You know what’s terrifying?”

“What?” Sameer asked softly.

“I think the office changed me.”

The sentence lingered heavily in the air.

“I calculate visibility during conversations now.”

He wiped his face quickly, frustrated with himself.

“I check emails before sleeping. I feel guilty resting. I missed my anniversary and still worried more about leadership perception afterward.”

A pause.

“I don’t recognize myself anymore.”

That hurt both of them to hear.

Because somewhere deep down—

they recognized parts of themselves inside those words too.

The parking basement remained cold and quiet around them.

Far above, Floor 7 still glowed against the night sky like nothing had happened.

The machine continued operating normally.

Finally Sameer leaned back against the seat slowly.

“You know what Mr. Iyer was trying to tell us?”

Arjun looked at him tiredly.

“This place trains people to confuse survival with success.”

Silence.

Then Neha added softly:

“And by the time you notice it...”

She looked toward the office tower above them.

“...you’re already emotionally invested in winning.”

For several minutes, none of them spoke.

Just rain.

Exhaustion.

Breathing.

Three coworkers sitting inside a parked car carrying invisible damage together.

Then Sameer finally said quietly:

“If they give you the promotion tomorrow...”

Arjun looked toward him.

“...will it actually fix anything?”

No one answered.

Because that question had become too real now.

Far above them, executive cabins remained illuminated behind glass walls while leadership discussed futures professionally.

Unaware or perhaps fully aware of the human cost accumulating beneath their decisions.

And somewhere inside a basement parking lot beneath fluorescent lights and rain-soaked concrete—

three exhausted employees finally confronted the truth they had been avoiding for months:

the promotion race had already taken something from all of them, whether they won or not.

Chapter 32 —

Promotion Pending

The announcement was supposed to happen at 10 AM.

By 9:15, nobody on Floor 7 was pretending to work anymore.

Coffee cups remained untouched.

Emails stayed unread.

Meetings became meaningless background noise.

Every employee carried the same invisible tension:

Today, someone's life changes.

At 9:58 AM, the entire floor looked emotionally frozen.

Sameer refreshed Outlook every twelve seconds.

Neha sat unnaturally still near the windows.

Arjun stared at his laptop screen without seeing anything on it.

Then 10 AM arrived.

Nothing happened.

Silence spread slowly across the office.

Confused at first.

Then uncomfortable.

By 10:07 AM, whispers had already begun.

“Maybe leadership meeting got delayed.”

“No, announcement mail usually comes exactly on time.”

“I heard final approvals are pending.”

“Pending” —

the most psychologically violent word in corporate language.

At 10:15 AM, Vikram exited his cabin.

Everyone looked up immediately.

He noticed.

Of course he noticed.

“The leadership announcement has been delayed.”

There it was.

One sentence.

Maximum damage.

“When will it happen?” someone asked carefully.

Vikram adjusted his sleeves calmly.

“Awaiting final alignment.”

Then he walked away before anybody could emotionally recover.

The office descended into chaos instantly.

Not loud chaos.

Corporate chaos.

Far more dangerous.

People stopped trusting normal conversations.

Every interaction suddenly carried hidden interpretation.

Why was leadership delaying?

Was there disagreement?

Did someone lose support?

Was there a last-minute issue?

The uncertainty spread like smoke across Floor 7.

Inside Meeting Room C, Sameer shut the door behind them sharply.

“This is bad.”

Neha folded her arms tightly.

“Or normal.”

“No,” Sameer corrected.

“Delays mean conflict.”

Arjun remained quiet.

Too quiet.

The breakdown in the parking basement had left something changed inside him.

He looked calmer externally now.

But emotionally detached in a way that worried both of them.

“What if they already decided?” Neha asked softly.

Sameer laughed once under his breath.

“They definitely already decided.”

A pause.

“They’re just negotiating consequences now.”

That sentence stayed in the room heavily.

Because promotions at senior levels are never just about capability.

They affect:

- reporting structures,
- alliances,
- leadership ego,

- departmental influence.

Organizations promote people carefully because power changes ecosystems.

Outside, the office rumor network had fully activated.

Floor 7 became a live psychological marketplace.

“I heard Ashwin wants Sameer.”

“No, operations leadership is backing Arjun.”

“HR strongly supports Neha.”

“I heard external hiring is back on the table.”

That last rumor spread fastest.

Because fear travels quicker than logic.

By afternoon, employees had stopped functioning entirely.

Meetings ended early.

Emails became shorter.

Even managers looked distracted.

The entire floor existed inside suspended emotional tension.

At 2 PM, Priya from HR walked through the office carrying files.

Employees tracked her movement like financial analysts during market collapse.

Who she spoke to mattered.
Who she smiled at mattered.
Everything mattered now.

Sameer watched the office carefully from his desk.

Then muttered quietly:

“This place would collapse instantly without gossip.”

Neha looked exhausted.

“Gossip is the only thing more reliable than leadership communication.”

Even Arjun smiled faintly.

But it disappeared quickly.

Because uncertainty creates something dangerous inside
ambitious people:

Self-doubt.

Every candidate had now started replaying past moments
mentally.

Did I say the wrong thing at dinner?

Did leadership dislike my presentation?

Did the escalation damage me?

Was I too emotional?

Too quiet?

Too visible?

Not visible enough?

The office had become a giant mirror reflecting insecurity back at everyone.

At 5 PM, still no announcement.

Rain battered the windows outside while fluorescent lights hummed across increasingly restless faces.

Floor 7 no longer felt professional.

It felt psychological.

Then came the email.

Subject:

Promotion Discussion — Leadership Continuation Review

No decision.

No result.

Just another meeting scheduled for tomorrow morning.

Sameer stared at the screen in disbelief.

“Oh, they’re torturing us recreationally now.”

Employees across the floor reacted visibly:

- frustration,
- panic,
- disappointment,
- emotional exhaustion.

Even people not competing felt drained by proximity.

Because uncertainty infects environments collectively.

Near sunset, the three stood by the windows again watching
Mumbai dissolve beneath rain and headlights.

The city below looked endless.
Indifferent.

Neha spoke first.

“You know what’s strange?”

“What?” Arjun asked quietly.

“I thought waiting for the result would feel exciting.”

The office lights reflected softly across the glass around them.

“But this just feels... exhausting.”

Sameer nodded slowly.

“That’s because somewhere along the way...”

He looked toward the dark conference rooms.

“...the competition stopped being about ambition.”

A pause.

“It became emotional survival.”

Silence settled heavily after that.

Because they all understood now:

the promotion had consumed months of their lives already.

Their sleep.

Their relationships.

Their health.

Their identity.

And still—

the organization wasn't ready to decide.

Then unexpectedly, Arjun spoke softly.

“If I don't get it...”

Both looked at him immediately.

He stared toward the rain outside.

“...I don't know if I can keep doing this version of myself anymore.”

The honesty of that sentence frightened them.

Because it sounded less like disappointment—

and more like awakening.

Far across Floor 7, the Regional Director cabin remained illuminated tonight.

Shadowed figures moved behind frosted glass while leadership continued discussing futures comfortably.

Employees waited outside those decisions carrying invisible emotional damage leadership would never fully see.

And somewhere between delay, ambition, and psychological exhaustion—

three exhausted co-workers realized the cruelest part of corporate life:

sometimes the waiting hurts more than the result itself.

Chapter 33 —

Rumors Floor

By Thursday morning, Floor 7 no longer felt like an office.
It felt like a stock market before collapse.

Nobody trusted silence anymore.

Every closed-door meeting became evidence.

Every delayed email became conspiracy.

Every leadership expression became emotional interpretation.

