

WHERE FIRE DROWNED AND LOVE IGNITED

A love as destructive as it is irresistible

GEET SUVIGYA



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STORIES MATTER

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Aagya Avaan

Age: 21
Height: 5'3"
MBTI: ENTJ - The Commander
Origin: Mumbai, Maharashtra.

ROLE:

- Only living heir of the Avaan Empire,
• One of the wealthiest families in the world.
- Successor to Avaan Studios, among the largest and most influential film production houses. globally.
- She was not raised to rule people.
- She was raised to carry weight without letting it show.

CORE IDENTITY:

- Aagya Avaan is not loud power.
- She is contained authority.
- Born into excess, trained in restraint.
- She learned early that privilege attracts predators; and silence filters loyalty.
- She does not chase dominance - she inherits responsibility.
- Her strength is not in control over others. but in never losing control over herself.

LIKES:

- ✓ Black coffee
- ✓ Night drives.
- ✓ Silence that thinks before speaking
- ✓ Precision over chaos.

DISLIKES:

- ✗ Being underestimated
- ✗ Public vulnerability
- ✗ Emotional theatrics
- ✗ Loss of control
- ✗ Loudness mistaken for strength

QUOTE

"I don't chase control.
I was raised inside it."



Rudra Suvigya

Age: 24

Height: 5'5"

MBTI: INFJ—The Advocate"

OCCUPATION:
Visual Artist
Territorial Army
(Undercover)

ORIGIN:
Gorakhpur
Uttar Pradesh

ROLE:

"The Ghost in Gallery"

- ★ Determined to expose Zameer's secret, fights against the system.
- ★ Fear has no grip on him.
- ★ Strikes with unashamed courage. expects.
- ★ Sees with a clear mind, strikes unexpectedly. But a common mean nerve was never his.

QUOTE:

"Some fires don't burn
to destroy—
they burn to purify."

AESTHETIC NOTES

The kind
of
silence
that makes
noise jealous.

Sketches
reality just
to rewrite it.

— Probably
goes to bed
at 2 AM,
goes to sleep
at 2 PM.

LIKES:

- ★ Early morning sketches
- ★ Pencil paintings
- ★ Classical instrumental playlists.
- ★ Silence earned

DISLIKES:

- ✗ Loud arrogance
- ✗ Wasted potential
- ✗ Emotional manipulating
- ✗ Violence without purpose

CORE IDENTITY:

- ★ Stoic undercover artist
- ★ waging a hidden war
to redeem a lost future.



Latika

Age: 7

Height: 3'11"

MBTI: ENFF - "The Spark"



Curious and observant.

TEMPERAMENT:

Curious • Observant • Resilient

CORE IDENTITY

- ✧ Latika wants to stay a child, but life keeps testing her like an adult.
- ✧ Learning to hold fear — without letting it decide for her.
- ✧ Innocent heart, wickedly curious mind.
- ✧ Kindness comes naturally, courage she has to find.

LIKES:

- ✓ Cartoons she half understands
- ✓ Drawing on old notebooks
- ✓ Asking too many why's
- ✓ Clinging to people she loves.

BACKGROUND:

Rudra's not-by-blood little sister

Grew up in a chawl, sharp beyond her years, but fiercely innocent.

DISLIKES:

- ✗ Raised voices
- ✗ Locked doors
- ✗ Being lied to like she's a baby
- ✗ Silence before scarier things.

AESTHETIC NOTES:

- Clothes chosen for comfort, not appearance.
- Hair rarely perfect, often forgotten.
- Sits cross legged instinctively

QUOTE:

"I know what I'm doing."

ITEMS:

- Sketchbook
- Colored pencils
- Worn stuffed animal



Megha

✓ Age: 21

✓ Height: 5'2"

MBTI: ISFJ—“The Anchor”

Role: Megha is Aagya's assistant and best friend.

Operational support, emotional anchor, and ground reality check.

→ CORE IDENTITY

Megha doesn't chase brilliance, she enables it.

She isn't built for the spotlight, she's built to keep things running when everything else is falling apart.

Where Aagya lives in Ideas and abstraction,

Megha stands in execution and reality.

She doesn't ask, "What if?"

She asks, "How, when, and at what cost?"

→ PERSONALITY

✓ Calm under pressure

- ✓ Sharply observant, selectively expressive

- ✓ Emotionally intelligent, not emotionally loud

✓ Loyal, but not blindly

- ✓ Knows when to speak, and more importantly, when not to

✓ They don't complete each other.

- ✓ They stabilize each other.

+ TEMPERAMENT

✓ Practical

✓ Grounded

✓ Quietly brave

- ✓ Emotionally disciplined

★ LIKES

✓ Tea,

- ✓ Well-organized spaces

- ✓ Quiet evenings,

✓ Half-baked plans ✓ Broken trust

+ DISLIKES

- ✓ Sudden disruptions

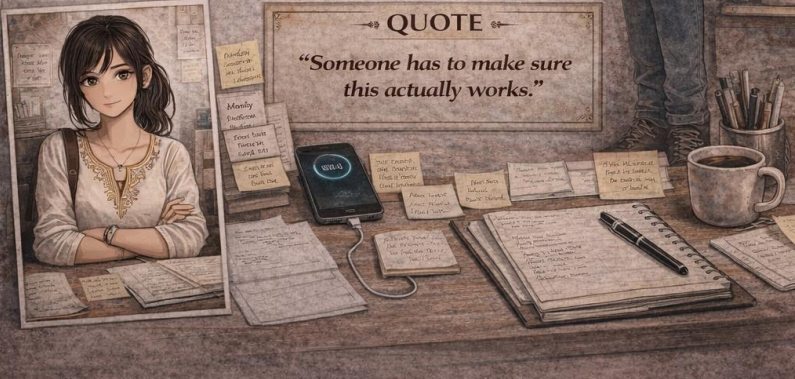
✓ Superficial charm

- ✓ Being the center of attention

- ✓ Broken trust

QUOTE

*"Someone has to make sure
this actually works."*





Lt. General Pratap Singh

AGE: 54

HEIGHT: 5'9"

MBTI: ESTJ – "The Executive"

ROLE

- Senior Indian Army Officer
- Strategic Overseer of Counter-Terror Operations
- Command Authority over Operation Narsimha

Pratap Singh does not fight wars himself.
He decides where they begin, and where end.

CORE IDENTITY.

- Discipline over sentiment.
- Authority earned, not demanded.
- Believes order must be preserved, even at a cost.
- Carries the weight of every decision personally.
- Knows when to bend rules, never principles.

BACKGROUND.

- Pratap Singh rose through the ranks without political protection or spectacle.
- His reputation was built in silence.
- On borders that never made the news.
- He believes the nation survives not on heroes but on men willing to make unpopular decisions.
- Every order he gives costs lives.
- He remembers every one of them.

QUOTE

Wars are not won by rage or mercy.

They are won by men who accept the cost before giving the order.



LIKES

- Precision briefings.
- Early morning Silence.
- Chess played without commentary.
- Soldiers who follow orders without hesi

DISLIKES

- Emotional interference in operations
- Media theatrics
- Unaccounted variables
- Terrorists who seek spectacle.

Zameer Haqqani

AGE: 25

HEIGHT: 6'3"

MBTI: INTJ — "The Architect of Fear"

ROLE

- ✓ Antagonist
- ✓ Leader of Lashkar-e-Qayamat.
- ✓ Architect of Qayamat-e-Hind

QUOTE:

"If your world breaks because of me—
then it was never strong to begin with."

BACKGROUND

- ✓ Zameer does not come from desperation or disorder.
- ✓ He comes from conviction.
- ✓ He is trained, disciplined, and invisible.
- ✓ He learned early that systems do not collapse from explosions, they collapse when belief is publicly shattered.
- ✓ Zameer does not seek power.
- ✓ He seeks proof that order is a comforting lie.

RELATION WITH RUDRA

- ✓ Zameer is Rudra's archnemesis.
- ✓ This is not rivalry. This is ideological war.
- ✓ He believes in protection, attachment, and saving lives.
- ✓ Zameer believes in fear, spectacle, and dismantling belief systems.
- ✓ Zameer does not merely oppose Rudra—he designs his attacks with Rudra in mind.
- ✓ Every operation is staged to force Rudra to make an impossible choice, and Rudra refuses to abandon.
- ✓ To Zameer, Rudra is not an obstacle. And design intends that proof publicly.
- ✓ Zameer exploits Rudra's principles to trap him into difficult situations.
- ✓ Zameer relishes demonstrating that Rudra's convictions are his vulnerability.



LIKES

- ✓ Silence after destruction
- ✓ Watching plans unfold precisely
- ✓ Chess played alone
- ✓ Controlled environments and perfect timing

DISLIKES

- ✗ Emotional decision making
- ✗ Disloyalty
- ✗ Improvisation
- ✗ People who value individuals over ideology



Author's Note

This novel explores power, silence, control, and the invisible scars people carry long after violence ends.

Some characters in this story speak cruelly. Some dominate through words. Some confuse strength with volume, and survival with control. These moments are not written to glorify cruelty, emotional abuse, or domination. They are written to **expose** them.

Trauma in this story is not a badge of honor. It is a wound. Silence is not a weakness here. It is a language. Power is not measured by how loudly it is asserted, but by what it costs to hold it.

This book does not offer perfect heroes or clean victories. It follows people who are broken in different ways – some visibly and some dangerously well-hidden. If any interaction feels uncomfortable, confrontational, or unsettling, that discomfort is intentional. Growth rarely arrives politely.

This story asks a simple question beneath all the noise:

What remains of us when performance ends, and only truth is left?

Reader discretion is advised.

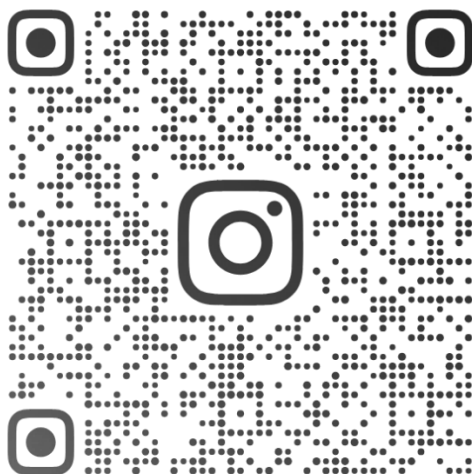
– *GEET SUVIGYA*

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Scan this QR code to see the Original Coloured
Sketches on the author's official Instagram handle:



MY BOOK 

BY @GEET_SUVIGYA

1. Where Fire First Touched Silence

There was no warning. Just a gunshot... sharp, splitting the air. And then everything fell apart. The marble lobby erupted into chaos. Bullets ricocheted off pillars. Velvet drapes caught fire like they'd been waiting for an excuse to burn. Smoke poured upward, swallowing the chandeliers until their crystals flickered like dying stars. Screams twisted through the lobby, rising, breaking, then disappearing beneath the roar of gunfire. The floor shook. Glass shattered. Someone prayed. Someone didn't finish.

And in the center of it all stood a little girl. Five years old. Barefoot. Shaking. Blood streaked her arms and cheeks. There was too much of it to be hers, too fresh to ignore. But she didn't seem to understand any of it. Her eyes were locked on the boy lying in front of her. He was maybe sixteen. Old enough to protect her. Young enough to die for nothing. His shirt was soaked through, crimson blooming across his chest like a flower opening in reverse... death first, petals second. His eyes were half-open, glassy, and unfocused. He wasn't breathing. He would never breathe again.

Something inside her cracked. A scream tore out of her throat which was raw, animal and heartbroken. She stumbled forward, reaching for him. But suddenly, a hand grabbed her wrist. Small. Unfamiliar. Fierce. A boy, about eight, covered in dust, clothes bloody and tears clinging to his lashes but refusing to fall. His grip shouldn't have been that strong. Not at his age. Not with everything trembling around him. He didn't waste a second. He pulled her through the collapsing lobby past burning curtains,

toppled chairs, discarded luggage, and bodies that she didn't dare look at. Flames hissed at their ankles. Smoke clawed at their throats. Bullets tore into walls inches from their heads. He didn't speak. He just moved. Guided her. Shielded her. Chose for her. Because she couldn't.

A linen closet appeared through the haze. He shoved the door open, pushed her inside first, and slipped in behind her. The door clicked shut. The world outside kept dying. Inside, it was dark. Hot. Silent, until her sobs shattered the quiet. She couldn't stop. Her breath came out in jagged pieces. Her tiny chest heaved like she was drowning in the air.

Gunshots hammered the hallway, growing louder and closer. Footsteps pounded past the door. Shouting. More fire. More fear. Her sobs grew louder. The boy's arms wrapped around her from behind. It was awkward, trembling, but steady enough to anchor her. She collapsed into him, shaking. He held on. She couldn't see his face in the pitch-black. But his voice cut through the noise. Soft. Whispering. Wrongly calm for a child.

"Shh... I'm here.", he whispered

Something cracked in her. A new wave of crying hit. His arms tightened protectively... not forceful, but desperate, like he was trying to convince the world to leave her alone. The gunfire kept coming. Screams rose, fell, and disappeared. Heat seeped through the door. She curled into him, clutching the ruby pendant around her neck... the one thing she still owned, still recognized, still understood. His arm trembled once. Just once. But he didn't let go. Not even when the air grew heavy. Not even when the footsteps stopped right outside their door. Not even when something crashed nearby hard enough to shake the walls.

Suddenly, blackness swallowed everything. And then, she jolted awake. Her body shot upright in her enormous bedroom, lungs dragging air like she'd run for miles. Sweat coated her forehead.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. For a moment, she couldn't breathe, couldn't think and couldn't tell if she was twenty-one or five again. Her fingers flew to the same red ruby pendant. Still warm from her skin. Still hers. Still holding memories, she wished would die. A single tear slipped down her cheek. She wiped it away violently.

"Not again...", she whispered.

Her eyes flicked toward her bedside clock. Her alarm was blaring. She was late. She exhaled sharply, frustration swallowing the lingering fear, and swung her legs off the bed. Her room, massive enough to fit a small apartment, was covered wall-to-wall with filmmaking posters, trophies, medals, magazine covers featuring her parents, and shelves overflowing with awards. Anyone else would feel pride. But she only felt suffocated. Trapped in perfectly polished walls that didn't belong to her. Like the walls were closing in. She tied her hair into a messy bun and rushed into the bathroom.

By the time she finished her shower, her head still buzzed from the leftover panic of the nightmare. Stepping out, she noticed a calendar alert blinking on her iPhone:

FILM FESTIVAL ORIENTATION – DAY 1

She cursed under her breath. Of all the things to forget. She got dressed quickly, slipping into a sleeveless, backless black bodycon dress, pairing it with heeled boots, a black leather jacket, two silver rings, and her oversized stud earrings along with a red scarf. Her hair was styled into soft see-through bangs that framed her face. She looked flawless. Not that she cared. Or at least, that's what she told herself. She took a deep breath and headed downstairs.

The mansion's dining hall was fit for royalty with high ceilings, crystal chandeliers, a dining table that could seat thirty, and a line

of chefs and servers moving with practiced precision. Her father sat at the head of the table. Her mother was beside him. The moment she approached, a waiter rushed forward and pulled out her chair. Another placed a neatly plated breakfast before her with both hands behind his back, *"Ma'am, your high-protein breakfast as per your nutritionist's instructions. Smoked salmon rolls, avocado truffle mash, almond flour toast with microgreens, and a detox spirulina shot."*

She frowned. Hard. Her father looked up, *"Fix your attitude, Aagya."*

Her mother chimed in, sharper, *"And how exactly did you wake up late today? Do you understand what day it is?"*

Aagya clenched her jaw. Her father continued, voice cold enough to freeze blood, *"Your last exam score was ninety-nine percent. Not a hundred. You embarrassed us once. Don't you dare do it again. This Film Festival is not optional. It is the Avaan Empire's legacy. If you tarnish it, the consequences will be far worse than you imagine."*

The threat was clear. And very real. She swallowed hard, *"Yes, Papa."*

No one asked if she had slept well. No one cared. She forced down the breakfast, barely tasting anything.

After eating in silence, she walked to the parking lot. Her breath steadied only slightly when she slid into her matte black Porsche 911 Turbo S. For a moment, she just sat there, gripping the steering wheel, grounding herself. Then she started the engine. The car roared to life... smooth, powerful, commanding. People stared as she drove through the city, and she soaked in every pair of eyes like armor. Attention was familiar. Comfortable. Predictable. Unlike her thoughts.