The promotion decision still hadn't arrived.

And uncertainty had started mutating people.

At 9:12 AM, the first major rumor exploded across the floor.

"Decision already finalized."

No source.

No proof.

Just confidence.

Which, in corporate environments, is usually enough.

Within minutes, theories multiplied aggressively.

“Sameer already spoke to Ashwin privately.”

“No, HR is preparing paperwork for Neha.”

“I heard Arjun’s escalation issue hurt his chances.”

“My manager said leadership wants someone externally polished.”

Someone else whispered:

“I heard there may not even be a promotion anymore.”

That rumor caused actual emotional damage.

Sameer entered the office carrying coffee and immediately sensed the atmosphere.

Employees stopped talking when he passed.

A few smiled too politely.

Others avoided eye contact completely.

He sat beside Neha slowly.

“Oh good.”

She looked up tiredly.

“What?”

“We’ve reached the social paranoia stage.”

Across the floor, Arjun was reviewing reports mechanically while two employees whispered near the printer.

He couldn't hear exact words.

Didn't need to.

Human beings recognize when they are being discussed.

The office had started separating into invisible camps now.

People aligned themselves quietly with whichever candidate they believed would win.

Not loyalty.

Preparation.

At lunch, even the cafeteria felt politically divided.

Managers sat strategically.

Employees analyzed seating arrangements subconsciously.

Who ate with whom suddenly carried meaning.

Priyanka slid into the chair beside Neha carefully.

"You okay?"

Neha laughed softly.

"That depends. Am I secretly promoted according to today's rumors?"

Even Priyanka smiled weakly.

But beneath the humor, exhaustion remained everywhere now.

Because rumors do something dangerous:

they force people to emotionally react to imaginary outcomes repeatedly.

At 1 PM, another rumor wave arrived.

This one more specific.

“Leadership disagreed over Sameer.”

Apparently:

- Ashwin admired him,
- some senior managers thought he was “too political,”
- HR considered him “high influence but unpredictable.”

By 1:30 PM, people discussed his personality like shareholders evaluating company risk.

Sameer heard fragments while walking back from the pantry.

He smiled casually.

But something in his face hardened slightly afterward.

Neha noticed immediately.

“You heard?”

“Apparently I’m a professionally unstable manipulator now.”

“That’s not what people said.”

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“No. That’s what they meant.”

The worst part about rumors wasn’t whether they were true.

It was realizing how people privately perceived you when they thought you weren’t listening.

Meanwhile, Arjun received his own invisible punishment.

Whispers about:

- lack of executive presence,
- operational dependency,
- “good worker, not leader.”

Every rumor reflected old feedback already buried inside his exhaustion.

At 3 PM, he finally snapped quietly.

Not publicly.

Not dramatically.

Just internally.

He stood during a meaningless review meeting and suddenly realized he no longer cared about sounding impressive.

Didn't care about visibility.
Didn't care about executive language.
He was simply tired of performing.

Vikram noticed immediately.

"You seem distracted."

Arjun looked directly at him for the first time in months without calculating political consequences first.

"I'm tired."

The room went silent instantly.

Because employees are allowed to be stressed.

Not honest.

Vikram adjusted his posture carefully.

"We all are."

"No," Arjun replied calmly.

"We're exhausted. There's a difference."

Nobody moved after that.

The fluorescent lights hummed softly overhead.

Then Arjun continued quietly.

"We keep calling burnout commitment because it sounds more productive."

The room remained frozen.

Because everyone knew he was right.

Vikram ended the meeting shortly afterward.

Not angrily.

Uncomfortably.

By evening, the story had already spread across Floor 7.

“Arjun challenged leadership.”

“No, he called out the work culture.”

“I heard he completely lost composure.”

Rumors always exaggerate emotional honesty into rebellion.

Near sunset, the office windows reflected orange light across exhausted faces while rain clouds gathered above Mumbai again.

The atmosphere felt emotionally unstable now.

One final push away from collapse.

The three of them gathered near the windows silently.

None had energy left for jokes tonight.

Finally Neha spoke.

“You know what I hate most?”

Sameer looked toward her.

“That people stop seeing you clearly during competition.”

She folded her arms tightly.

“You become reputation fragments.”

Sameer nodded slowly.

“Confident.”

He pointed toward himself.

“Reliable.”

Toward Arjun.

“Emotionally intelligent.”

Toward Neha.

The office lights reflected faintly across the glass.

“Everybody reduces everyone into one manageable narrative.”

Arjun stared toward the city below.

“And eventually you start reducing yourself too.”

Silence.

Because that was the real damage.

Not the rumors.

Internalizing them.

Far across Floor 7, the Regional Director cabin glowed softly behind closed blinds tonight.

Leadership still discussing futures while the office slowly emotionally cannibalized itself outside.

Then suddenly Sameer laughed once under his breath.

Both looked at him.

“You realize something?”

“What?”

“No matter who gets promoted tomorrow...”

He glanced around the exhausted office floor.

“...this place already changed all of us permanently.”

No one disagreed.

Because somewhere between ambition, visibility, burnout, and endless waiting—

three coworkers had slowly stopped competing against each other.

Now they were all simply trying not to lose themselves completely inside the system.

Chapter 34 —

The Decision Mail

The email arrived at 6:42 PM.

Late enough to ruin the evening.

Early enough to prevent sleep.

Most employees had already stopped pretending to work by then.

Floor 7 sat beneath dim evening lights carrying the exhausted silence of people emotionally drained by waiting.

Rain crawled slowly across the giant glass windows overlooking Mumbai.

The office looked tired.

Human.

Then suddenly—

Outlook notifications exploded simultaneously across the floor.

A sharp sequence of sounds echoed everywhere:

- ding,
- ding,
- ding.

Heads lifted instantly.

Sameer saw the subject line first.

And for one full second—

he couldn't breathe properly.

Subject:

Leadership Role Announcement

Nobody moved.

The entire floor froze inside one suspended heartbeat.

Neha's fingers tightened around her coffee cup.

Arjun stared at the screen without opening the mail immediately.

Because sometimes the few seconds before truth arrives still belong to hope.

Then slowly—

employees across Floor 7 opened the email together.

The message itself was painfully short.

Corporate decisions often are.

We are pleased to announce the appointment of...

Eyes scanned downward desperately.

Searching.

Praying.

Preparing.

And then—

there it was.

Sameer Malhotra

Associate Director — Strategic Operations

Silence.

Real silence.

The kind that lands physically inside a room.

For a brief second, nobody reacted at all.

Because disappointment and shock require processing time
before expression.

Then suddenly—

the office erupted.

Applause.

Congratulations.

Forced smiles.

Professional excitement.

Corporate grief always hides beneath celebration politely.

Employees rushed toward Sameer instantly.

Handshakes.

Back slaps.

LinkedIn-energy enthusiasm.

“You deserved it!”

“Knew it!”

“Big things ahead!”

Sameer stood frozen in the center of it.

Smiling automatically.

Thanking people automatically.

But somewhere behind his expression—

something felt strangely hollow.

Because the first people he looked for weren't leadership.

They were Arjun and Neha.

Across the floor, Neha smiled immediately when their eyes met.

A real smile.

Warm.

Sincere.

Painfully mature.

She walked toward him first.

“Congratulations.”

Sameer exhaled slowly.

“Neha...”

“No.”

She shook her head gently.

“You earned this.”

And somehow that kindness hurt more than jealousy would have.

Then he looked toward Arjun.

For one terrifying moment—

Sameer thought he might simply leave.

But Arjun stood slowly from his desk and walked toward him calmly through the noise and congratulations surrounding them.