Finally, she reached the National Institute of Visual Storytelling & Experimental Arts (NIVSEA). Her car turned every head at the

gate. The guard stepped forward, asking for ID. She held out her Royal Institute of Global Arts (RIGA) ID card without a word. The guard's eyes widened at her name, "*Aagya Avaan, ma'am... welcome.*"

He saluted immediately. Of course he did. Everyone knew the Avaan family. She parked in the underground lot, stepped out, and immediately dialed a number from her contacts. **Megha**. The call got connected within two rings.

"Bring everyone!", Aagya ordered.

A few minutes later, twelve people appeared. Her entire team consisted of the following:

1. Geeta — Assistant Director
2. Megha — Secretary
3. Simran — Cinematographer
4. Saadhna — Production Designer
5. Aadarsh — Lighting Head
6. Ayush — Sound Designer
7. Ravi — Costume
8. Mishika — Makeup
9. Aman — Cameraman
10. Ramesh — Still Photographer
11. Shyam & Seeta — Editing Duo

They formed a semicircle around her like she was their monarch. Because in their world, she was. She asked for updates. No apology for being late. None expected. One by one, they gave her every detail.

Day 1 — Registrations for the festival.

Day 2 — A "*surprise announcement*" from the festival committee. No one knew what it was.

The lack of clarity irritated her. But she kept her expression neutral. After all the briefings, she headed to the registration

booth and signed every document, which took far longer than she liked. Eventually, she received her ID card, her access to everything. She slipped it into her purse, then handed it to Megha to carry. Aagya was exhausted. She needed air. Silence. Space.

"I'm going to the rooftop," she announced.

No one argued. No one ever dared to. She moved and they followed her like sheep.

The rooftop door swung open with a metallic thud. Aagya stepped out first, her team trailing behind her like shadows afraid to fall out of formation. The golden hour sun washed the entire terrace in liquid amber, turning even the cracked, grimy walls of the NIVSEA into something surreal. Mumbai below buzzed in a restless hum, but up here, the world felt paused. She didn't come here for the view.

But, silence didn't greet her. She stopped as she saw that someone was already there. Her eyes froze at him instantly. A boy lay stretched out along the cement railing with one leg dangling lazily, the other propped up as a makeshift stand for his sketchbook. His pencil moved with hypnotic precision, strokes steady and deliberate. Headphones covered his ears, cutting him off from the world entirely. The breeze played with the loose strands of his hair, but nothing else seemed to touch him. He didn't notice her. He didn't flinch. He didn't even acknowledge the dozen people who had just stormed in like a film crew.

Aagya's eyebrow twitched. It was just what she didn't need today. She exhaled once, sharply, forcing her expression back into its usual cool arrogance. Then she let her voice cut through the air loud enough for her team to react on cue, *"Well, well, well. Look who's on a school trip to **my** rooftop."*

Her entourage chuckled. He kept drawing. She walked forward, heels clicking, attitude sharpened like a blade she was too tired to sheath, blocking his sunlight with her shadow.

"Hey, headphone guy," she added, stepping close enough that her shadow fell across his sketchbook. *"Didn't your map tell you this place is taken?"*

Nothing. He wasn't ignoring her to be dramatic. He genuinely... didn't care. That was new and infuriating to her. She bent toward him, voice dripping sarcasm. *"Hello? This isn't your emotional support balcony. Pick another spot and go vibe with the pigeons."*

Finally, his pencil paused. He looked up. Slow. Unhurried. His eyes met hers. They were dark, calm and steady. A complete contrast to the storm she carried everywhere.

"...What?" he asked, removing one headphone.

Aagya folded her arms. *"Get out of my spot, weirdo."*

He blinked. *"Didn't see your name written anywhere."*

A chorus of *"Oooooohhh!"* erupted behind her.

Her jaw tightened. This boy clearly had no idea who he was talking to.

"You clearly don't know who I am.", she said, stepping closer.

He smirked barely, but it was enough. *"Trust me, I figured. The attitude did most of the introduction."*

Before she could snap back, the wind shifted. Her scarf slipped off her shoulder, drifted through the warm air, and landed neatly in his lap. He picked it up. Turned it between his fingers. Lifted it to his nose.

"...expensive," he murmured. *"And a little poisonous. Fits."*

Heat rushed to her ears. She snatched it back. Too fast, too defensive. Their fingers brushed for a split second, and her pulse stuttered.

"Don't touch what you can't afford.", she said.

He held her gaze, unbothered. *"Relax! I wasn't touching. I was observing. Silence says more than noise."* Something in her chest tightened. Then she made the mistake of glancing at his sketchbook.

It was a bird. Wings outstretched, rising upward. But its claws were tangled in faint, invisible chains.

Something inside her flinched.

"What's that supposed to mean?", she demanded.

He looked at the drawing. Then at her. His voice dropped, quiet enough that the breeze nearly carried it away, *"Sometimes the things you think make you strong... are the same things that keep you trapped."*

For a fraction of a second, her mask slipped. Then she snapped back. Her breath hitched. She hated that it hit her. So she smothered it under a scoff. Desperation disguised as arrogance, she reached into her jacket, pulled out a crisp bundle of notes, and held it out between two fingers like it was contaminated.

"Here," she said coldly. "Take this. Consider it charity. Go sketch somewhere else and stop blocking my view."

Her entourage froze, half shocked, half impressed at the audacity. He didn't even blink. He looked at the money. Then at her. Then put his feet down on the ground, *"If you think I need your money,"* he said quietly, *"you're more trapped than that bird."*

The insult landed so clean and emotionless it felt like a punch. He kept going, voice steady, *"I prefer silence because it's cheaper. And it*

doesn't come with fake people. If you actually made art instead of performing confidence for an audience, you'd know."

Her temper snapped, *"Oh shut up,"* she fired back. *"You're not some misunderstood genius. You're just a guy wasting time because the real world doesn't want you."*

Her squad laughed too loud, too eager. He didn't. He simply closed the sketchbook, dusted his palms, and stood slowly, steadily to his full height. He was about 2-3 inches taller than her. Broader, too. But, Aagya looked a bit taller than him since she was wearing high heels. But, it was his presence that shifted the air.

"Maybe", he said calmly with a half-smile. *"But at least I've made peace with not being wanted."*

His eyes locked onto hers as he took one slow step forward, *"You spend your whole life trying to prove you are."*

For the first time in years, Aagya forgot her lines. He put his headphones back on as if he was done with the entire scene. That made her snap, *"You think you're deep, you Sketchbook Ghost? Talking slow doesn't make you smart!"*

He didn't turn. But he smiled. Not at her, through her, *"And talking fast doesn't mean you're saying anything."*

He finally faced her fully, voice lowering to something razor-sharp and quiet, *"You wear noise like armor because silence scares you. You perform confidence like a script... scene after scene. But if you were alone without an audience for five minutes, you'd fall apart."*

Her breath caught. He stepped closer, not threatening, just brutally honest, *"I turn pain into art. You turn yours into poison. We both bleed. But only one of us heals."*

Everything inside her went still. She didn't have a comeback. Her team didn't dare breathe. He walked past her, brushing her shoulder as he did.

"Being alone is better than being surrounded by echoes," he murmured.

Right then, the first raindrop fell. Then another. The sky darkened, like the storm above reflected the one inside her. Her makeup blurred, her hair dampened, but she didn't move. Couldn't. She clutched the scarf he'd touched, knuckles white.

Behind her, someone whispered, *"That was intense..."*

But Aagya didn't hear them. She stared at the spot where he'd disappeared down the stairs, feeling something she hadn't felt in years... shaken. Not because he insulted her. But because he saw her. And that terrified her more than any nightmare ever had.

2. When Storms Collide

The Amphitheatre buzzed with youthful excitement, drenched in the golden hues of a late Mumbai morning. But today, the usual chaos of the National Institute of Visual Storytelling & Experimental Arts (NIVSEA) had transformed into something more... electric. The first day of the **NIVSEA-RIGA Film Festival** had arrived, and the campus had dressed like a bride. Banners fluttered in the monsoon breeze. Lights blinked against marigold garlands wrapped around stair railings. Volunteers moved like a well-oiled crew across the Amphitheatre, setting up last-minute tech and handing out brochures.

But all that faded the moment Aagya walked in. Her name itself carried its own weather. Today, she wore a black sleeveless, body-hugging top that framed her muscular arms, paired with tailored jeans and sharp stilettos that clicked with command across the concrete. Her hair was in a high, sleek ponytail, her silver hoops glinting with every step. She didn't need to announce her arrival.

As she entered the Amphitheatre, it felt as though the very air shifted around her. She wore a sleeveless black top, showcasing her defined, muscular arms, paired with dark blue jeans and sharp black high heels. Her hair was pulled back into a tight, sleek ponytail that sharpened her fierce, commanding aura.

The crowd parted instinctively, not out of fear, but out of sheer awe. Even professors found themselves adjusting their posture as she passed. But amidst that swelling tide of attention... one person didn't even blink. That same guy. He sat cross-legged near the corner staircase wearing a black hoodie, eyes behind messy hair,

scribbling in a worn-out sketchbook like the world didn't exist. His silence screamed louder than the cheers of the festival. He was lost in his own world, relaxed and detached, as if the rest of the world barely existed for him.

Aagya's eyes scanned for someone. And then, they locked. When their gazes finally met, even for just a few seconds, an intense, unspoken conversation passed between them. A raw, electric spark, a silent clash of storms. He didn't move. He didn't smile. Just a fleeting glance... and then back to the sketchbook. It should have meant nothing. But something in that blank gaze clawed at her like a slow burn. Aagya's lips had curled into a confident smirk, but that smirk shattered the very next moment when he coldly ignored her, without a single flicker of expression. As if she didn't even exist. A blow to her ego, sharp and cutting. Yet Aagya composed herself with grace, lifting her chin and making her way toward the front of the gathering with her group. Her smirk faltered for half a second before re-emerging stronger. She straightened her back and headed toward the stage.

At the center stage, a dignified figure stepped forward, a senior professor, an alumnus of both NIVSEA and RIGA. He lifted the mic, and a deep, commanding voice echoed across the Amphitheatre, *"A very warm welcome, dear students, to the 10th Annual NIVSEA-RIGA Film Festival!"*

Thunderous applause roared through the crowd.

He continued, *"This festival is not just another competition. It is a celebration of storytelling, imagination, and the endless possibilities of cinema. As you all know, NIVSEA and The Royal Institute of Global Arts have been collaborating for a decade now to bring young creators together onto a single, glorious platform. Every alternate year, one institute gets the honor of organizing this grand festival. Last year, RIGA hosted a spectacular event. And this year, it is NIVSEA's proud moment to carry the torch forward! Over the past few editions, we have*

witnessed incredible films, and some truly exceptional artists rise to greatness. But this year... there's a twist."

The crowd leaned in, buzzing with excitement as he added, "This time, to push your limits and your creativity, we're introducing a new challenge: Each participant will be randomly paired – one Director and one Animator, and together, you must craft your project. You may choose whether you want your project to be a live-action film, an animated film, or even a hybrid of both. You will be allowed to build a team by adding writers, editors, cinematographers, musicians... whoever you require. However, your final team list must be submitted to the authorities by the end of today. All of you will get a month's time to complete your projects and both the institutes will sponsor your works in every possible way."

The crowd started hooting with happiness as he spoke, "You'll have to make a list of your requirements and submit them to the HODs of your respective departments and all the arrangements will be made accordingly. The awards this year will include:

- 1. Best Animated Film*
- 2. Best Live-Action Film*
- 3. Best Overall Film*
- 4. Best Director*
- 5. Best Actor*
- 6. Best Animator*
- 7. Best Editor*
- 8. Best Original Screenplay*
- 9. Best Adapted Screenplay*
- 10. Best Cinematography*
- 11. Best Production Design*
- 12. Best Music*

And lastly....

- 13. Special Jury Award"*

He added again, *"Your work will be judged by an esteemed panel of celebrated filmmakers, animators, musicians, and technicians. This is your stage, your story, your destiny. Make it unforgettable. And now... let's begin with the pairings!"*

As the pairing announcements began, the excitement in the Amphitheatre rose to a new high. One by one, names were called. Some pairs laughed nervously, some smiled awkwardly, shaking hands with newfound partners. Every heart silently prayed, ***"Who will my partner be?"***

And then... time seemed to slow as the next pair was announced, *"Next Pair, Rudra Suvigya and Aagya Avaan!"*

The entire Amphitheatre fell into a brief stunned silence as if the air itself had paused to listen. Aagya frowned slightly, *"Rudra Suvigya? Who's that?"*

But the moment she stepped onto the stage and looked at her assigned partner, the ground seemed to vanish beneath her feet. It was him. The boy from the rooftop. The silent storm in human form. Today, she finally learned his name. And there he stood clad in a sleeveless black hoodie that effortlessly showcased his powerful physique, standing like a Greek god carved by the universe itself. Aagya felt the volcano within her stir violently. But she masked her emotions behind a steely, composed face as she stepped forward. It was time to shake hands.

Aagya stepped forward with sharp, deliberate steps. She locked eyes with him, her expression cold but composed. It was the calm before a storm. She gripped his hand with fierce intent trying to crush it, to send a silent message of defiance. And yet... he didn't flinch. His face didn't twitch. Not a single muscle moved. There was just one thing in his eyes. A confident sparkle, hidden beneath that still, calm surface. Unbothered. Undisturbed. Unmoved. He simply held her gaze, his face as blank and unreadable as a frozen lake and didn't feel anything at all. And

then, without breaking eye contact, he leaned in just slightly and said in a voice calm, deep, and laced with quiet arrogance, *"Try harder, Princess."*

That one line struck deeper than any insult. Aagya's jaw clenched, but she didn't let her smile slip. No, she would never give him that satisfaction. She simply tilted her head slightly, smiled sweetly and whispered back through gritted teeth, *"Careful, what you wish for, darling."*

The crowd around them watched with clueless curiosity. They had no idea what was being said, but something about their handshake, their locked eyes, their sizzling tension. It felt like the Amphitheatre's temperature had just risen by two whole degrees. Two rivals. Two flames. And the fuse... had been lit. Their handshake lingered, not out of formality, but because neither of them was willing to let go first. Fingers tightened slightly. A silent tug-of-war. An invisible battlefield of egos. For a brief moment, it wasn't just two students meeting. It was fire challenging ice.

A breeze swept through the Amphitheatre, carrying fallen leaves around their feet, as if nature itself paused to witness this unspoken declaration of war. Around them, the crowd buzzed with anticipation clueless about the fire igniting between these two forces of nature. But those who watched closely... they felt it. They saw the tremor in Aagya's knuckles, the subtle arch in Rudra's brow. And then, finally, their hands parted. But the tension remained suspended in the air, electric and unrelenting. The spark had caught. It wasn't just a handshake anymore. It was a promise. A threat. A challenge. And somewhere in the shadows of that grand festival, a new story had just begun. One that wouldn't be written with ink, but with fire, grit, and pride.

As they walked off stage, Rudra returned to his sketching corner, and Aagya stormed back toward her squad, trying to suppress the rising heat in her chest. Her friends caught up immediately.

Simran whispered, *"Was that... tension or foreplay?"*

Mishika added, *"Both. Definitely both."*

Geeta further added, *"Girl, you looked like you were about to eat him alive."*

Aagya gritted her teeth, *"He thinks he's clever. I'll make him regret ever trying to play mind games with me."*

Simran smirked, *"He already made your heart skip."*

Aagya glared, *"One more word, Simran..."*

But her voice trailed off as she glanced toward Rudra again. He had resumed drawing. Calm. Peaceful. Unbothered. Like none of this had touched him. That made her angrier than anything else. That someone could rattle her so easily... And yet walk away without a scratch. Their eyes clashed once again. And this time, the battle wasn't with words... it was with fire.

Rudra Suvigya and Aagya Avaan.

Two storms, destined to collide.

Two fires, about to ignite one story.

.....

The crowd spilled out of the Amphitheatre like a wildfire, loud, chaotic, fueled by adrenaline. Except her. Aagya stormed out like a nuclear warhead in heels. Sharp. Silent. Seconds from detonation. Aagya asked Megha, *"Where's the coordinator's office?"*

Megha replied, *"Block D. Why?"*

Aagya coldly said, *"I'm switching partners."*

The words cracked through the air like thunder. The entire crew froze like soldiers watching their commander turn her back mid-battle.

Simran said, *"You're serious?"*

Aagya clenched her fists, *"I'm not working with that ghost."*

Ravi added, *"Come on. You just got paired with footpath's Picasso. It's a royal charity project."*

Geeta warns her, *"You've built an image, Aagya. Untouchable. Unshaken. You back out now, you crack the myth. You let him win."*

Megha added, *"People saw the handshake. You back out now, they smell fear."*

Shyam further added, *"Imagine the headline: 'Queen Avaan dethroned by a Hoodie Ghost.'"*

Seeta smirked, *"Not dethroned. Humiliated."*

Her knuckles turned bone white as she growled, *"I'm not afraid of anyone."*

Megha held her gaze, *"Then prove it."*

A moment. A breath. A decision. Aagya finally agreed.

Ravi groaned, *"Finally. Now can we eat? My sarcasm runs on protein."*

They all went to the canteen which buzzed like a hive. Students laughed, joked, and shouted over trays of food. And then all of a sudden silence spread like poison in water. Because Aagya Avaan had entered. And behind her came the storm. They didn't just claim the corner booth, they colonized it. Like gods descending on a playground. The crew sat like a mafia council. No one dared breathe near them.

Geeta opened her laptop like she was launching a missile. **Megha**, secretary, typed faster than fear could spread. **Simran** adjusted her lens like she was judging creation itself. **Saadhna** rolled her eyes at the canteen walls like they insulted her family. **Aadarsh** measured shadows with surgical boredom. **Ayush** pretended chewing was part of ambient testing. **Ravi** sneered at

students' outfits like they were a personal offense. **Mishika** powdered her rage. **Aman** silently panned his gaze over the commoners. **Ramesh** clicked Aagya's profile shot like it was a Vogue cover. **Shyam and Seeta** were arguing over whether slow-motion humiliation was better in 24fps or 60.

Ravi brought Aagya's go-to coffee, *"Here's your cold coffee. Double shot. Low sugar."*

Aagya snapped at him, *"Take it away. I'm not hungry."*

And then... the venom began to pour as they all started to express their opinions about Rudra.

Simran commented, *"He sketched during the speech like reality offended him."*

Saadhna added, *"That hoodie? Looks like a crime scene."*

Ravi said, *"He's what happens when anxiety fucks insomnia."*

Mishika added, *"My cramps hurt less than his energy."*

Aman said, *"I'd rather Photoshop a pigeon than frame his face."*

Shyam said, *"His voice sounds like nihilism having a stroke."*

Seeta replied, *"My uterus rejected him spiritually."*

Megha remained silent while Aagya stirred her coffee like she was plotting a war.

Aagya finally spoke, *"Enough. Focus."*

Geeta said, *"I hate to say this, but we need him. Deadline's 4 PM. We must find him."*

Saadhna replied worriedly, *"But he disappears like guilt from a politician."*

Simran added, *"But you've seen him. Up close."*

Ravi smirked, *"I think if anyone can summon NIVSEA's Ghost... it's you."*

She didn't answer. She just stood. It wasn't a compliment but an insult to her. She searched everywhere from the animation lab, classrooms, library, basement to the studio wings. No sign of Rudra. Her breathing grew shallow. Her steps became sharp. She dropped onto a stone bench. Frustrated. Sweating rage. And then... she looked up and saw the rooftop. Something stirred inside her and she climbed, fists clenched, heart hammering.

She slammed the door open and froze. There he was. Exactly where she first met him. He sat there like it was his throne. Sketchbook open. Hoodie draped. Pencil dancing. Wind in his hair. Sketching. Brooding. Barely breathing. Untouchable. Unbothered. Unfazed. He didn't even look at her.

Aagya mocked him, *"Found a bat in his cave. How poetic."*

Rudra smirked, *"Better a bat in peace than a peacock screaming for attention."*

Aagya replied furiously, *"You've got some nerve. Missing deadlines while your whole team waits."*

Rudra said calmly, *"Deadlines exist for people who know what they're chasing. I'm chasing silence."*

She stepped forward to stay something but froze when her eyes caught what he was drawing. She saw it. A sketch titled — **The Caged Mirror**. It was a cracked mirror in a golden cage. In its reflection, a powerful woman with hollow, lifeless eyes. She felt a glimpse of her soul in it.

Aagya asked, *"Now what's that supposed to be?"*

Rudra replied, *"This? Hmph... (smirks) It means that it's hard to meet your own gaze... when your whole world is built for others."*

She inhaled like she'd been punched. And snapped. Flashbacks of their first meet came rushing into her consciousness which made her even more furious.

Aagya lost it again, *"You know what you are? You're a stray dog with a sketchbook. A fungus that thinks it's art. You're the kind of mistake the universe doesn't admit. You think being quiet makes you mysterious? No, it makes you pathetic. Hollow. Forgettable."*

He stood up. Towering. Calm. One step closer. Their eyes locked. The air thickened. Electric. Raw. Almost... sinful. Something stirred in her. Dark. Low. Twisting. She didn't understand it. She hated it.

Rudra replied with dead calm, *"You've mistaken emptiness for strength and volume for presence. Storms don't scream, Aagya... they arrive. And I'm already here."*

He walked to the door and opened it, *"Let's go submit the team details. Unless your ego needs a stretcher."*

Aagya gritted, *"I'd rather die than lose to a parasite."*

Rudra smirked, *"Parasites survive. But I... I change ecosystems."*

He took a step forward, *"Well then, let's not keep them waiting. Shall we?"*

He turned. Close. Eyes locked. Her knees almost buckled. He opened the door. She paused for a second and then walked forward and Rudra followed her.

.....

Outside the admin block, the crew was waiting like a pack of wolves sniffing weakness. As soon as the crew saw them, they got ready to prey on him. Rudra had smelled this threat from a mile away.

When they finally reached, Aagya folded her arms and said, *"Guys! This is Rudra. Animator. Stray. Punishment. Parasite. Don't pretend he's anything else."*

They all laughed as they circled him, but he didn't flinch.

Simran said, *"Look what the cat dragged in."*

Saadhna added, *"Hope someone brought a collar."*

Ravi mocked, *"I brought holy water."*

Mishika added, *"He looks like depression got a second season."*

Shyam said, *"I'd rather listen to static than his existence."*

Seeta added, *"He's the reason sarcasm developed allergies."*

They all laughed. He didn't. He just raised his chin and smiled.

Rudra spoke in a voice sharp as steel, *"If this is your idea of power, then it's built entirely on noise. And noise fades. But shadows... they survive even the spotlight. You gather like flies on ego and call it power. But all I see is a choir of insecurities trying to harmonize. You don't hate me. You fear what I don't need. Your noise."*

Silence. Then he stepped through and spoke, *"If your circus of insecurities is done humping each other for laughs... shall we submit the team, or **(he looked at Aagya)** are you planning to choke your queen's legacy **(he looked back at them)** on sarcasm fumes?"*

BOOM.

Their egos shattered like cheap glass. She couldn't breathe. And suddenly, she remembered her father's voice, *"Stand up straight, dammit!"*

Her vision blurred. Megha shook her which brought her back. She blinked. Then turned. And walked beside Rudra. No words. No pride. Just... quiet war. They went in there together.

When they reached, the people at the desk handed them a form. The form asked the names of the director, the animator and the other crew members. Aagya filled the form. She was still furious but there was an awkward silence which none of them decided to break. All the names of the team members were written by now. Ink on paper. Fire under skin. The list was printed, signed, and stapled. Two names stood out like fate had carved them:

Aagya Avaan - Director

Rudra Suvigya - Animator

They didn't speak. Their hands didn't touch. But their fire did. And as they stepped out... the air cracked behind them. Because destiny just signed a contract. With fire on one side. And water on the other. But something louder than words had been written. Not on the form. But in the silence between them.

3. Ashes Between Us

Aagya hadn't slept well that night. Every time her eyelids fluttered shut, his face appeared like a storm behind them. That maddening calm. That stillness, that wasn't peace, but pressure. That voice? Low, slow, yet slicing. That gaze? Unmoving. but dragging something buried deep within her to the surface. And above it all, that final line from the previous day that kept echoing like a curse:

"You gather like flies on ego and call it power..."

She hated it. She hated him. Worse, she hated how he had stolen that moment. How her silence had surrendered that courtyard to him like a crumbled kingdom. Frustrated, she sat upright in her bed, flung the silk blanket off, and yanked open her laptop with fury. Her fingers flew:

Rudra Suvigya. Animator. National Institute of Visual Storytelling & Experimental Arts (NIVSEA).

No results. She switched to Instagram. Typed the name. Nothing. But just when she was about to give up, she spotted something, a tiny tag on an old post from a college art exhibit.

@silent.stroke

She clicked. No bio. No captions. Just raw, haunting, untamed artwork. Charcoal rage. Inked pain. And then, unexpectedly, a few gym clips, all from weird angles, like he didn't care about being seen but only about releasing something trapped within. His page was like him. Mute. Precise. Brutally honest.

Aagya muttered, *"Seriously? Who the hell is this guy?"*

She kept scrolling and found sketches of rage. Of violence. Of isolation. And strangely, of hope. But then, one sketch made her still. It was the sketch of a child, sobbing and bloodied, crumpled on the floor. Behind him was an identical silhouette of a child, older maybe, holding a blade. Smiling. Not a human smile. A haunting one. Her chest tightened. Her stomach twisted. She didn't know why, but something in her fractured. She slammed the laptop shut. The storm was now inside her.

.....

The next morning wasn't kinder. She woke up late. That had *never* happened before. She was always the first to rise. First to conquer. But now... her rhythm was broken.

The Avaan family estate sat like a fortress in the heart of Malabar Hill's elite lanes, wrapped in tall black gates and manicured silence. A three-storey glass-and-stone mansion with all reflective surfaces, sharp lines, and towering arches. Inside, the house was designed like a museum of legacy. White marble floors stretched endlessly beneath golden chandeliers. Oil portraits of past generations lined the hallways like silent judges. Every corner smelled of jasmine-scented polish and high expectations.

Aagya's room sat on the top floor. It was spacious, sterile, and styled like a designer showroom. Not a pillow out of place. Not a curtain moved by the breeze. It was spacious and sterile. It was a room meant for control, not comfort. But not today. Today, chaos had dared creep in. Laptop open. Hair undone. Eyes hollow. She was shaken, and she hated it.

She rushed down the royal staircase, its railings wrapped in wrought-iron phoenixes, tying her ponytail mid-run. The dining hall was cathedral-like with a twelve-seat table, silver cutlery, a digital screen showing stock updates and entertainment news.

Her mother sat at one end, sipping black tea silently with her father at the head reading his newspaper.

Rushing down the royal staircase, mid-ponytail, her footsteps echoed like sirens. From the dining hall, her father's voice cracked like a whip, *"You think the world runs on your mood swings, Aagya?! You have a legacy to uphold!"*

She didn't reply to him. Just picked up dry toast, swallowed two bites, and walked out without a word ignoring the two sedans waiting out front. Instead, she tossed her bag into her matte black Porsche Phantom, custom-crested with the Avaan insignia, and drove herself off. It was because she needed to take back control.

After a few minutes she reached Avaan Studios. Power didn't announce itself here. It radiated. The building stood tall at the heart of Film City; its glass and steel frame glinting like a sword unsheathed. The logo with a burning phoenix wrapped in golden film reels shimmered above the entrance. Inside, every floor buzzed with activity. Actors, editors, cinematographers, models, designers etc. All were hurrying, all flawless. But as Aagya walked in, everything paused. Spines straightened. Voices dropped. Cameras subtly turned *away*. She didn't speak. Didn't smile. She walked straight to the top floor, her lair. Her office was all made of obsidian marble, floor-to-ceiling windows, jet-black walls, and a throne-like chair. And then her jaw clenched. Because he was already there. Sitting quietly. Hoodie on. Sketchbook open. Pencil dancing. Like nothing mattered. Like *she* didn't matter.

Aagya shouted furiously at him, *"Who the fuck let you in?"*

No reply.

She added, *"This is a studio. Not a slum."*

Still nothing.

Megha replied timidly, *"I-I let him in, ma'am. He's part of the team now, right?"*

Aagya turned. Her gaze? Sharp enough to wound. Aagya shouted at her, *"You made that decision without asking me?"*

Megha answered softly, *"I thought... it was approved."*

Aagya replied, *"Don't use your brain unless you're asked to."*

She turned back, *"Let's begin. I'm pitching the idea."*

She opened her laptop. The screen behind her lit up. A digital storyboard appeared on the screen behind her.

Aagya began, *"Picture this... a dystopia ruled by women. Where men are the oppressed. Our lead? A rebellious man challenging the matriarchy. Minimal dialogue. Non-linear structure. He dies in the end."*

Silence. Except for one voice. Rudra said flatly without looking up, *"It's been done."*

Aagya's jaw tightened, *"Excuse me?"*

Rudra replied calmly, *"You flipped oppression and called it innovation. That's not storytelling. That's revenge in lipstick."*

Aadarsh whispered in the corner, *"Bro's dead."*

Aagya leant in, *"I didn't ask for your review, stray. I gave you a structure."*

Finally, he looked up. His eyes were storm clouds, *"You want justice with foundation. Vengeance in high heels. But tantrums dressed in couture don't make cinema. They just make noise."*

A pin-drop silence fell.

Simran gasped, *"He did not just say that..."*

Saadhna whispered, *"Aagya's about to go nuclear."*

Aagya mocked, *"And you'll teach us art? With what? Another mythological melodrama drawn in black ink?"*

He didn't flinch. He just slid his sketchbook forward. Aagya looked down. The sketch consisted of a lone woman. Bloodied. Eyes hollow. Standing before a temple in ruins. Not broken. Not triumphant. Just... breathing. Still.

Aagya asked, *"What is this?"*

Rudra replied, *"You! After the ending you're too afraid to write."*

She didn't respond. Because she couldn't. She was dead furious at him, but she felt like he had pulled a string inside her that even she didn't know existed.

Geeta looked at it, *"That's... powerful."*

Ravi added, *"It breathes, man."*

Mishika further added, *"And she's not even wearing makeup. But still fierce as fuck."*

Ayush said to Ramesh, *"This is the kind of shot you can hear."*

Aagya said nothing. She couldn't. He'd hit a nerve she didn't know existed. She felt powerless yet again in front of him.

.....

After brainstorming and discussing for hours, Aagya decided to take a lunch break so that everyone could re-fill themselves. Everyone gathered near the canteen section of the studio and ordered various kinds of stuff and talked a lot while stuffing their mouths with everything that came their way. Lunch was loud. Chaotic. Crowded.

But Rudra sat apart, eating from a small steel tiffin box. He cooked it for himself. His tiffin consisted of dal mixed with rice along with some potato sabzi, 4 egg whites and 2 whole eggs. Simple. Homemade. Real.

Aagya walked past with her coffee, scoffing, *"Aww. Your mummy still packs your lunch?"*

Rudra replied without looking up, *"She lives 1650 km away. Even if she were here, she would. Because love doesn't need an excuse."*

He looked up, *"She taught me how to lead in silence. To build without noise. To never belittle someone else's worth just to feel tall. Which, clearly, you never learned."*

He paused and held her gaze, *"I guess better late than never."*

Simran giggled, *"I'm bringing popcorn tomorrow."*

Megha spoke to herself, *"That was... brutal."*

The others chuckled. Aagya didn't. She turned sharply and threw her coffee in the bin. She rushed into the washroom and slapped cold water on her face. Then, the scream came from her father's voice: *"FIX YOUR FACE BEFORE YOU LEAVE THIS HOUSE!"*

She gripped the sink until her knuckles went white. Aagya choked on her breath, *"STOP – STOP – I'M TRYING – "*

Silence. Then... she looked up. The fire was back. Not healed. Just... **reinforced**. Her eyes hardened. The fire returned. The mask came back on. She walked out.

Later that evening, Aagya suggested they take the session to the terrace. They all moved with their stuff without any arguments. The air was warm, and the glowing sky burnt orange.

Megha looked at the sky and said, *"This view though..."*

Aman took out his camera, *"Let me capture this vibe."*

Rudra walked ahead, silent as usual, and chose the farthest corner. He opened his sketchbook again. Aagya walked up behind him... and noticed the stitching on his hoodie. Military green. NCC-grade camouflage. Her gaze lingered. Something inside her shifted. It wasn't attraction. It wasn't hatred. It was

something more primal. It was respect. It was something that she had never felt for anyone in a very long time. The Queen of the Avaan Empire had finally met someone whose silence echoed louder than her legacy. The warrior princess had finally found her equal.