The office watched quietly.

Because everybody understood the emotional mathematics happening underneath professionalism now.

Sameer spoke first.

“I...”

But Arjun interrupted softly.

“Congratulations.”

There was something dignified yet controlled in his simple greeting.

Then after a pause, he added quietly:

“You’ll be good at it.”

And that sentence nearly destroyed Sameer emotionally.

Because it carried no bitterness.

Only exhaustion.

Around them, applause continued.

Leadership emerged from cabins smiling proudly like architects unveiling a successful project.

Vikram shook Sameer’s hand publicly.

Ashwin congratulated him beside the conference room.

Employees watched carefully.

The new hierarchy had officially formed.

But beneath the celebration—
something invisible had broken quietly.

At 7:30 PM, the office slowly began emptying.

People carried gossip home.

Predictions home.

Disappointment home.

The promotion cycle had ended.

The emotional damage remained.

Near the windows, the three stood together one last time before leaving.

Mumbai shimmered below beneath rain-soaked streets and endless headlights.

The city looked alive in ways the office no longer did.

None of them spoke initially.

The silence itself said enough.

Finally Sameer laughed weakly.

“This feels significantly less cinematic than I imagined.”

Neha smiled faintly.

“That’s because corporate victories are mostly administrative.”

Even Arjun laughed softly at that.

Small.

Tired.

But real.

Then Sameer’s expression changed again.

More serious now.

“I don’t know how to celebrate this properly.”

Neha looked at him carefully.

“That’s normal.”

“No,” he admitted quietly.

“It doesn’t feel like winning.”

The honesty of that sentence settled heavily between them.

Because they all understood why.

To reach this moment, all three had sacrificed pieces of themselves:

- sleep,
- relationships,

- emotional stability,
- authenticity.

And now only one person stood holding the official reward.

Arjun looked toward the city lights below.

“You know the strange part?”

Both turned toward him.

“I’m not even angry you got it.”

A pause.

“I’m angry about what this place convinced us success should cost.”

No one responded immediately.

Because somewhere deep down—

all three agreed.

Then Neha spoke softly.

“Maybe the promotion was never the real competition.”

Sameer frowned slightly.

“What was?”

She looked around Floor 7 one final time.

The glowing cabins.

The empty desks.

The exhausted atmosphere.

“Keeping yourself human while chasing it.”

Silence followed.

Long.

Heavy.

True.

Far across the office, leadership cabins remained illuminated behind glass walls while congratulatory mails continued circulating through the organization.

Another promotion completed.

Another success story created.

From the outside, everything looked perfect.

But near the windows overlooking Mumbai—

three exhausted coworkers stood quietly carrying very different versions of loss.

And somewhere beneath applause, ambition, and official announcements—

the office had finally revealed its cruelest truth:

sometimes people achieve the thing they wanted most,

only to realize they no longer recognize the version of themselves that earned it.

PART 5 —
AFTER THE APPLAUSE

Chapter 35 —

Corner Office Silence

The new cabin was bigger than expected.

That was the first thing Sameer noticed.

The second thing—

was how quiet it felt.

Three days after the promotion announcement, his name finally appeared outside the glass office beside the leadership corridor.

Sameer Malhotra

Associate Director — Strategic Operations

Employees congratulated him constantly now.

Some genuinely.

Some strategically.

Some because organizations teach people to align upward automatically.

The cabin came with:

- larger screens,
- softer lighting,
- better coffee access,
- executive meeting privileges,
- and silence.

So much silence.

Because leadership cabins isolate people gradually.

The higher you rise, the fewer honest conversations survive around you.

On Monday morning, Sameer entered his new office carrying a laptop bag and unfamiliar discomfort.

The chair felt too large.

The desk too clean.

The room looked like success.

Why did it feel lonely already?

Outside the glass walls, Floor 7 moved normally again.

Emails resumed.

Deadlines resumed.

Employees resumed pretending burnout was sustainable.

The machine had reset itself frighteningly fast.

Sameer watched people from inside the cabin carefully.

For years, he had stood among them.

Now there was glass between everything.

Literal glass.

A knock interrupted his thoughts.

Vikram entered smiling professionally.

“How does it feel?”

Sameer looked around slowly.

“Expensive.”

Vikram laughed politely.

“You earned it.”

There was that phrase again.

Earned it.

As though exhaustion naturally converts into authority.

Vikram sat across from him.

“Things will change now.”

“They already have.”

“No,” Vikram corrected gently.

“You haven’t seen the real change yet.”

Then came the leadership conversation.

The real one.

Not motivational.

Not inspirational.

Operational.

“You can’t stay emotionally attached to everyone anymore.”

Sameer’s expression shifted slightly.

“What does that mean?”

“It means leadership requires distance.”

The city skyline reflected faintly through the cabin glass behind them.

“You’ll need to make decisions people dislike.”

Sameer understood the sentence intellectually.

Emotionally—

it unsettled him immediately.

After Vikram left, Sameer remained seated quietly for several minutes.

Then his phone buzzed.

Message from Arjun.

Coffee? Pantry.

Sameer exhaled slowly.

Relief, unexpectedly.

The pantry felt comfortingly ordinary.

Bad coffee.

Artificial lighting.

Employees gossiping near vending machines.

Human again.

Arjun stood near the counter scrolling absentmindedly through his phone while Neha leaned against the window beside him.

For the first time in weeks—

they looked calmer.

Tired still.

But calmer.

Sameer walked in dramatically.

“Well. I’ve become management.”

Neha looked horrified.

“Oh no. We lost him.”

Even Arjun laughed softly.

And suddenly the atmosphere felt normal again.

But only briefly.

Because invisible changes had already begun.

Employees nearby now lowered their voices slightly around Sameer.

Conversations adjusted subtly.

Even casual interactions carried awareness of hierarchy now.

Sameer noticed instantly.

And hated it.

Later that afternoon, he attended his first senior leadership review as Associate Director.

Different room.

Different table placement.

Different expectations.

For years, he had joked about leadership culture from the outside.

Now he sat inside it.

And what disturbed him most,
was how normal everything suddenly sounded.

Budget restructuring.
Performance exits.
Resource optimization.
Human consequences translated into clean business vocabulary.

At one point, a senior leader casually suggested reducing
weekend staffing support despite ongoing burnout concerns.
Nobody reacted emotionally.
People simply discussed efficiency models.

Sameer spoke carefully.
“Teams are already stretched.”
A brief silence followed.
Then Ashwin looked toward him calmly.
“Leadership requires balancing empathy with operational
reality.”
There it was.
The sentence every organization eventually teaches its managers.

Sameer nodded externally.

But internally, something uncomfortable shifted.

Because he suddenly recognized how systems preserve themselves.

Not through cruelty.

Through normalization.

That evening, he remained alone inside the new cabin long after most employees left.

Rain blurred the windows again while Floor 7 slowly emptied beneath dim evening lights.

From here, the office looked different.

Smaller somehow.

Employees moved below like carefully organized pressure points inside a machine.

Then he noticed Arjun near the far desks helping a junior employee solve reporting issues patiently.

No visibility.

No audience.

No performance.

Just instinctive reliability.

And near the windows, Neha sat beside a crying new employee speaking softly with calm emotional precision.

Again—
no recognition.
No leadership stage.

Just humanity surviving quietly inside corporate architecture.

Something tightened painfully inside Sameer then.

Because suddenly he understood something leadership metrics
never capture properly:

the most valuable people in organizations are not always the ones
easiest to promote.

His cabin suddenly felt even quieter.

At 9 PM, he finally stepped out.

Floor 7 stood nearly empty now beneath cold fluorescent lights.