Aagya spoke to herself under her breath, *"Who are you, Rudra? And why do your shadows feel deeper than my spotlight?"*

She had no answers. Only one truth. The storm hadn't even begun. And neither of them were the kind to run.

4. The Fire Beneath Silence

The golden sun had just begun melting into the Mumbai skyline, streaking the rooftop in hues of copper and crimson. The crew had packed their bags. Footsteps echoed faintly, fading down the iron stairs. The air still held the aftertaste of deadlines and exhaustion.

Aagya stood alone, eyes glued to the horizon, arms crossed. Her silhouette cast long and sharp across the floor. A queen still in armor, even after the war ended. And then, he appeared. Rudra walked slowly toward her, hoodie sleeves pushed up, sketchbook in one hand. His other hand rested inside his pocket, casual, unreadable. He stopped a few feet away and spoke first, *"You still think this project is just yours?"*

Aagya didn't look at him and replied, *"I think I was forced to share it with a brooding sketchbook clown who probably bathes in mediocrity and thinks silence is a personality trait."*

She finally turned, eyes burning into his, *"I don't care what tragic graffiti you've spilled on paper. I'm not here to be impressed by a pity parade wrapped in charcoal."*

He didn't flinch. He simply tore a page from his sketchbook and held it out, *"This is yours."*

She scoffed, not even looking down, *"Is this supposed to make me cry? Or kneel? You think handing me a half-baked sketch gives you any credibility, you poor excuse for a creative partner?"*

Her words were venom. She snatched the page, not with gratitude, but with aggression. Their fingers touched for a brief, electric second. She felt it again, that familiar jolt. That damnable

current that had haunted her since the scarf incident. It was more intense now. It crawled under her skin and refused to leave. She looked at the sketch. It was the warrior woman again but refined. Battle-worn. Armor cracked. Knees bloodied. Yet standing tall in front of a ruined kingdom. Her eyes weren't angry anymore; they were calm. Knowing. Terrifying in stillness. And beneath it, written in neat, jagged letters:

"Power isn't how loud you roar.

It's how long you survive."

Aagya shook the page, *"Now what the hell is this supposed to mean, you haunted library of disappointment?"*

Rudra stepped closer, *"It means I see you."*

She laughed in a short, cold, cruel manner, *"No, you don't. You don't know shit about me. You're just a stray dog with a god complex who scribbles dead women and calls it art."*

Rudra's eyes narrowed, but his voice stayed flat, *"And yet... here you are. Holding it. Shaking. Wanting to burn it. But you won't. Because somewhere between your palace and your poison... you know it's you."*

Aagya gritted, *"You arrogant bastard! You think you've seen pain? You think sketching nightmares makes you deep?"*

Rudra replied with dead calm, *"No. Living them in silence does."*

She looked away, teeth grinding, *"You're nothing. You're a background noise with a tragic filter. And once this film ends, you'll crawl back to whatever gutter you came from."*

Rudra leaned in slightly with eyes sharp, *"And you'll still be screaming for control... while I draw your silence louder than your voice."*

Her hands trembled. She didn't know if it was rage... or something else. She didn't know why her throat felt tight, or why

the sketch in her hand suddenly felt heavier than it looked. But she did the only thing she knew best.

She glared, *"Stay out of my way, stray."*

Rudra gave a final reply, *"I'll stay ahead. Not out."*

He turned and walked away, fading into the golden light like a ghost she couldn't shake off. And Aagya... just stood there. Breath stuck. Chest tight. Holding a sketch that felt more like a mirror.

Aagya stood there for a while and then walked down to the underground parking lot, gripping the page tighter than she meant to. Her heels clicked against the marble as she reached her onyx black Porsche Phantom and slid into the driver's seat. She drove herself, always had. It was the control she trusted. And today, more than ever, she needed it.

Meanwhile, Rudra exited the Avaan Studios compound and crossed the street to catch a local. The sun had dipped further now, casting elongated shadows on the streets of Mumbai. He sat by the window, the rattle of the train soothing like an old friend.

By the time she reached the golden-lion gates of her estate, night had swallowed the sky. Her mansion gleamed in the moonlight; pillars gilded, statues towering, glass glinting like a modern-day fortress. She tossed her bag on the grand hallway's suede bench and headed upstairs, past the endless corridors, into her personal gym. Inside, the walls were lined with polished mirrors, and equipment imported from Germany. Waiting for her, as always, was **Diego Marcellus**, her international celebrity trainer. A 6'5" ex-Navy SEAL turned elite coach. Arms like Greek sculptures and voice like steel.

Diego noticed her anger, *"You look like you want war today, Avaan."*

Aagya strapped her gear, *"Then give me one."*

Back in his modest apartment, Rudra entered his two-room flat, clean and barebones. The walls were plastered with his own artwork. Ink portraits, charcoal chaos, oil-painted grief. He poured himself a black coffee, downed it, changed, and left for the gym. His gym was small, dimly lit, filled with rusted dumbbells and old machines, but it worked. It was raw. Real. Just like him.

Both trained like possessed spirits. Aagya threw punches like she was killing something inside her. Diego watched, impressed. Rudra lifted with silent precision, rep after rep, sweat pouring; each movement controlled like a sniper shot. Aagya's knuckles bruised from boxing drills. Rudra's palms bled from deadlifts. Both didn't stop. Couldn't stop. In their mirrors, they saw their younger selves. Aagya was screaming, trembling, back when her father's voice echoed in every bone. Rudra crouched behind a wall, hearing gunfire, heart beating to the rhythm of old wounds. Both reached for their reflections. And both... pulled back their hands before touching.

After training, Rudra returned home. In his tiny kitchen, he prepared a simple meal consisting of roti, paneer and dal, and weighed everything on his digital scale. He opened his phone, launched the HealthifyMe app, and added each component with surgical accuracy.

Aagya, on the other hand, walked into her private dining room. Her chefs, coordinated by her personal nutritionist, laid out her high-protein plate: grilled salmon, quinoa salad, beetroot smoothie. Neither enjoyed their meals. They just needed fuel.

Rudra, after cleaning up, opened his laptop and began animating frame by frame the warrior princess from his sketch. Every line had her eyes now. And he didn't know why.

Aagya sat by her window, sketch in hand, staring at the stars. Her laptop glowed in the dark. She opened her presentation from

earlier, deleted half of it, and started rewriting. This time, inspired by a certain bloody warrior standing tall. Her story was changing. So was she.

And neither knew it yet, but they were mirroring each other, stroke by stroke. They both opened Instagram at nearly the same time.

Rudra searched:

@theaagyaeffect

Aagya searched:

@silent.stroke

Aagya's page was polished, pristine. Highlights of interviews. TEDx talks. Magazine covers. Few personal photos with each one edited, framed, and flawless. Rudra's profile? Mysterious. No captions. Only art. Anger. Ink. Gym. Aagya's thumb hovered over "Follow." Then pulled back. So did Rudra's. But both stared longer than they should have.

.....

The next day, sharp at 10, they both arrived at Avaan Studios. The conference room was charged with anticipation. Avaan Studios' sleek glass walls reflected the setting sun, casting a warm glow over the team gathered around the long mahogany table.

Aagya stood confidently, her laptop open, presenting her refined vision to the group, *"Listen, everyone. Our story isn't just a revenge saga anymore. It's a dystopian future where women have taken control, yes, but it's layered and complex. Our lead is a man, caught in the crossfire of a matriarchal regime, struggling to find his place not just in society, but within himself. This isn't about simplistic good versus evil. It's about power. How it corrupts, how it heals, and ultimately, how it redefines identity. The narrative will explore non-linear storytelling to mirror the chaos of rebellion and introspection. Sharp cuts, minimal dialogue... because sometimes silence says more. The lead's journey ends*

not in victory or defeat, but in understanding. Redemption, not destruction. It's raw, unpolished, and emotionally brutal. That's the story we owe the audience."

There was a brief silence, eyes locked on Aagya, sensing the passion and control she wielded over the narrative. Everyone listened, eyes wide.

Geeta nodded, *"It's fierce. Raw. This could win festivals."*

Aman said, *"Cinematography-wise, it's got insane visual potential."*

Ravi said, *"Costumes would be a dream for this. Battle armor? Royal designs? I'm in."*

Simran added, *"Lighting this is going to be insane. We could experiment with dusk and fire tones."*

Ayush, *"I already hear the background score in my head."*

Aagya finished and looked at Rudra. He stayed quiet. Then finally stood, *"It's better. Still not complete."*

Aagya replied, *"What now, Mr. Broken Brushstroke of Doom?"*

Rudra walked closer, *"Power isn't just about fire and fury, or loud declarations of rebellion. It's about the silence that follows the storm, the space where real change takes root. You speak of shattered systems and unstoppable forces. But remember this, the strongest chains are the ones unseen, forged in fear, doubt, and pain. Our protagonist's fight isn't just against an external regime; it's a battle within herself; against the scars she tries to hide. Storytelling isn't about spectacles, it's about truth. The uncomfortable, raw, imperfect truth that makes us confront our own shadows. If we merely scream defiance without showing the cost, we risk creating noise that fades quickly. I don't want to paint a hero who only breaks down walls. I want to show what it takes to rebuild from the rubble, the courage to stand alone when everything else falls apart. Because that is the power worth telling."*

A subtle shift rippled through the room. The female members of the team, i.e. Geeta, Simran, Saadhna, Seeta and Megha exchanged glances, their eyes briefly flickering toward Rudra with an unmistakable spark. They found themselves drawn not just to his words but to the quiet intensity in his demeanor, the way his gaze held depths they were only beginning to understand.

Simran said with a slight smile, nudging Saadhna, *"Did you see that? The way he talks... it's like he's living every word."*

Saadhna replied softly, *"There's something... different about him. Not just the art or the attitude. It's... magnetic."*

Geeta tried to play it cool, *"I mean, sure, he's mysterious. But that calm confidence? It's impossible not to notice."*

Meanwhile, Aagya's gaze sharpened. A flicker of something unspoken passed through her, an unfamiliar twinge of jealousy as she caught the lingering looks aimed at Rudra. She straightened, voice firm, asserting her position, *"This isn't a popularity contest. We're here to build something that lasts. And that requires more than just charisma. It needs vision and discipline."*

The conversation soon broadened, with Geeta pitching ideas for dramatic tension, Mishika discussing makeup and costume nuances, and Aman excitedly suggesting innovative camera angles to capture the protagonist's internal turmoil. Throughout, Rudra's critiques remained measured but piercing, challenging each suggestion with a calm precision that was both unsettled and inspired.

Mishika said, *"I never thought makeup could tell a story. But Rudra's right, every bruise, every scar has to speak."*

Aman added, *"And the lighting has to catch those moments, the quiet ones, not just the big explosions."*

Geeta further added, *"The nonlinear structure keeps the audience guessing. I love it."*

Simran said playfully to Rudra, almost flirting with him, *"Your sketches bring so much raw emotion. Ever thought of directing?"*

Rudra replied without looking up, *"Not interested."*

Simran whispered to Geeta, *"He's impossible but... intriguing."*

Geeta grinned, *"I'm trying not to fall for the silent mysterious type."*

Rudra remained unmoved.

Ravi spoke, *"We can push costume symbolism harder. Scars, colors reflecting inner conflict."*

Saadhna added, *"And use the set to mirror the mental states. Decay versus power."*

Shyam said, *"Editing will be key to balancing chaos and clarity."*

Seeta added, *"Music can underscore the silent pain."*

Aman said, *"And camera angles... let shadows tell half the story."*

Aagya watched this exchange and felt part irritation and part awe.

By the end of the meeting, the team was buzzing; not just with ideas, but with a renewed sense of purpose. Geeta lingered near Rudra's side a moment longer than necessary, trying to catch his eye. Simran pretended to check her phone but smiled a little too brightly when their gazes met. Megha, usually the quiet one, found herself volunteering for extra tasks just to be near him.

Aagya noticed all this and for a split second wondered if Rudra knew the stir he was causing. She clenched her fists but didn't say a word. Instead, she reminded herself: this was her project. Her story. And she would not be overshadowed.

.....

Around lunch, Rudra quietly approached Aagya as the others filtered out of the room. The afternoon sun filtered through the tinted glass, painting pale gold patterns on the floor.

He stopped in front of her desk, pulling the pen drive from his pocket, *"I need to leave early. There's something I have to take care of."*

He placed the pen drive on her desk carefully, almost like it was fragile.

"Watch this when you are alone.", he said.

Aagya looked up, suspicious. She folded her arms, *"What is it? Another sob fest sketch turned into an artsy tantrum?"*

He didn't smile. He didn't blink. He just held her gaze, *"No. It's you. The version no one else dares to show... not even you."*

She scoffed, but her hand tightened around the pen drive. Aagya replied in a sharp cutting tone, *"You really think you know me, don't you?"*

Rudra replied softly, *"I don't. But I've drawn enough shadows to recognize light when it's hiding behind one. You'll know when you see it."*

For a second, she had no comeback. He turned and walked away. He didn't look back. Aagya raised a brow, *"Where the hell are you going now, sketchbook ghost?"*

Rudra turned partially with a smirk, *"Let's just say... not every battlefield looks like a storyboard."*

He walked off. No further words. No glance back. Just that line hanging in the air, heavy as lead. There was something about the way he said *"battlefield."* Like he meant it. Like he'd seen one. Or maybe... fought in one. And for the first time, she didn't stop him. Her fingers curled around the pen drive. And in her chest, something stirred. Something dangerous. Something... true.

Just as he turned, the neckline of his hoodie slipped slightly. She saw it again. A patch. Olive green. Barely stitched. Military code markings. Aagya frowned, just a flicker. But he was gone. And the pen drive sat cold in her palm... Heavy with something more than data. Something like... a secret.

5. Unbroken

The marble floors of Avaan Manor echoed faintly beneath her heels as Aagya stepped inside with her strides sharp and her expression unreadable. The guards straightened, the maids hushed, and the heavy double doors closed behind her with a sound like finality. Without a word, she tossed her designer duffel on the nearest velvet chair and ripped open an energy bar, finishing it in two furious bites.

Her jaw was tense. She didn't greet anyone. Didn't slow down. Just marched toward the west wing, i.e., her gym quarters. Aagya stepped into her private gym, the sleek black and chrome sanctuary on the third floor. The Avaan private training hall wasn't just a gym. It was a battleground lit with full-height glass panels and outfitted with the world's most advanced equipment. Polished obsidian floors. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors on three sides. Air-conditioned silence humming beneath the sound of steel equipment. Every machine was imported. Every dumbbell was engraved. And in the far corner, adjusting the tension on a rowing machine, was her trainer Diego. He turned as she entered, waiting for her, as always. He was already warming up with resistance bands when she entered.

Diego noticed her face, *"You didn't just lose sleep, cariño. You buried it alive."*

Aagya grabbed her resistance cables, *"Talk less. Load more."*

Diego raised an eyebrow, *"Ah. Silent rage today. We're building vengeance in muscles?"*

Aagya locked in her gear, *"We're building distraction."*

Diego understood and nodded slowly, *"Back and biceps then. Let's destroy everything pulling you backward."*

The session began. Lat pulldowns. Weighted pull-ups. Cable rows. Reverse flies. Bicep curls till failure. Aagya trained like the world owed her blood. Sweat poured. Veins surfaced. But she didn't stop. Not even when Diego stepped in, concerned.

Diego spoke gently, *"Sometimes, Avaan... The weight on your mind crushes more than the ones in your hands."*

Aagya replied breathing heavily without looking at him, *"Then let it. So at least it'll shut up."*

Diego didn't push further. He just handed her a fresh towel, nodded once and silently recorded her reps. She wasn't training her body today. She was punishing her heart. Diego never saw her like this and it concerned him. To lighten the mood he said, *"Shit... you're possessed."*

Aagya replied while clenching her teeth, *"No. I'm wide awake."*

She collapsed onto the bench after her final set, gulping water as if it were revenge. Without waiting, she waved Diego off and stormed toward the kitchen wing. Her chef and personal nutritionist were already prepping her meal consisting of teamed quinoa, grilled tofu, sautéed spinach, avocado slices drizzled with lime, and her post-workout protein smoothie all portioned to macro perfection. The plate was arranged like a five-star hotel menu.

The chef said to her, *"Everything's calculated as per your nutritionist's sheet, ma'am."*

Aagya didn't answer. She took the tray and walked off to her room, the fortress. The only space in Avaan Manor that looked lived in. Velvet drapes. Crystal chandeliers. A large canopy bed with satin sheets and an enormous wall-mounted screen above

the opposite wall. She threw herself on the bed, dropped the tray beside her, and plugged Rudra's pen drive into her MacBook.

One file. No name. Just a title — **Unbroken.mp4**

She stared at it for a moment. Something in her chest stirred. She pressed play. She opened the file:

A blank screen. A low hum, like wind howling softly through mountains. Then light. Golden. Warm. Spilling into a vast, sunlit valley covered in wildflowers. Tulips. Daisies. Marigolds. Dancing with the breeze like they had no fear in the world. And there, twirling barefoot among them was a little girl. The princess. Young. Joyful. Her laughter was like bells over water, clear and bright. She wore a delicate silk dress and a flower crown, her hair flying like freedom in the wind. Her cheeks were flushed with the innocence of someone untouched by the world's darkness. She spun, arms wide, eyes closed as if the whole world belonged to her. The screen subtly darkened. A gust of wind knocked her crown to the ground. Her eyes opened. The flowers stopped moving. Cut. Now she stood in a massive throne room. Marble floors were so polished, they reflected every tear that dared fall. Tall obsidian pillars lined the hall like guards, each etched with the emblem of a lion's mouth swallowing a sword. She stood before a towering king and queen. Her parents. Cold. Stern. Distant. The queen's mouth twisted in disapproval. The king's voice echoed like thunder, *"You were born to be the pride of this empire. And yet... you are nothing but a soft-hearted liability."* The princess trembled. Tried to speak. But the king's hand raised sharply and her crown was snatched off her head by a faceless guard. The queen stepped forward and dropped a sword at the girl's feet. *"No more poetry. No more dance. Win us glory or don't return."* The screen shifted again. Now the princess was older and was training. Sweat. Bruises. Endless drills. Swords heavier than her arms. Armor that didn't fit. Her parents watched coldly as she failed. Again. And again. And again. No smile. No praise. Only

disappointment. Only one person watched her differently. Her brother. Golden eyes. Gentle hands. He taught her how to hold the sword, not fear it. He wiped her tears when no one else looked. He taught her to fight, not to win. But to survive. And then... war. Steel clashing against steel. Screams. Blood splattering like red rain. The princess now wore armor too big for her frame, her face smeared with dirt and fear. She fought. Clumsily. Desperately. Each swing of her sword reeked of a child trying to survive in a game made for monsters. A voice called her name from across the battlefield. Her elder brother. He fought like a legend. Every time she fell, he shielded her. Every time she froze, he pushed her forward. Until, a blade came flying. Toward her exposed back. She didn't see it. But he did. And he stepped in front of it. The frames stuttered. The moment played again. And again. The blade piercing through his chest. His body collapsing into her arms. Her scream rising above the battlefield like a funeral hymn for gods. She screamed. **"NO – BHAIYA –!"** Her hands cradled his face, eyes wide in disbelief, face streaked with tears and blood. He coughed. Tried to speak. Only one word came out. A whisper that felt like a sword through the heart: **"Live."** His eyes closed. The color drained from the scene. And the screen faded to white. The sound of a heartbeat. Slow. Unsteady. She lay unconscious in a white bed with her armor stripped, her body bandaged. The camera zoomed into her face. Her eyes fluttered open. Confusion. Then panic. She sat up, screaming his name. The handmaids tried to hold her down. She thrashed. Screamed again. Then her parents entered. **"You should've died,"** the king said flatly. "But now that you didn't... earn it." The queen stepped forward and placed something in her lap. A gemstone. Deep red. Ruby. Almost bleeding in the light. Tied to a golden thread. **"This belonged to your brother,"** the queen said. **"It's all you're worthy of now. And if you ever bring shame to this house again... this will be the last thing you wear."** The princess trembled. Tears streamed silently as she held the gem to her chest. Then the screen

cut to a darkened mirror. She stood before it disheveled, eyes hollow. She raised a pair of scissors. And cut her long hair off. Lock by lock, her femininity fell like silk on the cold marble floor. Then... she opened a wooden chest. Inside was a blade. She stared at it for a long time. Then gripped it. The music surged. Her new armor gleamed. Not polished, but scarred. She stepped out onto a cliffside. The wind howled louder now. Below her was the kingdom. Lit. Alive. Celebrating a victory, they believed she had nothing to do with it. She didn't smile. But her eyes? They burned. And then the screen faded to black. Only one word appeared, in Rudra's signature charcoal brushstrokes — **UNBROKEN**.

No background score. Just silence. Because what more could be said?

Aagya stared at the screen. And didn't move. Her fork had fallen hours ago. Her hands trembled as they reached up to touch the ruby locket resting at her collarbone. The exact same one. She clutched it tight. And began to cry. Her trembling fingers slowly lowered the MacBook screen. The silence that followed was thunderous. The kind that pressed against your ribs and refused to let go. Aagya just sat there, back resting against the cushioned headboard, eyes vacant. Her food had gone cold on the tray beside her untouched except for a few bites. She reached for her fork, tried to take another bite of the grilled tofu... but the taste turned to ash in her mouth. She pushed the tray away. Her throat was tight. Her stomach was hollow. But not the kind of hollow that begged to be filled. The kind that screamed for something, anything, to numb it.

Her hand went to the ruby pendant on her neck. The one she had always worn, the one she had never once taken off in all these years. The same one she had watched animated on screen, held by a girl who wasn't a stranger anymore. She held it tightly. Pressed it against her chest. And the dam finally broke. The tears

came in violent waves. Not quiet, not delicate. But raw. Ugly. Shaking. Her shoulders trembled as she curled forward on her bed, hugging her knees to her chest, the silk sheets pooling around her like a fortress that couldn't hold her pain in. She wept for everything she had buried. Her pain. Her silence. Her guilt. Herself. She didn't remember when she last cried like that. Or when she last felt seen. Every word Rudra had said. Every look he gave her. Every sketch. It all made sense now. He hadn't created a character. He had resurrected her. And she didn't know how to deal with it.

An hour passed. Then another. Her stomach growled. Her body was exhausted both emotionally and physically. But instead of reaching for the cold tofu, she picked up her phone and dialed the internal chef line, *"Bring me dessert. As much as you've got. Cake. Brownies. Anything."*

The chef replied surprised, *"But Ma'am? Your nutritionist – "*

Aagya cut him in between, *"I said everything."*

Within fifteen minutes, her room turned into a miniature bakery. Plates of chocolate mousse, red velvet cupcakes, frosted brownies, triple-layered fudge cake, and caramel pudding lined her side table. She sat cross-legged and began eating. Messily. Desperately. Like a child trying to patch up a shattered soul with sugar. Every bite stung more than it satisfied. Her mouth moved, but she didn't taste anything. The tears hadn't stopped, they just got quieter.

The staff exchanged worried glances from the door. They had never seen her like this. The poised, untouchable Aagya Avaan was stuffing cake into her mouth, smudged mascara under her eyes, muttering things they couldn't hear. One of the younger maids tried stepping inside but Aagya growled, *"GET OUT!"*

The girl flinched. The entire team backed off like scared shadows. And then the parents came. Her mother entered first. She was tall,

cold, elegant in a saree so stiff it looked like armor. Her father followed, jaw clenched, already fuming. She shouted, *"What is this circus?"*

Her father added, *"Are you out of your mind? Look at you! You're embarrassing this house!"*

Aagya didn't stop eating. Didn't even look at them.

"Go away!", she said.

Her father shouted at her, *"You're not some college rebel throwing tantrums! You are an Avaan!"*

Aagya's hands shook. Her mother stepped forward, *"Staff out. Now."*

The room emptied in seconds. Then came the silence. Heavy. Suffocating. Her father said, *"You've made a mockery of our name tonight. I want this phase to end. Now."*

Aagya replied, *"Don't call it a phase. Call it grief."*

"What grief?", said her father.

Aagya didn't reply. Her mother said coldly, *"You think tears will bring him back?"*

That hit like a slap. Aagya flinched. Her lips parted to say something. Anything. But nothing came. Her father then stepped in, *"Enough. Clean this mess. Go to bed. And tomorrow, fix your face before stepping out."*

He turned. Walked out without another word. Mrs. Avaan stayed for a beat longer. Then, quietly said, *"Empires are not built on breakdowns. Remember that."*

And then she too left, closing the door behind her. The sound of the lock echoed in Aagya's chest. She stared at the half-eaten cake on her lap. Then in the mirror across her room. Her reflection looked broken. Not weak. But broken. She got up, walked over,

and pressed her hand to the glass with her palm aligning with the image of herself. A girl, not a queen. Just a girl. A tear slid down again as she stumbled to her bed, collapsed face-first into the pillow, hugged it like it was the only thing that wouldn't leave her... And cried. This time, till she fell asleep. Just soft breaths between sobs. And darkness.

The next morning, she woke up late. Too late. And paid the price. Her mother stormed into her room, pulled the curtains open with a screech, and began her usual barrage of disdain. Aagya didn't argue. Didn't speak. Just dressed in silence. A black formal dress. Tight ponytail. Heels that hit the floor like declarations.

She took the elevator down, stepped into the driveway. Her Porsche was ready. The chauffeur approached, but she shook her head, *"I'll drive."*

She needed control. And silence.

The drive to Avaan Studios felt longer that day. Her hands gripped the steering like it was the only thing she had control over. By the time she parked, the storm inside her had quieted. Not gone. Just buried again. She stepped out. Eyes fierce. Posture unshakable. The Queen had returned. Or at least, her armor had. She walked through the glass doors of Avaan Studios like a force no one dared question. Staff cleared the way. Interns turned away nervously. Even the building seemed to sense her presence. But her eyes searched. Subtly. Desperately. For him. The one person who now felt more real than her own reflection. But he wasn't there. The chamber was full and the team had already gathered, but the corner seat was empty. She blinked. Just once. Then walked to her seat, heels clicking like clockwork.

Megha spoke nervously, *"Ma'am, Rudra didn't show up today."*

Aagya questioned, *"Where is he?"*

Megha replied, *"He didn't say. No one's heard from him."*

Geeta added, *"Ma'am... he's not coming today?"*

Aagya asked, *"He didn't inform anyone?"*

Simran added, *"No, ma'am... nothing."*

Ravi added half-jokingly, *"Maybe that's why people call him The Ghost of NIVSEA."*

A few chuckles erupted. But they died instantly when Aagya turned her eyes to him. Cold. Sharp. The room fell into silence.

Aagya spoke flatly, *"Let's begin. With or without him, this film moves forward."*

But her voice betrayed her. A crack too soft to catch, but there. She opened her files, began pitching the new sequence changes. But something inside her still searched. Still waiting. Still aching. Because he wasn't there. And she didn't know why that mattered so much. But it did.

One day passed. Then another. Then three. Then a week. Rudra didn't return. No messages. No calls. No explanations. It was as if he'd been plucked out of existence and folded back into the silence he came from. And Aagya... couldn't stop thinking about it. At first, she pretended she didn't care. Barked orders louder. Corrected people with sharper words. Refused to let anyone mention his name in the chamber. But inside, it was chaos. She couldn't stop replaying the animation. That single word etched in charcoal: *Unbroken*.

She found herself opening the file every night. Just to watch. To *feel*. And every time, the tears returned. But they were quieter now. More... dangerous. They didn't fall. They simmered. She kept working. Edited the storyline. Refined dialogues. Rewrote scenes. But it all had *him* in it. His thoughts. His shadows. And that terrified her. Because she didn't know when she stopped being angry... and started feeling something else. Longing? Respect? Guilt? Obsession? She wasn't sure. She just knew she

wanted to see him again. To scream at him. To ask him what gave him the right to know her that well. To.....

Her thoughts stopped abruptly when the door opened. She looked up. And froze. A week of silence. A hundred hours of ache. A thousand thoughts screaming for answers. And now, there he stood. Same black hoodie. Same unreadable eyes. But something was different. A thin, raw scar ran diagonally across his right cheek. It was fresh and healing. Like he'd walked through something the rest of the world hadn't seen. The room gasped quietly. Simran dropped her pen. Geeta whispered something to Ravi. Aman straightened in his seat. But Aagya... couldn't speak. Her eyes locked onto his. And something in her chest stuttered. She saw it in him too. A flicker. Familiar. Electric. Like they had both crossed something dark... and returned changed. But neither said a word.

When their eyes met, for a second, the entire room disappeared. And in both their gazes was concern and resentment living side by side. They didn't speak. But something told her... He wasn't just a ghost anymore. He was a storm returning home. He walked past the others, slow and calm, like he didn't owe anyone anything. His seat waited for him like a throne. He took it. And looked forward. Not at her. Not at anyone. Just... forward.

Aagya finally found her voice. But it wasn't the one she usually used. It wasn't fire. It was smoke. *"You're late.", she said.*

Rudra replied calmly, *"I'm here."*

And that was it. They didn't explain anything. Because in their eyes, those few seconds, that one look, said everything they didn't. The whole team sensed the shift. The storm wasn't over. It had only just begun. Because now... they weren't just rivals. They were something far more dangerous. They were mirrors. Cracked. Reflective. And always... watching.

6. Aftershocks

Aagya froze for half a second. But she was Aagya Avaan. So, she blinked it away, composed herself, squared her shoulders, and strutted in like the Queen of Hell had just been reborn. Aagya ordered, *"Let's get started."*

Everyone gathered, all eleven of them, like chess pieces taking their places. Geeta was already flipping through the agenda. Megha, her quiet but precise secretary, followed with a clipboard. Simran adjusted the camera lens from the tech desk while Aman, the cameraman, gave her a quiet nod. Saadhna was fidgeting with her production design notes while Ayush, the sound designer, unwrapped a candy absentmindedly. Ravi leaned over Mishika's table, commenting on swatches, while Ramesh clicked a few stills from the side. And at the far editing bay, the twins, Shyam and Seeta, silently synced visuals from yesterday's shoot. Only Rudra remained quiet. Still learning. Still detached.

Aagya launched her presentation, refined from Rudra's perspective, and sharpened by her own fire. She laid out the new plot structure, character arcs, emotional beats, and the full live-action approach that would make the film intense and raw. No one interrupted her. Not even him. She couldn't help noticing it. That silence from Rudra. It wasn't calm today. It was... hollow. He didn't even look at her during the pitch. His gaze stayed somewhere far off, almost like he was physically here but spiritually buried six feet under something unspeakable. She hated that it unnerved her.

When the presentation ended, everyone clapped. Even the ones who used to fake their enthusiasm now looked genuinely

impressed. Still, Rudra didn't move. Not a nod. Not a word. It was Geeta who broke the silence first, *"So... no criticisms today, Mr. Stoic?"*

Simran smiled, *"I think he's secretly proud of you, Aagya."*

Ayush muttered to Ravi, *"Dude's got the ghost-mode on today. You think he's high or just broken?"*

Ravi added, *"Plot twist: he's actually an AI. And someone just unplugged him."*

Aagya smirked, then narrowed her eyes at Rudra, *"Or maybe the brooding ghost has finally realized he's not needed."*

No reaction. Nothing. Just those dead eyes.

Saadhna spoke to Shyam, *"He didn't even blink during her twist reveal. Is he even processing?"*

Shyam replied, *"He's buffering."*

Seeta added, *"Or crashing."*

Lunch break was announced soon. The room emptied quickly. But Aagya didn't move. She watched him gather his sketchbook, slow and mechanical. Then, as he turned to leave, she said, *"Wait. You're not leaving."*

He paused, turned slightly, *"Is that an order or a cry for attention?"*

Aagya replied, *"Take your pick, sketch-monkey. You think I'll let you vanish again without answers?"*

Everyone was gone and just the two of them remained now. She walked to the door and locked it from the inside. Rudra raised an eyebrow, finally registering the situation. She turned back, eyes blazing, her voice trembling not with fear, but fury, *"You think you can just waltz in after disappearing for days? After dropping that bomb of a video into my life and vanishing like some damn poetic coward?"*

She stormed toward him, jabbed a finger into his chest, *"How the fuck did you know about my brother?!"*

Rudra didn't flinch. Didn't move. He just looked at her with that same unbearable calm and replied, *"I researched you. After our first fight."*

Aagya replied, *"Oh, how sweet. Stalking now, are we? Is that your way of flirting? Pathetic."*

Rudra replied, *"I read some old Avaan family articles. Found one about a young boy dying in a war zone. The timeline matched. The pendant matched. And... the pain matched."*

She punched him. Right in the chest. Hard. Then again. And again.