Only a few exhausted employees remained.

The office looked less glamorous after ambition leaves for the
day.

Near the elevators, Neha waited holding her bag.

“You’re still here?”

Sameer smiled faintly.

“Apparently leadership comes with insomnia.”

She studied him carefully.

“You okay?”

That question hit differently now.

Because almost nobody asks leaders that sincerely.

Sameer leaned against the wall quietly.

“You know what nobody tells you about promotions?”

“What?”

“You don’t actually arrive anywhere.”

The elevator lights reflected softly across the empty hallway.

“The pressure just changes shape.”

Neha nodded slowly.

Because she already knew.

Everyone on Floor 7 knew.

The organization never truly rewards people with peace.

Only larger responsibilities and more sophisticated stress.

As the elevator doors closed, Sameer looked back one final time toward the glowing leadership corridor.

His new cabin remained illuminated behind glass walls.

Beautiful.
Important.
Lonely.

And somewhere between authority, silence, and fluorescent office lights—

a newly promoted manager began realizing the final corporate truth:

the corner office doesn't always separate successful people from exhausted people.

Sometimes it simply gives exhaustion a better chair.

Chapter 36 —

Resignation Letter

Arjun wrote the resignation letter at 1:43 AM.

Not dramatically.

Not impulsively.

Quietly.

Like someone finally admitting a truth to himself after months of negotiation.

The apartment was dark except for the laptop glow reflecting across the dining table.

Rain tapped softly against the windows.

Kavya slept in the other room.

Or pretended to.

Arjun stared at the blank email for almost twenty minutes before typing the first sentence.

Dear Vikram,

Please accept this email as formal notice of my resignation...

The words looked unreal initially.

Like someone else had written them.

For years, resignation had always felt like something other people did.

Brave people.

Reckless people.

People with backup plans and confidence.

Not him.

He had survived:

- escalations,
- burnout,
- invisible pressure,
- missed anniversaries,
- leadership politics,
- emotional exhaustion.

He thought endurance itself would eventually become meaning.

Instead, it had become habit.

Arjun leaned back slowly and reread the letter again.

No anger.

No emotional speech.

No dramatic truth bombs.

Just professionalism wrapped around accumulated fatigue.

Corporate endings rarely sound emotional on paper.

The damage exists between the lines.

Then his eyes drifted toward the bedroom door quietly.

Toward the life waiting outside the office.

The life he had postponed repeatedly for “just one more quarter.”

He clicked send.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

No music.

No cinematic release.

Just silence.

Then suddenly—

his chest felt lighter.

Not happy.

But lighter.

The next morning, Floor 7 exploded emotionally by 9:08 AM.

“Arjun resigned.”

The news spread faster than the promotion announcement had.

Because promotions create admiration.

Resignations create fear.

Employees whispered openly near printers and coffee machines.

“Why would he leave now?”

“Didn’t he just miss promotion?”

“I heard another company offered huge salary.”

“No, he was burned out.”

That last one traveled most quietly.

Because it felt too honest.

Sameer found out during a leadership review.

For one full second, he stopped hearing the meeting entirely.

“You okay?” Ashwin asked casually.

Sameer looked up immediately.

“Yes.”

Automatic corporate lie.

But internally, something dropped heavily inside him.

Because despite everything—

he genuinely believed Arjun would stay.

People like Arjun always stay.

That's how organizations survive.

By 10 AM, Arjun's desk had become an emotional pilgrimage site.

Employees visited one by one:

- shocked,
- curious,
- secretly jealous.

Because resignations represent something terrifying in corporate culture:

proof that escape is possible.

Neha reached his desk quietly carrying two coffees.

She didn't ask if the rumor was true.

She already knew.

"You sent it?"

Arjun nodded once.

“How do you feel?”

He looked toward the windows thoughtfully.

“Tired.”

A pause.

“But honest.”

That answer stayed with her.

Because honesty had become rare inside Floor 7.

At noon, Vikram called Arjun into his cabin.

The glass walls immediately attracted attention across the office.

Employees pretended not to watch.

Failed completely.

Inside, Vikram looked genuinely surprised.

“I didn’t expect this.”

Arjun sat calmly.

“I know.”

Then came the standard leadership sequence:

- concern,

- negotiation,
 - retention attempt.
-

“Is this about the promotion?”

“No.”

It wasn’t.

Or at least not entirely.

The promotion had simply exposed damage already existing underneath.

Vikram leaned forward carefully.

“You have long-term growth here.”

Arjun almost smiled.

Growth.

Corporate vocabulary for prolonged sacrifice with potential future reward.

“I believe you,” Arjun said softly.

“Then why leave?”

Silence settled briefly between them.

Rain slid down the cabin windows outside while Floor 7 continued moving beneath fluorescent lights.

Finally Arjun answered honestly.

“Because I don’t like who I became while trying to succeed here.”

That sentence landed harder than anger would have.

Vikram looked genuinely affected for the first time.

Not defensive.

Human.

Arjun continued quietly.

“I stopped measuring life properly.”

A pause.

“I started treating exhaustion like achievement.”

Neither spoke for several seconds afterward.

Because deep down—

both men knew the system encouraged exactly that.

Meanwhile outside the cabin, rumors continued evolving aggressively.

Some employees now viewed Arjun like a tragic warning.

Others viewed him like a hero.

A few secretly updated their resumes during lunch.

At 4 PM, Sameer finally cornered him near the windows overlooking Mumbai.

The city looked gray beneath heavy clouds.

“You idiot.”

Arjun laughed softly.

“That’s your emotional reaction?”

“You resign one week after I get promoted?”

Sameer folded his arms tightly.

“You understand how emotionally manipulative that timing is?”

For the first time in days, both laughed properly.

Real laughter.

Not survival humor.

Then silence returned quietly.

“You’re really leaving,” Sameer said finally.

Not a question.

Arjun nodded.

“Yes.”

Sameer looked toward the office floor behind them.

“What if things improve?”

Arjun followed his gaze slowly.

The glowing cabins.

The rushing employees.

The endless pressure disguised as opportunity.

“This place doesn’t need improvement,” he said softly.

“It needs boundaries.”

That sentence lingered between them heavily.

Because both understood the difference.

Later that evening, Neha joined them near the windows again.

The familiar trio.

One final phase.

“You know what scares me?” she asked quietly.

“What?” Sameer replied.

“That you leaving makes sense.”

Silence.

Because that was the real danger.

Not resignation itself.

The fact that everyone understood it emotionally.

As night settled over Mumbai, employees slowly left Floor 7 carrying laptops and unfinished exhaustion home with them.

The office lights dimmed gradually.

But Arjun's resignation mail still sat unread in hundreds of inboxes across the organization.

A quiet rebellion disguised as professionalism.

Near the far end of the floor, Sameer's leadership cabin remained illuminated behind glass walls.

Important.

Prestigious.

Isolated.

And somewhere between resignation letters, burnout, and fluorescent office lighting—

three exhausted coworkers finally understood something the organization never openly admits:

sometimes the bravest corporate decision isn't staying long enough to win.

It's deciding what's no longer worth losing yourself for.

Chapter 37 —

New Targets

The office recovered from Arjun's resignation in four days.

That was the disturbing part.

By Monday morning, Floor 7 had already adapted.

Meetings resumed.

Deadlines resumed.

Escalations resumed.

The machine absorbed emotional events quickly and converted them into workflow updates.

Arjun's projects were redistributed through a carefully worded mail.

“Transition alignment.”

Corporate language for:
someone left, continue working.

His desk remained empty for one week.

Then IT removed the monitors.

Facilities cleared the drawers.