"WHO TOLD YOU TO LOOK INTO ME?! WHO GAVE YOU THE RIGHT TO – TO SEE THROUGH ME LIKE THAT?!", she screamed at him.

Rudra grabbed her wrists, not forcefully, just enough to stop her rage. And in one swift motion, pulled her against him. Her back met his chest. She froze. His voice, a whisper near her ear, *"What are you really angry at, Aagya?"*

She struggled. But her strength wasn't in her muscles now. It was in her voice, and even that cracked.

Rudra added, *"Is it the animation I made? Or that for the first time, someone saw the girl beneath the crown?"*

She stiffened. Tears began to form against her will. He continued, softly, *"You're terrified. Because all your life, you were taught to rule. Not to feel. You wear power like a second skin. But the skin is cracking now. Isn't it?"*

That broke her. She spun around and before she could stop herself, she slammed her fists against his chest again. And then clutched his hoodie. And cried. Sobbed into him like a child. She

didn't understand it, but the moment her face pressed against his chest, something strange wrapped around her. A feeling. Faint but familiar. Like a whisper from another lifetime. Something warm. Something safe. Something that screamed home and she didn't even know why. He didn't say anything. He didn't move. He just stood there, arms hovering for a moment, then gently wrapped them around her. And for the first time, they both felt safe. Truly safe. Her words were muffled against his shoulder, *"I hate you... I fucking hate you..."*

Rudra replied softly, *"I know."*

She clung tighter. Rudra's eyes were wet too. His arms, which had only known defense, now learned warmth. For a few long minutes, they stayed like that. But nothing in this world lasts. Not even honesty. Aagya pulled back suddenly, wiped her tears, shoved him away and said angrily, *"How dare you touch me?"*

Rudra replied while wiping his face too, *"You touched me first, remember? I was just the punching bag."*

Aagya screamed, *"Stay away from me."*

Rudra replied with a devilish smile, *"Or what? You'll break again?"*

She didn't answer. Just glared. Broken. Enraged. Confused. She finally spoke, *"Where the hell were you all week?"*

Rudra flatly replied, *"Gone."*

"That's not an answer.", said Aagya.

"Good. Because I wasn't offering one.", replied Rudra.

He turned away. Aagya stopped him, *"You can't just walk away from this – "*

Rudra replied calmly, *"Watch me."*

And he left. And for the second time in her life, Aagya didn't know whether she'd won... Or lost.

The team reconvened after lunch. The room felt charged, but oddly imbalanced. Rudra returned silently and took his seat in the corner. Aagya, now calmer but guarded, stood at the front again. But before she could resume, Rudra's hand went up, *"I have a suggestion."*

The room turned. Even Aagya blinked, surprised as he spoke, *"What if we do it differently? What if we blend it?"*

Aagya blinked, *"Blend what?"*

Rudra replied, *"Live-action. And animation. Merge the best of both worlds."*

Silence. Even Ramesh stopped clicking mid-shot.

Ravi added, *"Like Toonpur Ka Superhero vibes?"*

Simran nodded, *"Or Sonic. Or The Minecraft Movie. Or The Tom and Jerry Movie."*

Aadarsh added, *"Technically doable. Tricky, but not impossible."*

Geeta further added, *"It could work. If the tones match right."*

Saadhna smiled, *"Visually... it could be stunning."*

Rudra spoke with a firm but respectful tone, *"This story is emotional, but also surreal. The line between imagination and memory is blurry for the protagonist. Animation can mirror that. Give the film an edge, not just visually, but narratively."*

The room fell into a thoughtful hush.

Ravi nodded, *"That's... actually a sick idea."*

Simran added, *"It'll stand out at every international festival."*

Even Megha spoke, *"And think of the transitions between childhood flashbacks and present-day scenes..."*

Heads turned toward Aagya waiting for her reaction. She didn't smile. Didn't nod. Didn't even blink. Her expression cracked. And

then, like a dormant volcano awakening. She finally exploded, *"OH, Wow! Of course! Let's all bow down to the great Lord Sketches-a-Lot and do whatever he says!"*

Stunned silence. She turned to face everyone fully. She began to walk slowly across the floor, heels clicking like a countdown and continued, *"So one guy speaks... and suddenly everyone's an art critic? The same guy who disappeared for a week? Who shows up like a ghost and throws around animation ideas like he's Miyazaki's prodigal son?"*

No one dared to speak. Aagya continued, *"I'm sorry, did I hallucinate the past 1 year of leadership? Or did you all decide to start a fan club and forget who built this pitch deck from scratch?"*

Still no response. Aagya concluded, *"Let's make this simple. Choose a leader. Me... or him."*

The air grew sharp. Tense. Fragile. Everyone exchanged terrified glances. Aagya snapped again, *"Decide now. Is this my film or his?"*

She glared at each of them., *"Pick a leader. Me or the brooding wallflower."*

No one spoke. Even Geeta looked conflicted. Finally, Ravi whispered, *"I mean... it's still your film. We just liked the idea –"*

Aagya replied, *"Then stick to liking what I approve of!"*

Everyone nodded, afraid. And then one by one, they murmured her name. She folded her arms. Victorious, but not satisfied. Then she looked at Rudra. He wasn't angry. He wasn't defensive. He wasn't anything. Just... still. And that silence? It echoed louder than any insult she'd hurled. Rudra slowly opened his sketchbook, flipped through its pages, pulled one out, folded it, walked up to the table, placed it there and without a single word turned and walked out. The door clicked behind him. Softer than a whisper, but louder than thunder.

Everyone turned to the table. Simran slowly reached for the paper and unfolded it. Her gasp was audible. She held it up so all could see. It was Aagya. Drawn in delicate charcoal, but not the version the world knew. There were **two faces**. One was fierce, crown-clad, sharp-eyed. Queen Avaan. The other was hidden behind it like a mask peeled back, a weeping little girl. Vulnerable. Fragile. Real. The team went silent. Even Geeta blinked rapidly.

Simran whispered, *"This is... art."*

Megha spoke, *"It's... her. But not her."*

Ravi added, *"He saw her like this? How?"*

But Aagya? She couldn't move. Her fingers trembled as she took the sketch into her hands. Her breath hitched, shallow and ragged. Because this wasn't just a drawing. This was an exposure. This was the truth. This was her, the part even she couldn't admit existed. And the fact that he had seen it, drawn it without even asking? It broke something inside her. Aagya didn't speak. Didn't blink. She just stood there... staring at the paper like it had peeled her skin open. And then, she folded it back, held it close to her chest, turned on her heel and walked out. No explanation. No goodbye. Just the sound of her footsteps sharp, urgent and echoing down the corridor.

She went to the technical room and ordered the team to dig up all the information on Rudra and find his address. It took them some time, but they found it. The main guy wrote it down on a piece of paper and handed it to her. She grabbed it and left. The Avaan Studios' glass doors swung shut behind her, muffling the noise of the world she controlled, the world she'd built out of power and sharp words. But her breath... was ragged. Her hands clutched the sketch Rudra had left behind, now crumpled from the force with which she had grabbed it.

A minute later, she was in her car. Her Porsche roared to life. She spoke to her GPS, *"Siri! Create a route to Behrampada. 16th Cross. Dharavi."*

She didn't repeat herself. Just stared straight ahead. The drive was over 90 minutes long thanks to Mumbai's afternoon traffic and the distance from the glossy spires of the Aavaan Empire to the beating underbelly of the city.

She had never been here before. Never needed to. And yet now... she had to. The farther the car went, the more the skyline changed. Glass faded into tin. Marble faded into damp cement. Luxury gave way to survival. And yet, this place pulsed with something her world lacked. Warmth. Chaos. But real. She got out in a narrow bylane, where kids played cricket with broken wickets and women hung clothes out of small balcony railings. The air smelled of fried onions, paint thinner, and life. Every head turned. A silver S-Class in this lane was like a UFO landing in a vegetable market.

She stepped out in black boots, sharp slacks, sleeveless blazer. Unbothered. Her eyes scanned every face. Within minutes, a group of locals gathered.

"Is she a movie actress?", said a passerby.

"Maybe a studio is shooting something here?", said another passerby.

"Bro, this is the first time a Porsche has ever entered this lane...", said a third one.

She ignored the murmurs and walked up to a tea seller, *"I'm looking for Rudra Suvigya. He rents a room nearby."*

The tea seller replied happily, *"Ah, Rudra? Everyone's favorite. Treats the elders like his own parents, teaches the kids art for free. Second floor, green door, building on your left. The one with sketch stickers."*

She thanked him and then walked up to a cluster of elderly women sitting on low stools near a tea stall, shelling peas and chatting, *"Excuse me. I'm looking for someone. Rudra Suvigya. He rents a room nearby."*

The women paused mid-shell. One of them was a kind-eyed aunty in a faded floral saree. She smiled and tilted her head, *"Ohhh Rudra? Of course we know him. Such a lovely boy. Teaches drawing to the children, helps us with medicine when we're sick... like a son, really."*

Another nodded, *"He stays just around the corner. Second floor, green door. You'll know it by the cartoon stickers stuck outside."*

Aagya was utterly amazed and shocked at how much everyone around there loved and respected Rudra as if he was a family member.

The first aunty then turned her head and called out, *"Latika! Come here, beta!"*

A high-pitched giggle rang out as a little girl, no older than seven, ran up with her braids bouncing with each step. Her frock was a chaos of color, doodled over with crayons and tiny superhero stickers. *"Yes Mumma?"*, she said.

"Take this young lady to Rudra beta's room, will you?", the aunty replied.

Latika saluted dramatically and replied, *"Okay Mumma!"*

She turned to Aagya and grinned, *"Are you Rudra bhaiya's girlfriend?"*

Aagya raised an eyebrow dryly, *"Not in a million lifetimes."*

Latika giggled more, *"Okay didi! You still look super pretty though."*

Before Aagya could react, Latika grabbed her hand and started dragging her toward the stairs, *"Come! I'll take you."*

As soon as Latika grabbed Aagya's hand and led her up the stairs, the two aunties leaned closer, lowering their voices, but not enough to hide the unmistakable excitement.

"Did you see that girl? Porsche, power walk, and a face straight out of a film set.", said Latika's mother.

"She looked like one of those business magazine cover girls. Is she... here for Rudra?", said the other aunty.

"I think so! And he's only been living here for a year! Already attracting girls like that?", added Latika's mother.

"He keeps to himself, but he's always polite. Teaches the kids art, helps the uncle next door with groceries... But this? This is new!" added the other aunty.

A third aunty spoke, *"She said she's not his girlfriend... but did you see the way she looked at his door? Hah! That's not how work colleagues look at front doors."*

Fourth aunty laughed, *"And she let that little Latika drag her up like they've known each other forever. She didn't even flinch."*

Latika's mother nodded with mock approval, *"If they're together, I hope it works out. She looks like the 'don't mess with me' type. And he... well, he needs someone like that."*

The second aunty dreamily added, *"Just imagine... gully boy meets empire queen. Bollywood would kill for that story."*

Third aunty giggled, *"And we'll get the front row seat to the wedding of the century!"*

They both chuckled, eyes twinkling, already narrating this tale to their evening chai circles in their heads. They were absolutely convinced they'd just witnessed the beginning of a blockbuster romance.

On the other hand, Latika and Aagya climbed the narrow, slightly cracked staircase. Laundry brushed against her arm. The walls

were peeling, but clean. There was no luxury here. But there was dignity. Latika stopped at a pale green door with sketch stickers of Goku, Naruto, Luffy, Spider-Man and Batman. She banged it loudly, *"BHAIIYAAAAAA! A really pretty didi is here to meet you!"*

The door creaked open a moment later. Rudra stood there. No hoodie this time. Just a loose t-shirt, cotton pants, bare feet. His hair was slightly messy, and a faint trace of dried paint lingered near his wrist. His eyes widened for a second. Then came stillness. Latika immediately jumped into his arms, demanding a piggyback ride. Rudra lifted her easily. He hadn't even looked at Aagya yet. She stood still, arms crossed. Watching. He spun Latika once, making her giggle uncontrollably, then kissed her forehead. Only then did he glance at Aagya. No surprise. No apology. Just a soft, unreadable nod.

Latika asked, *"She's your girlfriend, right?"*

Rudra & Aagya immediately replied in unison, *"No!"*

Rudra added, *"She works with me."*

Aagya added as well, *"Yes... And I'm here to talk about the project."*

Latika raised her hands, *"Okay, okay! I'm leaving. I'll let the lovebirds talk."*

She ran down the stairs, yelling behind her, *"Rudra bhaiya's girlfriend is here! Rudra bhaiya's girlfriend is here!"*

Rudra and Aagya groaned in unison. They looked at each other. Then quickly looked away.

"Come in.", said Rudra.

She did. His apartment was small, barely a studio with one bed, one desk, a shelf crammed with art supplies and a wall covered with sketches. Dozens of them. Pinned like fragments of his soul. Some were iconic characters like Goku, Naruto, Spider-Man.

Others... completely original. It wasn't a home. It was a beating heart exposed to the world. She turned slowly, taking it all in.

Aagya asked, *"You live here?"*

Rudra replied, *"I create here."*

She faced him now. Pulled out the sketch from her coat pocket. Held it up, *"What is 'this'?"*

He looked at the page without taking it, *"A sketch."*

Aagya roared, *"Don't be clever with me."*

Rudra replied, *"I'm not."*

Aagya asked, *"Why me?"*

Rudra replied, *"Because your mask was too loud to ignore."*

She froze. Then whispered, *"You don't even know me."*

He looked her in the eyes, *"I think I do."*

She didn't speak. He pointed to the bed, *"Sit. There's something I need to tell you."*

She hesitated. Then sat. He pulled up a chair. His face turned more serious. He looked down and spoke in a deep haunted voice, *"Aagya!... Do you remember the night of 26/11?"*

Her breath hitched. And everything around her froze. The room felt smaller. Quieter. Aagya's hands gripped the edge of the bed, her knuckles whitening. Rudra's voice dropped calm, steady, but reverent. Like he was opening a box sealed shut for too long.

7. Blood and Ruby

It was the morning of Mumbai, and the date was **26th November, 2008**. The sky was overcast, but hopeful.

"Wake up, hero," a woman whispered, tapping the nose of her son. *"It's our last day in Mumbai. We have to make it count."*, said a woman.

An eight-year-old boy stretched and grinned. His bed hair was wild. He sat up immediately, reaching for his little sling bag where his precious sketchbook slept. Notebooks were boring. But a sketchbook? That was his home. His mother, a Sikh woman in a bright floral salwar kameez, pulled her hair into a tight braid while humming softly under her breath. Strong, warm, and endlessly practical. An engineer by profession, but today just Mumma on holiday mode. His father, a gentle, unemployed Hindu man from, was quietly folding a map into his jeans pocket, pretending to look busy. He wore a faded shirt with trousers and formal shoes. He'd said about having everything planned, but it was all a lie. The boy knew it, but never called him out.

The family had come from Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh to celebrate their little boy's birthday. Breakfast was toast, jam, and a quiet kind of hope. They had plans today for Colaba Causeway, Marine Drive, and dessert at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel. A soft close to a hard year. And him? He just wanted to draw the sea.

Meanwhile in the Sea Lounge Suite of Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, morning light spilled across polished floors and perfectly arranged balloons. A little girl, about five, sat on a velvet stool in her unicorn pajama set, her hair half-brushed, crown slightly tilted. Daughter of two business moguls. It was her fourth

birthday. Still, she was the loneliest guest at her own party. Her parents were arguing in the master bedroom, voices hushed but heated. But she didn't care. Because her favorite person in the world was kneeling in front of her, buttoning her birthday dress like a prince from a fairytale. Agastya. Sixteen. Her big brother. Her superhero.

Agastya said, *"You thought I'd miss your birthday? Idiot."*

He pulled out a tiny velvet box and opened it. Inside was a delicate red ruby pendant on a gold chain.

"Put this on and never take it off," he said. *"If you're ever scared... just hold it. I'll come running."*

The little girl beamed, *"Promise?"*

Agastya replied, *"Swear on your cake, my lioness."*

They giggled. He was planning something later, sneaking her out for ice cream. What were parents, anyway, compared to a brother like him?