A new employee ID request appeared shortly afterward.

The organization was already preparing replacement capacity.

Sameer noticed all of it from inside the glass cabin.

And every day, the silence inside that office grew heavier.

Because now he understood something terrifying about corporate structures:

they don't pause for grief.

Not even professional grief.

At 9 AM Monday, leadership reviewed quarterly targets again like nothing emotionally significant had happened.

Revenue forecasts.

Delivery margins.

Utilization percentages.

Arjun's name appeared only once.

"Backfill required."

That was it.

Years of sacrifice compressed into staffing terminology.

Sameer sat through the meeting quietly.

Something inside him recoiled physically at the sentence.

Ashwin noticed his expression.

“You’ll get used to transitions.”

Sameer looked toward the presentation screen.

“That’s the part I’m worried about.”

But the meeting continued.

Because organizations normalize replacement faster than reflection.

Meanwhile, Arjun woke up Monday morning without checking emails for the first time in years.

And the silence felt unnatural initially.

No notifications.

No escalation calls.

No urgent Teams messages vibrating beside breakfast.

Just morning.

Pure morning.

Kavya noticed immediately.

“You’re smiling.”

Arjun looked surprised.

“I am?”

“You forgot how your face looked without stress.”

The sentence hit him harder than expected.

For years, he had mistaken constant mental pressure for adulthood.

Now the absence of anxiety felt almost suspicious.

Back at Floor 7, however, the system had already moved on.

Because after every promotion cycle, organizations require something new quickly:

Fresh ambition.

Fresh pressure.

Fresh competition.

At lunch, Priyanka leaned toward Neha carefully.

“You know leadership is already discussing next restructuring?”

Neha stared at her blankly.

“It’s been one week.”

Priyanka shrugged helplessly.

“Companies get hungry immediately after success.”

That afternoon, Sameer received his first leadership directive as Associate Director.

“Need stronger performance accountability from teams.”

Simple sentence.

Complicated implication.

Vikram explained calmly during their meeting.

“People became emotionally relaxed after the promotion cycle.”

Sameer almost laughed.

Emotionally relaxed.

Most employees looked clinically exhausted.

“We need sharper output next quarter.”

There it was.

The next target.

Always the next target.

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“Teams are already stretched.”

Vikram nodded professionally.

“And now you understand leadership.”

That sentence haunted him all evening.

Because he suddenly recognized the trap clearly.

Every exhausted manager once promised themselves:

When I reach leadership, I'll change things.

Then pressure arrives from above.

Targets arrive.

Deadlines arrive.

And slowly—

they begin protecting the system they once resented.

Near sunset, Sameer walked across Floor 7 watching employees work beneath fluorescent lighting.

The same lighting.

The same tired expressions.

The same invisible fear.

Only the hierarchy had changed slightly.

The pressure remained identical.

Then he noticed a new junior employee sitting at Arjun's old desk.

Nervous.

Eager.

Overcommitted already.

The cycle restarting in real time.

The new employee looked up quickly.

“Sir, should I stay late tonight to finish the report?”

Sir.

The word felt strange still.

Sameer stared at him for several seconds.

Then suddenly remembered himself years earlier.

Hungry for approval.

Mistaking sacrifice for growth.

Proud of exhaustion.

“No,” Sameer answered quietly.

“Go home.”

The employee looked confused.

“But the report—”

“Tomorrow.”

As the employee packed up uncertainly, Sameer felt something shift inside him.

Small.

But important.

Later that evening, Neha entered his cabin carrying coffee.

“You look disturbed.”

“I just realized something.”

“What?”

Sameer looked through the glass walls toward the office floor.

“This place trains people to become the pressure that once hurt them.”

Neha sat quietly across from him.

Neither spoke for several moments.

Rain blurred the Mumbai skyline outside again while employees slowly disappeared from Floor 7 one by one.

Finally she asked softly:

“Do you think Arjun escaped?”

Sameer considered the question carefully.

Then shook his head slightly.

“No.”

A pause.

“I think he woke up.”

That sentence settled into the room heavily.

Because somewhere deep down—
both knew awakening comes with consequences too.

At 8 PM, Sameer remained alone inside the leadership cabin
after everyone left.

The office stood silent around him.

Empty chairs.

Dark monitors.

Cold fluorescent light.

Then his screen lit up with a fresh leadership email.

Subject:

Q4 Growth Acceleration Targets

He stared at it for several seconds before opening.

Inside:

new expectations,

new pressure,

new performance goals.

The cycle continuing perfectly.

Far away across the city, Arjun sat on his apartment balcony
beside Kavya drinking tea while rain cooled the evening air.

No laptop nearby.

No notifications.

No urgency.

Just breathing.

And somewhere between empty desks, new targets, and
fluorescent office lights—

two former competitors slowly began understanding opposite
sides of the same truth:

one had escaped the system physically.

The other was still deciding whether surviving inside it meant
becoming part of it completely.

Chapter 38 —

“Can We Have a Quick Chat?”

The message arrived at 11:06 AM.

And despite everything—

Neha’s stomach still dropped instantly.

Ashwin Mehra:

Can we have a quick chat?

No sentence in corporate life has ever caused peace.

Neha stared at the screen for several seconds while the office noise around her blurred softly into background static.

Even after years inside corporate culture, the body still reacts first:

- elevated heartbeat,
- immediate anxiety,

- involuntary self-review of recent mistakes.

Across the floor, Sameer noticed her expression immediately.

“What happened?”

She turned the screen toward him silently.

Sameer leaned back dramatically.

“Oh good.”

“What?”

“You’ve reached the terrifyingly calm leadership-message stage.”

She didn’t laugh.

Because Ashwin almost never messaged employees directly unless something important was happening.

“Maybe it’s normal,” Sameer offered.

Neha stared at him blankly.

“You’ve been promoted for three weeks and already speak like management.”

At 11:20 AM, Neha walked toward the leadership corridor carrying the familiar emotional tension of someone entering a performance review disguised as conversation.

The glass cabins looked colder during daylight.

Too clean.

Too quiet.

Ashwin's assistant smiled politely.

"He'll see you now."

Corporate equivalent of entering an executive courtroom.

Inside the cabin, Ashwin stood near the window overlooking Mumbai instead of behind his desk.

Which somehow made the room feel more serious immediately.

"Sit."

Neha sat carefully.

Ashwin remained standing for a moment before turning toward her.

"You handled the promotion cycle well."

There it was.

The leadership opening line:
compliment first,
purpose second.

"Thank you, sir."

“You were disappointed.”

Not a question.

Neha paused briefly.

Then answered honestly.

“Yes.”

Ashwin nodded calmly.

“Good.”

She blinked.

“Good?”

He sat across from her finally.

“People who pretend disappointment doesn’t affect them usually stop growing honestly.”

That sentence surprised her.

Because it sounded human.

Not managerial.

Ashwin folded his hands thoughtfully.

“You know why I called you here?”

“No, sir.”

“We’re restructuring strategic operations support next quarter.”

A pause.

“I want you leading the people sustainability initiative.”

For several seconds, Neha said nothing.

Because the phrase sounded important.

But unclear.

Corporate language often hides actual workload inside impressive titles.

Ashwin continued calmly.

“Burnout retention, employee engagement, leadership communication frameworks.”

Neha almost laughed internally.

So the organization finally noticed employees were collapsing emotionally.

Interesting timing.

Then Ashwin said something unexpected.

“Your presentation stayed with several people.”

The city skyline shimmered faintly behind him.

“Especially the part about emotional exhaustion.”

Silence settled softly between them.

“You were right,” he admitted quietly.

That sentence startled her more than the offer itself.