At around 9:15 PM in the Taj Hotel Lobby, his mother was checking the bill. His father had gone to the restroom. The little boy wandered with a little sketchbook in hand, doodling in his mind. He had drawn Spider-Man on a dinner napkin and was immensely proud. He tugged his mother's dupatta and made an emotional face, *"Dessert?"*

She smiled, distracted. *"Two minutes."*

He drifted toward the glass dessert counter, mesmerized by the strawberry tart. And then, gunshots. Screams. Crashing trays. His mother screamed his name. He turned, but she was lost in the chaos.

At around 9:20 PM in the Side Entrance of Taj Hotel, the little girl held Agastya's hand, licking the last of the ice cream from her fingers. They had just snuck back in through a side hallway,

laughing. Then, gunfire. Louder. Closer. Agastya yanked her behind a decorative pillar. She whimpered. He covered her ears. Agastya whispered, *"Stay. Here."*

Before she could nod, another small boy, breathless, blood on his collar crashed into her. It was him. Agastya pulled him in instinctively, shielding both.

"W-we were at the lobby – I got lost – ", said the little boy shaking.

Then, a shadow. A terrorist turned the corner and raised his AK47. Agastya didn't flinch. He shoved the two children behind him. He stared at the gunman down. And when the trigger clicked, he took every bullet. One after another. Chest. Shoulder. Ribs. But he didn't fall immediately. He looked up one last time, met her tear-filled eyes, and smiled.

"Stay safe... my lioness.", he said, kissing her forehead.

Then, silence. He collapsed in front of them. His blood soaked everything. The terrorist walked away, assuming none survived. The little girl screamed. Not in fear, but in loss. He didn't know what else to do. So, the little boy did the only thing he could. He held her hand and dragged her into the nearest door. It was a cleaning closet. It was full of old mops, detergent cans, and shadows. She was trembling like a leaf. He crouched beside her, whispering, *"I'm Rudra. Don't be scared. I'll stay here till it's over."*

She didn't speak. She just cried. And never let go of his hand. Hours passed. Then, boots. Voices. Soldiers opened the door. They were found. Two children. Blood-soaked. Alive. But dead inside. They were rescued and returned to their parents who by God's grace were able to survive too.

.....

Back in the present:

Aagya's hands gripped the edge of the bed. Rudra sat across from her and spoke in a voice low and reverent, *"I was eight years old. We came from Gorakhpur. It was our first trip to Mumbai. We had come to celebrate my birthday which was 10 days before that incident. My mom had planned this for me. We were staying at the Taj."*

He paused and then continued, *"We'd just returned from Marine Drive. Around 9:30. I was holding the dessert menu in the lobby... That's when the first shots rang out."*

Aagya didn't move. Didn't breathe.

Rudra added, *"Smoke. Screams. My mom tried to pull me close. But we got separated. I remember running. And then I saw her. A girl. Even younger than me. Alone. Crying. I ran to her. I held her hand. Then... Gunfire. Again. One of them spotted us. That's when he came."*

Aagya asked, *"Who?"*

Rudra replied, *"A boy. Maybe sixteen. He jumped in front of us. Took every bullet without any hesitation."*

Aagya's face fell.

Rudra continued, *"He didn't fall right away. He turned to her. Smiled. And said something before collapsing. She screamed his name repeatedly. But he never moved. I didn't know what to do. So, I grabbed her hand. And we ran. There was a cleaning closet. We hid. I told her my name. Told her I'd stay. She didn't speak. Just held my hand. Tight. When the army found us, we were covered in blood. Her brother's blood. My savior's blood."*

There was silence for a second and he continued again, *"She never told me her name. But I never forgot her face."*

He then looked directly into her eyes, *"And then, 17 years later, a day before the Film Festival Orientation, on the rooftop of NIVSEA. You*

walked in like the Queen of Hell. Mocked me. Snatched your scarf like I'd stolen your throne."

Aagya replied, "You said... 'Poisonous. Expensive. Interesting combo...'"

Rudra smiled faintly, "Just like you."

He paused and then continued, "I remember everything. The moment your scarf landed in my lap. The way you looked at my sketch. You weren't just new to me. You were familiar. I wasn't observing you. I was remembering you."

He gave an innocent smile to her, the one she had never seen before.

Aagya was trembling now, "It was you... In that closet."

Rudra nodded, "And I never forgot him.... or you."

Aagya replied, "I forgot your face. I forgot everything... Except... the blood."

Rudra assured her, "You weren't supposed to remember. Afterall, you were just a child."

Aagya spoke in a sobbing voice, "But so were you."

She now clutched her ruby pendant.

Rudra chuckled with teary eyes and pointed towards her pendent, "I saw it around her neck that night. Burned it into my memory. Years later, I saw the same one around yours. That's how I knew it. Even before we spoke. Even before we were paired at the orientation."

The earth beneath her shifted at this revelation. She replied, "You knew... all this time?"

Rudra replied, "I didn't want to force memories onto you. Memories you'd buried long ago to survive."

There was silence for a moment. Rudra continued, *"You don't owe me anything. But maybe now... you understand the sketch."*

She looked at it while he spoke.

"The version you wear.

The version you hide."

Rudra added, *"I wasn't trying to hurt you. I just wanted you to know. You're not alone in that pain. Not anymore."*

A tear fell onto the sketch. And for the first time since she was a child, the silence inside her felt a little less loud. She didn't speak. She just let it fall. Like home had once looked her in the eye and never left. And in that silence, something clicked. Something that had eluded her for so long. Now she understood why she always felt that strange pull toward Rudra. Why every time their skin touched, even for a second, it felt familiar. Safe. Like home wrapped in memory. Like pain wrapped in comfort. Like something... she once knew.

The room was quiet again. Too quiet. But this time, it wasn't silence made of distance. It was the kind that came after an emotional avalanche, when two broken hearts had finally recognized each other in the rubble. Neither of them spoke. Not because there was nothing left to say, but because saying more would've broken something fragile they had just begun to rebuild.

Rudra then stood up. He walked to the wardrobe at the far end of the room. His fingers, slightly trembling, unlocked the latch of an old wooden cabinet. Inside, stacked carefully like museum artefacts, were canvases; each one a piece of his soul, a wound painted open. He pulled one out. Turned. And walked back toward her. Wordlessly, he placed the canvas on the bed. It was haunting. It was a painting of two girls. One was small, barely five, covered in blood, crying on her knees. Her eyes hollow. Her palms were red. Her world... gone. Behind her stood a taller

version of herself with the same face, but stronger. Fierce. Crowned with confidence, wrapped in an armor made of silence. Both wore the same ruby pendant.

Aagya stared. Her fingers touched the brushstrokes. They were gentle, reverent as she spoke in a soft but trembling voice, *"Is this...?"*

Rudra nodded slowly, *"Yes. That's you. Both of you. The one you lost. And the one you became to survive."*

He sat beside her but didn't look at the painting. He looked at her, *"I never forgot. Not a single day in the last 17 years has passed when I didn't think of you. Of that night. Of him."*

Aagya's eyes welled up again. Her chest rose and fell rapidly. And then, she couldn't take it anymore. She shoved the canvas aside onto the mattress. And crashed into him, arms wrapped around his torso and buried her face into his chest. The dam finally broke. She sobbed. Uncontrolled. Violent. Like years of grief had been waiting for permission. Rudra didn't hesitate. He wrapped his arms around her. Tight. Protective. Soft where the world had always been sharp. His chin rested on her head. His voice, a whisper, meant only for her, *"It's okay. You can fall apart now. Today, you don't have to be Queen Avaan. You can just be Aagya. The little girl who never got to grieve. I'll hold the pieces together. I won't let you shatter. I promise."*

He landed a gentle and soft kiss on her forehead to comfort her. And just like that, she stopped holding herself together. She broke down. Fully. And cried harder. Hours passed. No words. Just her pain soaking into his t-shirt. Her fists tightened around the fabric like she'd drown if she let go. They sat down on the bed, side by side. But it felt like one heartbeat. His one hand kept stroking her back gently. The other played through her hair like the wind through pages. No desire. No tension. Just... healing. For the first time since Agastya, Aagya felt safe in someone's arms. Truly, devastatingly safe. But comfort is a strange thing. The moment it

gets too real, it gets too scary. Suddenly, she jerked away. Rudra blinked, confused. Aagya's expression had changed. Fear. Panic. Walls shooting up again.

"No. No, no, no... this is wrong.", said Aagya.

Rudra replied, gently, *"Aagya...."*

Aagya stepped back, "This is not real! This is just a moment. A lie wrapped in kindness. Like every other moment I've ever trusted."

Rudra replied, *"It's not a lie."*

Aagya interrupts him, "It always starts like this... and then it leaves. Or gets taken away. And I... I can't lose anything again."

She rushed to the door. Rudra moved to stop her with tears hidden in his eyes. But she shoved him, not violently, but desperately. She whispered at the doorstep, *"Don't try to save me. Not again!"*

She ran down the stairs past the curious aunties watching from balconies, the confused tea vendor and the entire society that had started falling in love with the idea of **'them'**. She reached her Porsche, got in, started the engine and drove. Tears blurred her vision. Breath stuck in her throat. The pendant around her neck felt heavier than ever. She drove blindly through chaos, traffic, sirens, and beggars tapping her window. She didn't stop until she arrived home. The gates of the Avaan Empire opened like jaws. The car rolled in. The guards bowed. She didn't acknowledge them.

Inside the mansion, lights were still on. Her parents were waiting. She wiped her face, fixed her tone, took a deep breath, and entered inside. As soon as she entered, her mother snapped at her, *"Where the hell were you, Aagya?!"*

Her father furiously added, *"We've been calling for hours! Do you know how reckless you've been?"*

Aagya replied coldly, *"I was at the studio. The team meeting went late."*

Her mother replied, *"In the middle of the night? Do you think we're fools?"*

Her father added, *"This is not how we raised you. Your career doesn't give you the right to vanish."*

Aagya replied flatly, *"Can I go to my room now?"*

They stared at her with frustration, confusion and helplessness, but she didn't wait for permission. She walked up the stairs. One step at a time. She closed her bedroom door and locked it. Then she collapsed onto the bed, hugged her pillow tightly, and cried again. Quieter this time. But deeper. Shame. Regret. Fear. Everything flooded at once. She grabbed her phone, opened her contacts, and dialed Megha. Megha picked up and answered in a sleepy voice, *"Hey... Ma'am? Are you okay?"*

Aagya cut her off with urgency in her tone, *"Rudra's number. I need it. Now."*

Megha replied with concern, *"Wait – what happened? You sound...."*

Aagya cut her sharply, *"Just send it, Megha. Please."*

Megha was hurt but replied obediently, *"...Okay."*

Megha was in a bit of shock because it was the 1st time Aagya had said the word '**please**' to her which was unlike her. A moment later, the number popped up on her WhatsApp. Aagya stared at it. Her thumb hovered over the call icon. Her heart screamed *yes*. Her fear whispered *no*. She locked the screen, threw the phone aside, sat back and whispered to herself, *"I don't want him gone... But I don't know how to keep him close either."*

And in that aching confusion, she fell asleep. Still wearing the ruby pendant. Still clutching the sketch. Still drowning in everything she'd never said.

8. The Mask and The Mirror

Rudra stood frozen as the echo of the slammed door faded into silence. And then, something inside him broke. Not with noise. Not with rage. But with weight. Like an ocean caving in on a single breath. He didn't scream. Didn't throw anything. Didn't curse the world. He just walked to his cupboard, grabbed his gym bag, and left. The road blurred past him as his body moved on autopilot. His fists were clenched. Jaw locked. Eyes blank. He didn't notice the traffic, didn't hear the sounds of the city.

By the time he reached the gym, Rudra was no longer a boy with broken hope. He was fury contained in flesh. He didn't speak to anyone. Just walked straight to the weights. And then, he trained like he was at war with himself. Every rep was a punishment. Every set was a scream without sound. Deadlifts. Pullups. Punches against the heavy bag. Burpees until his lungs gave out. Planks till his arms gave in. He didn't stop. Not until he collapsed on the mat. Drenched in sweat. Hands trembling. Chest heaving. Face pale. A couple of gym regulars rushed over.

"Rudra! Oye Rudra! Wake up, bro!", said one guy.

"Bro... are you okay?", said the other guy.

Someone sprinkled water on his face. Another rubbed his chest. He coughed. Blinkered. Groaned. Nodded once. Silent. Someone handed him a bottle. He drank. Then, without a word, he left. He walked home. Dropped his bag. Mixed a protein shake with shaking hands. Ate last night's cold roti and aloo sabzi like it was punishment. Then, he crawled into bed. He clutched his pillow. And wept. Not like a warrior. Not like a man. Just like a human being. Raw. Exhausted. Wrecked.

Rudra said to himself, *"Maybe I am worthless. Maybe I am a curse. Maybe no one gives a damn. Maybe... she was right to walk away."*

His father's voice echoed inside his head, *"Useless. Spineless. Worthless. You're nothing but a burden on this family and this world. I'd have been a big and successful name if you weren't born. Raising you ruined my life and prime time. You're a failure! You'll surely end up as a beggar and destroy my name."*

His chest burned. His head throbbed. And somewhere between memory and pain, sleep dragged him under. The next morning came empty. Rudra woke up with a heavy head and picked up his phone. No good morning. No message. Nothing. No messages or calls. From her.

On the other side, Aagya glanced at her latest iPhone. There were about 100 notifications, but none from him. She sighed. Stared at the ceiling.

He splashed water on his face. She sat down for breakfast. It was a perfectly plated avocado toast and a detox smoothie, courtesy of her private chef. He messed up his oatmeal. Ate it anyway. And even in that silence... An idea struck. At the exact same time.

She ran to her diary. He grabbed his sketchbook. She scribbled. He sketched. And when they finished, they smiled. Alone. But a little more alive than they were yesterday. And yet, in that silence, something sparked. A thought. A memory. A story. Two broken artists. Two haunted hearts. She got ready. Sleek maroon pantsuit. Sharp heels. Red ruby at her neck. He wore a faded grey tee. Loose denims. Hair all messy. She stepped into her Porsche. He took a local train as always with wind kissing his face.

.....

At Avaan Studios, the air buzzed with quiet anticipation. Geeta, Simran, Saadhna, Aadarsh, Ayush, Ravi, Mishika, Aman, Ramesh, Shyam and Seeta... all were already seated. But Rudra

wasn't there. Aagya stepped in. Eyes scanning. Heart betraying her mask. No sign of him. She inhaled. Straightened her back.

"Let's begin!!", she ordered.

The projector blinked behind her. The lights dimmed. She looked at her team, each of them an artist in their own right, and began:

"After endless rewrites, I've realized our story isn't about revenge. Or redemption. It's about silence. And scars. About masks... and what happens when they finally crack."

(The animation began to play behind her, Rudra's work.)

"I want to tell a story. Not a fantasy. Not fiction. A mirror. Of two children who survived a storm without knowing they weren't alone in it."

(The animation ended)

"As you saw, the story begins in a golden field... Where a little princess who was innocent, curious and full of wonder ran barefoot under the sun. She was soft, naive, and gentle. But her laughter didn't last long. Because one day, a tall boy leapt from behind the trees and started teasing her. He was her older brother. A warrior-in-training. Fierce... and kind and the king to be. They fought, they chased, they laughed. Their bond? Unbreakable. But childhood is a fragile thing. It slips away the moment duty walks in. One day, her family called her in. The Kingdom's name now rested on her shoulders. And her brother, who was her shield and her safe space, was assigned to train her. That day... her innocence was taken away. She trained. Bled. Grew. Year after year, until she wasn't a child anymore. She became a warrior and was unmatched in battle. Yet... never enough. Not for her parents. Not for the throne. She fought harder. Smiled less. And when another kingdom declared war, she volunteered. To prove herself. She fought like fire. And fell like dust. Wounded. Bleeding. Alone. And just when the final sword rose to end her, her brother appeared. He didn't hesitate. He took the blow. Fought through pain. Killed the enemy. And died... in her arms. He smiled and called her his lioness. Then he was gone. Gone forever.