Because organizations rarely admit truth after ignoring it publicly.

Neha studied him carefully.

“Then why doesn’t anything change?”

Ashwin leaned back slowly.

Because that question had no simple answer.

“Organizations are complicated,” he replied carefully.

“No,” she said gently.

“They’re scared.”

The honesty in the room shifted immediately.

Ashwin didn’t interrupt.

So she continued.

“We keep calling burnout resilience because slowing down threatens performance targets.”

A pause.

“People aren’t tired anymore. They’re emotionally detached.”

For the first time since entering leadership, Ashwin looked less like an executive and more like a man carrying invisible pressure himself.

“You think I don’t know that?” he asked quietly.

Neha stopped.

Because suddenly—

the conversation no longer felt hierarchical.

It felt human.

Ashwin looked toward the office floor beyond the glass walls.

“You know what leadership actually becomes after enough years?”

He smiled faintly without humor.

“Managing consequences.”

That sentence lingered heavily inside the room.

He continued softly.

“You spend years climbing toward authority believing you’ll finally gain control.”

A pause.

“Then you arrive and discover the system was already moving before you.”

Neha watched him carefully now.

Because for the first time, she saw exhaustion behind his composure too.

Executive exhaustion.

More expensive.

Less visible.

Finally Ashwin slid a document across the desk.

Director Recommendation Pathway — Neha Kapoor

Her breath caught slightly.

Not promotion.

But succession planning.

Leadership pipeline.

“We’re not done with you yet,” Ashwin said quietly.

Outside the cabin, Floor 7 continued operating normally beneath fluorescent lights and endless targets.

Employees rushed between meetings carrying coffee and invisible stress through identical corridors.

The machine remained alive.

Inside, Neha stared at the document silently.

Months ago, this would have felt like victory.

Now—

she wasn't sure what she felt.

Ashwin noticed immediately.

“You’re questioning whether it’s worth it.”

Again—

not a question.

Neha looked toward the rain beginning outside the windows.

“I watched what happened to Arjun.”

A pause.

“And now I’m watching what’s happening to Sameer.”

Ashwin nodded slowly.

Fair.

Then quietly, he asked:

“So what do you want?”

That question hit harder than any leadership evaluation ever had.

Because for years—

nobody inside the office had asked what employees actually wanted beyond performance.

Neha sat silently for several moments.

Then finally answered with painful honesty.

“I want success that doesn’t require becoming emotionally unavailable to myself.”

Ashwin looked at her for a long time after that.

Not evaluating.

Not judging.

Thinking.

Finally he smiled faintly.

“That’s a harder promotion.”

When Neha exited the cabin forty minutes later, Floor 7 looked exactly the same.

But she didn’t.

Sameer immediately stood from his desk.

“Well?”

She looked at him quietly.

Then laughed softly under her breath.

“What?”

“I think leadership is just burnout with better vocabulary.”

Even Sameer laughed.

But beneath the humor, both understood something important had shifted today.

Far across the office, Ashwin remained alone inside his glass cabin overlooking Mumbai beneath darkening clouds.

The Regional Director.

The powerful executive.

The successful leader.

And yet—

for the first time in years—

he looked tired enough to finally tell the truth out loud.

Chapter 39 —

Exit Interview

Arjun returned to Floor 7 on a rainy Thursday carrying a visitor badge.

And somehow—

that hurt more than resignation itself.

The receptionist smiled politely while handing it over.

VISITOR

One word.

Instant emotional distance.

For years, he had entered this building half-asleep holding coffee and unread anxiety.

Now security checked his ID like he no longer belonged to the life that once consumed him completely.

The elevator ride felt strangely quiet.

No laptop bag.
No escalation messages.
No mental preparation for meetings.
Just memory.

When the elevator doors opened onto Floor 7, everything looked exactly the same.

Which felt deeply unfair.

The same fluorescent lights.
The same rushing employees.
The same smell of coffee and stress lingering through the corridor.

The office had moved forward without him effortlessly.

Some employees looked genuinely happy to see him.

Others looked uncomfortable.

Because resigned employees become emotionally complicated figures inside organizations.

They represent freedom.

Regret.

Possibility.

Sameer spotted him first through the glass cabin and immediately walked out.

“You came back voluntarily?”

Arjun smiled faintly.

“I have clearance formalities.”

“Tragic reason.”

Then for a brief second—

everything felt normal again.

The same sarcasm.

The same rhythm.

Until both remembered it wasn't.

Neha joined them moments later near the pantry.

“You look healthier.”

Arjun blinked.

“That obvious?”

Sameer pointed aggressively.

“You have color in your face again.”

Even Neha laughed softly.

But behind the humor, sat something heavier:

all three knew recovery had started becoming physically visible.

At 11 AM, HR called him for the exit interview.

The room looked identical to every other HR room:

- soft lighting,
- neutral furniture,
- artificial emotional safety.

Priya sat across from him holding a tablet and professional concern.

“How are you feeling?” she asked gently.

Arjun almost laughed.

Because corporate systems always ask emotional questions at the exact moment employees are leaving.

“Better,” he answered honestly.

Priya nodded slowly.

“I’m glad.”

And surprisingly—

she sounded genuine.

The formal process began predictably.

Reason for resignation?

Managerial feedback?

Growth concerns?

Compensation expectations?

Corporate organizations always try reducing emotional decisions into measurable categories.

But burnout rarely fits neatly inside dropdown menus.

Finally Priya put the tablet down.

And the conversation became real.

“You were one of our strongest people.”

Past tense.

That word landed quietly inside him.

Arjun smiled faintly.

“That sounds like an obituary.”

Priya laughed softly despite herself.

Then her expression shifted again.

More human now.

“Can I ask you something honestly?”

“Sure.”

“Why didn’t you speak up earlier?”

There it was.

The question every exhausted employee eventually hears.

Arjun looked toward the rain sliding down the glass windows thoughtfully.

“Because everybody else looked tired too.”

Silence.

He continued quietly.

“After a point, burnout stops feeling abnormal.”

A pause.

“It starts feeling like professionalism.”

Priya didn't write notes anymore.

She just listened.

“You know what the strange part is?” he said softly.

“I kept thinking things would calm down after the next milestone.”

Promotion cycle.

Quarter end.

Escalation recovery.

Always the next thing.

“But the pressure never actually ends here.”

The fluorescent lights hummed softly overhead.

“People just become better at carrying damage silently.”

Priya leaned back slowly.

Because she had probably heard variations of this before.

Too many times.

Then she asked the question quietly:

“Would you ever come back?”

Arjun smiled properly for the first time.

Not bitterly.

Not emotionally.

Just honestly.

“No.”

And somehow that single word felt peaceful.

Meanwhile outside, Sameer sat inside his glass cabin staring absently toward the office floor.

He watched junior employees rushing between meetings carrying the same nervous ambition he once had.

The same hunger.
The same willingness to sacrifice.

Then suddenly he realized something terrifying:
the organization was already preparing replacements emotionally
before people even left physically.

A knock interrupted his thoughts.
Ashwin entered calmly.
“You seem distracted.”
Sameer hesitated briefly.
Then decided honesty was less exhausting.
“Arjun’s exit interview.”
Ashwin nodded once.
“Transitions happen.”
“There’s that word again.”
Ashwin studied him carefully.
“What word?”
“Transitions.”
Sameer leaned back slowly.
“It makes people sound temporary.”

Silence settled briefly inside the cabin.

Then Ashwin spoke quietly.

“That’s because organizations survive by continuing.”

A pause.

“Individuals survive by knowing when not to.”

That sentence stayed with Sameer long after Ashwin left.

At 5 PM, Arjun finally packed the last few things from his desk:

- one notebook,
- headphones,
- an old coffee mug,
- a stress ball someone gifted during appraisal season ironically.

Years of professional life reduced to a small cardboard box.

Employees shook hands.

Promised to stay connected.

Made LinkedIn jokes to avoid emotional sincerity.

The usual corporate goodbye ritual.

Then finally, near sunset, the three stood together beside the windows one last time.

Mumbai glowed below beneath rain and traffic lights.

The city looked endless.

Alive beyond office walls.

“You know what I’ll miss?” Arjun asked quietly.

“What?” Neha replied.

“You two.”

Simple answer but real...

Sameer folded his arms tightly.

“Emotionally unacceptable timing for vulnerability.”

But his voice sounded strained.

Arjun looked around Floor 7 slowly.

The glowing monitors.

The glass cabins.

The endless movement.

“I gave this place too much of myself.”

A pause.

“But not everything.”

He looked toward them both carefully.

“That’s probably why I got out in time.”

No one spoke after that.

Because somewhere deep down—

all three were trying to calculate what parts of themselves still
remained untouched by the office too.

At 6:12 PM, Arjun walked toward the elevators carrying the
cardboard box quietly under one arm.

No dramatic music.

No cinematic applause.

Just footsteps fading slowly through fluorescent corridors.

The elevator doors opened.

He stepped inside.

Then looked back one final time.

Floor 7 glowed behind glass walls like it always had:

important,

busy,

hungry.

The doors closed gently.

And somewhere between resignation, recovery, and rain-soaked
city lights—

one exhausted employee finally left the building that had spent
years teaching him success,

without ever teaching him how to survive it emotionally.

Chapter 40 — Promotion Confirmed

Six months later, Floor 7 looked exactly the same.

That was the first thing Arjun noticed.

The same fluorescent lighting.

The same coffee smell.

The same employees walking quickly while pretending stress was productivity.

Even the rain against the windows felt familiar.

Mumbai had moved forward.

The office hadn't.

He stood near reception holding a visitor pass again.

But this time—

he felt different.

Lighter.

Like someone returning to a place that no longer owned parts of him.

“Sir, they’re waiting in Conference Room A.”

He nodded politely.

No anxiety.

No elevated heartbeat.

Just calm.

Because today, he wasn't here as an employee.

He was here as a client consultant.

Life after resignation had unfolded quietly.

No dramatic overnight success.

No cinematic transformation montage.

Just recovery.

He slept properly again.

Started eating dinner without checking emails.

Spent weekends existing instead of recovering.

Kavya once told him:

“You laugh before people finish jokes now.”

That sentence mattered more than any appraisal rating ever had.

Professionally, things improved too.

A smaller consulting firm hired him initially for operational restructuring work.

Less glamorous.

Less prestigious.

Healthier.

Ironically, the same skills his old company undervalued, became deeply respected elsewhere.

And somewhere during those six months—

Arjun stopped measuring his worth through exhaustion.

The conference room door opened suddenly.

Sameer entered first.

Still sharp.

Still confident.

But calmer now.

More deliberate.

For one second, both simply stared at each other.

Then Sameer grinned.

“You escaped and somehow became healthier. Extremely selfish behavior.”

Arjun laughed softly.

“You look tired.”

“I got promoted again.”

“That explains it.”

Then Neha entered behind him carrying files and coffee simultaneously.

She stopped immediately after seeing Arjun.

And smiled.

Not politely.

Genuinely.

“You look peaceful.”

Best compliment he had received in years.

The three sat together again around a conference table overlooking Mumbai beneath gray monsoon clouds.

Same room.

Different people.

A lot had changed.

Neha had accepted the leadership pathway eventually—
but differently than expected.

She became known for enforcing:

- protected weekends,
- realistic workloads,
- emotional check-ins,

- actual boundaries.

Some senior leaders called her “difficult.”

Employees called her human.

Sameer survived leadership by refusing complete transformation.

Not perfectly.

Some days he still slipped into corporate autopilot.

Still spoke in performance language.

Still carried invisible pressure home.

But occasionally—

he interrupted the cycle.

He sent employees home early.

Rejected performative burnout.

Protected people quietly where he could.

Small rebellions inside the system.

And Ashwin?

He resigned two months earlier.

That news had shocked everyone.

Apparently, after twenty-two years in leadership, he simply announced during a review meeting:

“I don’t want my entire identity to belong to targets anymore.”

Then he left.

No scandal.

No collapse.

Just clarity arriving late.

The meeting itself lasted only forty minutes.

Professional.

Efficient.

But underneath the business conversation sat something larger:
closure.

After the presentation ended, the three remained inside the
conference room while evening rain blurred the city outside.

The office beyond the glass walls buzzed with familiar urgency.

New employees.

New targets.

New ambitions.

The cycle continuing beautifully.

Sameer leaned back slowly.

“You know what’s funny?”

“What?” Neha asked.

“We spent years believing promotion was the finish line.”

Arjun looked toward the office floor quietly.

“But nobody ever arrives.”

Silence settled comfortably between them this time.

Not heavy.

Not painful.

Peaceful.

Because for the first time in years—

none of them were trying to prove anything inside this room anymore.

Neha looked toward the younger employees rushing across Floor 7 outside.

“They remind me of us.”

Sameer nodded.

“Hungry. Terrified. Overcommitted.”

Arjun smiled faintly.

“Still believing hard work automatically creates balance.”

Rain tapped softly against the windows.

The city lights below slowly awakened as evening deepened across Mumbai.

Then Sameer asked quietly:

“So what actually matters now?”

No sarcasm.

No corporate philosophy.

A real question.

Arjun thought about it carefully.

Then answered simply.

“Being able to recognize yourself outside work.”

The room went quiet again.

Because after everything—

that had become the real achievement.

Not titles.

Not cabins.

Not applause.

Identity.

Far outside the conference room, Floor 7 continued operating beneath fluorescent lights and quarterly targets.

Somewhere out there:

- another employee stayed late unnecessarily,
- another manager praised burnout as commitment,

- another ambitious young professional confused exhaustion with success.

The cycle would continue.

It always does.

But inside one quiet conference room overlooking rain-soaked Mumbai—

three former competitors sat peacefully carrying the same understanding at last:

success was never supposed to cost your entire personality.

And the most important promotion of their lives had nothing to do with designation.

It was the moment they finally stopped needing the office to tell them who they were.

Epilogue — The Lights Stay On

Two years later, Floor 7 still existed.

Still glowing every evening above Mumbai like ambition trapped behind glass.

New employees arrived every quarter carrying fresh confidence and carefully ironed clothes.

They learned quickly:

- reply fast,
- stay visible,

- sound confident,
- never look replaceable.

The system trained them efficiently.

Just like before.

The office café had changed vendors.

The reporting structure had evolved.

Half the old leadership team was gone.

But the rhythm remained identical.

Because organizations rarely transform emotionally.

They simply rename processes and continue operating.

On a rainy Friday evening, a young analyst sat alone near the windows reviewing slides at 9:40 PM.

Nervous.

Determined.

Trying desperately to impress leadership before appraisal season.

Then unexpectedly—

a woman stopped beside her desk.

“Why are you still here?”

The analyst looked up immediately.

Neha Kapoor.

Now Director — People & Strategic Culture.

Still calm.

Still observant.

“I wanted to finish this tonight,” the analyst replied quickly.

Neha glanced at the screen.

“It can wait until tomorrow.”

“But leadership review—”

“Will still happen tomorrow.”

A pause.

“Go home.”

The analyst hesitated.

Because ambition and permission rarely coexist comfortably.

Neha smiled faintly.

“You know the strange thing about corporate work?”

“What?”

“It expands endlessly if your boundaries don’t exist first.”

The analyst slowly packed her bag.

Confused.

Relieved.

Suspicious.

Exactly how healthy workplace culture initially feels to overworked employees.

Elsewhere across the city, Sameer sat inside a smaller office now.

Not at the multinational company.

He had left one year after Ashwin.

Turns out he was excellent at building teams.

Just not inside systems that treated people like renewable resources.

His own consulting firm operated differently:

- no weekend calls,
- mandatory leave,
- cameras off during late meetings,
- promotions tied to mentoring, not exhaustion.

Clients initially called the approach unrealistic.

Then productivity improved.

Funny how rested people think more clearly.

Sameer still joked too much during meetings.

Still used sarcasm during stress.

Still occasionally caught himself measuring self-worth through achievement.

Recovery isn't transformation.

It's awareness repeated consistently.

And Arjun?

He never returned to corporate leadership.

Instead, he began teaching operational strategy workshops for young professionals and mid-level managers.

Ironically, he became respected precisely because he spoke honestly about burnout.

Not theoretically.

Personally.

During one workshop, a participant once asked him:

“How do you know when your job is becoming unhealthy?”

Arjun smiled quietly before answering.

“When your personality only exists on weekends.”

The room went silent immediately.

Because too many people understood the sentence instantly.

Later that evening, the three met again at a small café overlooking Marine Drive.

No office clothes.

No laptops.

No urgency.

Just rain, traffic lights, and old friendship surviving beyond employment.

Mumbai glowed beautifully outside beneath monsoon clouds.

Alive.

Chaotic.

Human.

“You know,” Sameer said while stirring coffee absentmindedly, “we really thought promotions would fix our lives.”

Neha laughed softly.

“We thought validation would.”

Arjun leaned back in his chair watching headlights blur across wet roads.

“That’s because nobody teaches young professionals the difference between ambition and self-abandonment.”

Silence settled comfortably between them.

Not empty.

Earned.

Around them, the café buzzed with conversations from other tired professionals escaping offices temporarily before Monday arrived again.

Some still chasing titles.

Some already burned out.

Some slowly waking up.

Neha looked out toward the city thoughtfully.

“The sad part is...”

“What?” Sameer asked.

“Most people won’t realize the cost until after they’ve already paid it.”

No one disagreed.

Because they had lived it themselves:

- the missed dinners,
 - the panic disguised as professionalism,
 - the emotional numbness celebrated as maturity,
 - the quiet loneliness of becoming useful everywhere except your own life.
-

Rain tapped gently against the café windows.

Soft.

Steady.

Then Sameer suddenly smiled.

“What?”

He looked at both of them carefully.

“We survived it.”

Arjun nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“But not by winning.”

That sentence stayed between them quietly while the city lights shimmered beyond the rain.

Far away across Mumbai, Floor 7 still glowed late into the night.

New employees still sitting beneath fluorescent lights chasing the next promotion cycle.

The machine continuing exactly as designed.

But somewhere outside that glass tower—

three former employees had finally learned something the corporate world rarely teaches clearly:

work can be important without becoming your identity.

Success means very little if peace disappears while achieving it.

And sometimes the most powerful career decision a person makes is refusing to sacrifice their entire humanity just to feel professionally valuable for a while.

Endnote

Some readers may finish this story and wonder:

Was the corporate world really this emotionally intense?

Do offices truly shape people this deeply?

Would someone really walk away from a stable career because of exhaustion?

Why are there no clear villains in this story?

Why does everything feel so quiet, restrained, and painfully ordinary instead of dramatic?

Those are fair questions.

This book was never written as a documentary about every workplace, nor as a universal truth about every organization or every professional life. There are healthy workplaces in the world. There are extraordinary leaders. There are teams built on trust, balance, and mutual respect.

But this story exists for another reason.

It explores what happens when professional ambition slowly becomes emotional identity.

Not suddenly.

Not violently.

Quietly.

Most people do not wake up one morning and decide to sacrifice their peace, relationships, health, or personality for work. It happens gradually through small compromises that initially feel responsible, mature, and necessary.

One late night becomes routine.

One missed dinner becomes understandable.

One weekend call becomes “part of growth.”

One promotion becomes proof that the sacrifice was worth it.

And eventually, exhaustion stops feeling abnormal.

That emotional progression is the true subject of this novel.

The world inside Floor 7 may appear emotionally heightened because the story intentionally focuses on the inner lives people rarely express openly in workplaces. Most professionals do not speak these thoughts aloud during meetings, presentations, or appraisals. But many carry them internally:

the fear of becoming replaceable,

the pressure to remain valuable,

the guilt associated with rest,

the loneliness hidden behind achievement,

the silent question of whether success still feels meaningful once it begins consuming identity itself.

The characters in this book are not meant to represent perfect realism in speech or behavior every moment. They are emotionally distilled versions of responses many professionals develop over time.

Arjun represents endurance pushed beyond emotional sustainability.

Sameer represents adaptation and charisma within systems of pressure.

Neha represents emotional awareness inside environments that reward detachment.

Ashwin represents the quiet fatigue leadership often hides professionally.

Even Floor 7 itself is written almost like a living organism because modern workplaces can begin to feel larger than the individuals inside them.

Some readers may notice there is no true villain in this story.

That choice was intentional.

The novel does not argue that corporations are evil, nor that ambition itself is dangerous. Ambition can create innovation, stability, purpose, and extraordinary achievement. Many people genuinely love their work and find meaning through it.

The danger begins when human worth becomes measurable only through performance.

The story avoids simplistic villains because many unhealthy systems survive not through cruelty, but through normalization. Most people inside such systems are not malicious. They are simply adapting, surviving, competing, leading, and carrying pressures of their own.

That is why even leadership figures in this story are humanized.

Because sometimes the system exhausts everyone differently.

Some readers may also feel the novel repeats certain imagery: glass walls,

rain,
late-night offices,
fluorescent lights,
silence.

This repetition was deliberate.

Corporate life itself is repetitive. Burnout is repetitive. The emotional cycles of ambition, pressure, visibility, validation, and exhaustion often repeat so consistently that environments begin feeling psychologically circular. The prose mirrors that rhythm intentionally so the reader slowly experiences the emotional sameness the characters themselves are trapped inside.

Another important question may arise:

Does this story romanticize resignation?

No.

Leaving is not presented as victory. Staying is not presented as failure.

Arjun's resignation matters not because he quit a company, but because he finally recognized himself slipping away beneath professional performance. His recovery is not magical. It is simply the gradual rediscovery of emotional space, identity, and boundaries.

Likewise, Sameer stays and attempts to change the system from within. Neha rises into leadership while trying to protect humanity inside structures that often reward emotional detachment. Ashwin realizes too late that success without selfhood becomes hollow.

There is no single "correct" path in this story.

That is the point.

The novel is not asking readers to reject ambition. It is asking them to examine the cost of ambition when boundaries disappear.

If this book leaves behind discomfort, it has succeeded honestly.

Because many people today are professionally connected to the world at all times, yet emotionally disconnected from themselves. Modern work culture has made exhaustion look admirable, busyness look important, and constant availability look like commitment.

But human beings were never meant to exist only as productive versions of themselves.

In the end, this story is not really about promotions, resignations, leadership, or corporate life.

It is about remembering that behind every designation is still a person trying to build a meaningful life.

And perhaps the most important question this book leaves behind is not:

“Did the characters become successful?”

But rather:

“What parts of themselves did they have to protect in order to remain human while becoming successful?”