That night, she screamed so hard she passed out. When she woke up, her armor was gone. Her wounds were bandaged. But her soul... shattered. She looked for him. Crawled across the room. But only found her parents. Smiling. Relieved. Until they spoke. **'You're safe,'** they said. **'But you're no longer our daughter. Only by name. Not by heart. You brought shame upon us. From now on, be perfect. Or be gone.'** Her mother handed her a red ruby, **'His last memory,'** she said. 'And your last warning.' She broke. Cried. But didn't scream. She took the ruby. Wore it. And buried herself under a crown of ice. That day... the princess died. And something else was born. Not a queen. Not a warrior. A weapon. Years passed. She built her army. Won wars. Claimed titles. But never peace. Until one day... A boy entered her life. Not a prince. Not a king. Just... a soldier. Brave. Sharp. Untamed. They clashed. On a rooftop. She mocked him. He replied with silence. And one sentence that broke her walls a little. He said, **'Silence is honest.'** She should've walked away. But that line, it haunted her. The next day, they were in the same war council. The king introduced him as **Samargeet**, the warrior whose legends and feats were famous across the world, and that trembled everyone except **her**. Same mission. Same side. They hated each other. Respected each other. And somewhere between strategy maps and sword fights, they started seeing the scars behind each other's armor. He made her laugh. She made him flinch. He saw the girl she'd buried. She saw the fire he tried to hide. Then one day, he vanished. Left only a letter behind. A letter that spoke of her brother. Of the day he died. Of the little girl he once saw. She cried that night. The first time... in years. When he returned, something in him had changed. There was a scar on his face. And one in his voice. They fought again. Words. Blades. Until he pulled her close. Whispered something in her ear. And everything inside her shattered. She cried. In his arms. And he didn't let go. But fear? Fear doesn't leave so easily. She pushed him away. Ran. He let her. Because warriors know when to retreat. And then came the great war. The war against evil. Against darkness. Against death itself. They fought side by side. Not as lovers. Not as allies. As something deeper. As... destiny. They reached the final gate. He handed her the sword. She beheaded the demon king. Victory. That night, for the first time, her parents praised

*her. There was celebration. Wine. Music. She drank too much. And when a hidden demon tried to strike her, he saved her. Again. Slayed the monster. Carried her home. Watched over her till morning. When she woke up, he was there, sword in hand. Eyes soft. Guarding her sleep. She went close to wake him but he instantly pulled out his sword and placed it against her throat in defense. She got scared but calmed him down. Then he placed his sword in its sheath. She asked what happened. He told her everything. And she cried. Again. He held her again. This time... she didn't run. She confessed. And so did he. Then came the royals. Angry. Judging. But instead of rage... The King smiled. Held the boy's shoulder. And asked, **'Do you love my daughter?'** He nodded. **'Then she's yours. And I hereby declare you my heir.'** He hesitated since he didn't consider himself worthy of that title. But the king consoled him. He then placed his daughter's hand in his and asked her to rule the kingdom with him since she has now earned her rightful place in the kingdom. He also asked her to be by his side just the way her mother was by her king's. There was no limit to their happiness. They got married. The girl who once called herself cursed, finally found her blessing. In a soldier's arms. With a ruby around her neck. And love in her heart. Because, ***even the fiercest warriors... deserve to be saved.***"*

As her voice carried through the room, her story unfolded with the little princess, her warrior brother, the betrayal, the rebirth. Her journey from innocence to weapon. The boy who entered her life. The rooftop. The silence. The sword. The war. The crown. The confession. Every frame of the animation hit like thunder. And yet, she narrated like rain. Soft. Steady. Unrelenting.

By the time she stopped, the room was silent. No one blinked. No one breathed. And then, The slide at the end read: **'Crimson Silence'**

She turned to the team, "This was Rudra's idea of blending reality with animation. So that's what we'll do: Live-action for the present. Animation for the past. For what words can't say. Dreamlike. Raw. Unfiltered."

And then the floodgates opened:

"That's... beautiful. Duality will hit hard. It's not just technical, it's emotional.", said Geeta.

Simran added, *"Color tones? Desaturate the present. Oversaturate the past. I'll play with that."*

Saadhna spoke, *"Two sets – one real, one stylized. It's ambitious. I love it."*

Aadarsh added, *"Lighting grids – warm for now, haunting for then. Let's do it."*

Ayush further added, *"Audio textures... silence in flashbacks. Let the visuals scream."*

"Costume arcs! Her wardrobe: rigid to soft. His: muted to expressive. I'm on it.", said Ravi.

Mishika said, *"Emotional masks through makeup. Glam up the facade. Strip it during breakdowns."*

Aman added, *"Camera moves? Smooth for reality, disjointed in flashbacks. Contrasts will kill!"*

Ramesh said, *"Posters: blood and ink. Scars and smiles. I see the whole series already."*

Shyam and Seeta spoke in sync, *"Editing this will be a beast. But poetic beasts are our favorite kind."*

Megha concluded, *"This story deserves everything we've got."*

Aagya's eyes softened. She dropped a thick folder on the table, *"This is just the draft. It won't be a script until all of you bleed into it with me..... We're not making a film. We're making a memory."*

Silence. Then, soft claps. Geeta, Simran, Aman and soon, the whole room. But Rudra wasn't there. Not yet. Still, his silence lived in the room. And for the first time, Aagya didn't feel alone in it. She walked over to the screen, switched it off, turned

around... and there he was. Standing at the doorway. Hair slightly messy. Eyes tired. Hands holding a sketchbook. Their eyes met. She froze. He walked forward. Silent. Calm. He placed the sketch on the table. A girl massive, powerful, controlling the world like puppets. And behind her, a tiny, joyful version of herself. Both wearing the same ruby.

She stared at it. *"What... does this mean?"*

Rudra replied, *"You already know."*

She couldn't reply and everyone was stunned by the sight of it.

.....

Lunch was announced. Everyone stood. But no one left with Aagya. They crowded around Rudra. Laughed. Praised the sketch. Told him about her story pitch.

"That fantasy warrior arc? Lowkey, it's you.", said Simran.

He chuckled. But inside, something softened. And yet, she sat alone. Watching.

Post-lunch, Rudra returned. This time, with fire in his voice, *"What if the final war isn't against demons or kings, but against identity itself? What if the real enemy is the mask we wear to survive?"*

The room fell into silence again.

"That... is powerful.", said Simran.

Geeta added, *"And it fits. Perfectly."*

Aadarsh whispered, *"Two wars. One external. One internal."*

But then, she arrived and gave a deadly gaze to everyone, *"So he finally accomplished his mission to overthrow me, huh?"*

The room froze. Rudra replied in the same tone, *"What made you jump to that conclusion?"*

Aagya addressed, *"Here's what we'll do. Choose. Him. Or Me."*

Everyone looked at her. Then at him.

Simran spoke, *"Aagya, please – "*

Aagya replied in a stern tone, *"Choose."*

Geeta finally spoke, *"We're with you. Always."*

One by one, the others echoed. Except Megha. She stood still. Defiant.

Everyone stared at her and she finally spoke, *"I'm with the story. Not your egos."*

Rudra looked at her. And then at Aagya.

"Megha's right! When you're ready to put the film above your throne, you'll know where to find me.", he said and he left. No drama. No storm. Just silence.

That night, Aagya stormed into her private gym like a hurricane in heels. No warm-up. No playlist. No Diego. She didn't need supervision, she needed punishment. Push-ups. Burpees. Cable rows. Punches on the heavy bag. Her movements were erratic, fueled by a fire that had no name... only heat. Her lungs burned, her muscles screamed, but she didn't stop. Couldn't. Not when silence hurts louder than noise.

After nearly an hour, her body gave up before her pride did. She collapsed mid-set drenched, breathless, and trembling. Her vision flickered. By the time her guards found her, she was half-conscious. They rushed her to the hospital. She was diagnosed with acute emotional and physical exhaustion. The doctors called it an overexertion. But Aagya knew what it really was: implosion.

Her parents arrived. Furious. Disappointed. Humiliatingly loud. They scolded her like a reckless teenager who'd embarrassed the family. Told her to stop behaving like a drama queen. She didn't argue. Didn't explain. She just came home. Walked silently up to her room. Locked the door. Collapsed onto the bed like a broken

crown. Tears fell without permission. Slow. Silent. Searing. She buried her face into her pillow and cried until the fabric turned damp and then... quieter.

When the tears stopped, she reached for her phone. Still no message. No call. No name lighting up the screen. Just the ache of absence. Just Rudra's silence. She clenched the phone like it was his throat, then loosened her grip like it was his hand. Six missed calls from Megha. One from Simran. And a single text from Aman: *"You okay?"* Her heart jumped. He didn't show up? For a second, panic clawed at her chest. But her fingers responded before her feelings could: *"Focus on your work."*

And she hit send. Cold. Clean. Cruel.

.....

The next day at Avaan Studios, the room felt hollow. Everyone was there. Except him. Geeta tried to control the noise, but Simran and Ayush were bickering over a soundscape. Ravi and Mishika whispered about yesterday's outburst like some school kids trading scandal.

Megha noticed her walk in. Eyes dull. Shoulders stiff. Face unreadable. She asked with concern, *"Are you okay?"*

Aagya snapped at her, *"Focus on your minutes. Not on my face."*

Silence followed. Ramesh paced like a time bomb, *"We're two days behind. If Rudra's not back tomorrow, we're scrapping storyboard revisions."*

In the corner, Shyam and Seeta sat behind their monitors, watching the broken footage of a story that had lost its soul.

"This film's heart is broken. It shows.", said Shyam.

Seeta added, *"So is its heroine."*

Aadarsh tried to lift the tension, *"Maybe we warm up the lighting during her breakdown scene? A little intimacy. Maybe even... romantic?"*

But the word **'romantic'** was a fuse.

Aagya shouted, *"This is not a fucking rom-com! We're telling a story about pain, loss, and survival! Not some midnight Netflix kiss-fest! Do any of you even understand the script?!"*

The room froze. Aman muttered under his breath, not low enough, *"Maybe Rudra should've handled this part."*

She heard it. Clear as a gunshot. Her eyes snapped toward him, *"You're free to leave. All of you. Go join the ghost if you miss him that much."*

No one moved. But no one spoke either. And somehow, that silence was the most humiliating thing of all. She walked out, not like a queen, not like a storm, but like a girl lost in a noise that no longer obeyed her. She ended up in the smoking area, even though she'd never touched a cigarette in her life. Megha followed, a Red Bull in hand.

"You don't have to be strong all the time, you know.", said Megha.

Aagya replied, *"I don't know who I am when I'm not."*

Megha didn't reply. She just placed the can beside her and walked away.

That night, her bed didn't feel like hers. Her room didn't feel like a palace. And her heart, it felt like something was missing. Something loud. Something quiet. Someone.

.....

Aagya woke up late the next morning. Mascara stains marked her pillow like bruises she forgot to wipe. Her throat felt like sandpaper. Her head throbbed with the weight of everything she

hadn't said the night before. She reached for her phone like it was a muscle memory. The home screen blinked awake. Still, no messages from him. No sarcasm in charcoal. Just the aching silence. Still, something inside her stirred, low and relentless. A dull ache. Not the kind she could train away in the gym. Not the kind that went quiet with green juice or cold showers. A thought clawed at her, *"Where the hell are you, Rudra?"*, *"And why does it matter so much?"*

The screen dimmed again. She didn't text him. Not yet. She just curled her fingers around the phone and held it to her chest like maybe, just maybe, the absence would feel a little less sharp if she hugged it tight enough. But the ache didn't leave. Later, she opened WhatsApp. Her thumb hovered. Clicked on his name. She typed. Deleted. Typed again. Her breath caught in her throat. She, Aagya Avaan, who had faced kings and cameras and the cruelty of her own parents, was scared. Scared of sending a text. She couldn't do it. She couldn't be the first. She was Aagya Avaan. She doesn't chase ghosts. She doesn't beg for presence. She just held the phone to her chest, lay back into the emptiness... and tried to remember how to breathe without him.

He didn't show up that day either. And the team? They were done whispering. Now they avoided her entirely. The atmosphere had shifted. Not with rebellion, but with resentment. She could feel it in the way no one met her eyes. In the way Simran didn't crack jokes. In the way even Geeta didn't offer suggestions anymore. She was alone again. Just like before. But this time... it wasn't armor. It was a punishment.

Finally, that night, as silence wrapped around her mansion like vines, her fingers moved again. This time, they didn't stop. She finally typed:

"Listen Rudra! Whatever happened... I don't have the right words. I don't know why I acted the way I did. I don't know what

I'm feeling. But when I saw your painting, I saw myself. The real me. And that scared the shit out of me."

She pressed the sent button, and the message was sent. There was a beat of breath. Then, the screen lit up.

Rudra replied:

"I wasn't trying to show you. I was just... remembering."

She stared at it. Fingers trembling, she typed again:

"I'm sorry for everything. I don't know what this is... But I know I don't want to lose it."

She didn't even realize she was holding her breath until his typing bubble popped back up.

"If you really are sorry, then I want you to remove the mask and start embracing your real self. I want to see the real Aagya, not the Queen Aavaan persona she built to survive. When you're ready, you know where to find me."

His words hit like arrows. Sharp. Undeniably true. She didn't reply right away. She read it. Again. And again. Until her fingers responded:

"You're asking me to do the impossible, Rudra!"

A second passed. Two. Three. Then his message appeared:

"Our limitations are mere imaginations that prevent us from achieving our true potential, Aagya. It's up to us to either push past them, or surrender to them. But the Aagya I know... bows to no one. And never backs off from a fight."

This time, she smiled. Not the smirk. Not the rehearsed camera-tilt. Not the queen's facade. The real kind. Soft. Small. Shaky. But real. His words didn't just comfort her. They saw her. He saw her.

Aagya texted back:

"I'll try my best. But please come back! Not just to the project. To... whatever this is. I wanna talk to you. Not as rivals. Not as teammates. But as two kids from that closet."

She hit the send button. And this time, she didn't close the app. She just stared at the screen...hoping he still remembered. The girl in the closet. The silence they survived. And the bond they never chose, but never forgot.

9. Where It All Began

The early light crept softly into Aagya's room, dancing on the sheer curtains as she sat cross-legged on her bed, scrolling through her phone with absent eyes. Her phone vibrated once. It was a message from Rudra.

"Give everyone else a holiday today to relax... and meet me where it all began by 10."

Her hands froze. Her breath hitched. She hadn't gone back since that night. Neither had her family. That place wasn't just architecture, it was a vault of grief, a scar they all pretended wasn't there. Her parents never mentioned it again. Therapists danced around it. And she? She buried it. Deep. Under rubies and armor and cold smiles. Her first instinct was to say no. To pretend the message never came. But instead, her fingers typed back two simple letters:

"OK."

She stared at the sent message for a moment. Then exhaled, slow and shaky. Her heart skipped a beat. The word alone was enough to shake her core. But now, she closed her eyes and inhaled. Her hands were trembling.

On the other side of the city, Rudra's room was sun-drenched, golden morning light spilling through fluttering curtains. The quiet fan hummed above, and somewhere far, the clinking of teacups echoed from the kitchen. Then, a soft laugh escaped his lips, as if disbelief had tickled something dormant inside him. He jumped to his feet like a boy who'd just heard his crush say yes.

He twirled. Actually twirled. He hummed a stupid song and did an awkward half-shimmy near the mirror.

And that's when the door opened. A bunch of kids peeked in with Latika leading the chaos as she caught him between his goofy celebration, *"So Aagya didi finally said yes, didn't she?"*

Rudra froze like a guilty child caught dancing in the middle of the night. His face turned pink, *"What are you all doing here?! Out! Out, all of you!"*

The kids shrieked and scattered like paper planes. Rudra tried to chase them but gave up halfway. Latika, the ringleader, stood at the door with her arms crossed, smirking, *"I need to talk to you. Important stuff."*

Her voice wasn't playful this time. Rudra blinked. He nodded and waved her in. The others sulked outside as he closed the door gently behind her. She leapt onto his bed, sat cross-legged like a little queen, and patted the space beside her. Rudra sat next to her, a little amused, a little worried.

Latika teased him, *"You like Aagya didi, don't you?"*

Rudra got startled at this, *"Wh—What?! No! I mean—what are you even talking about?! You're too young to ask things like that!"*

She narrowed her eyes, completely unconvinced and smirked, *"You didn't sound convincing."*

Rudra sighed, flopping back on the bed for a moment, groaning, *"Why do I even bother with you..."*

He sat back up and looked at her seriously, *"By the way, what do you think about her, Latika?"*

Latika tilted her head, *"Ohooo... Well! She's really pretty. But kinda scary too. Her face always looks like she's angry... like a cartoon villain."*

Rudra burst into laughter and replied, *"You're not wrong."*

Then he fell quiet for a second. His smile softened as he added, *"But people like her... they're not really scary. They just look like it. Sometimes the ones who seem the angriest are the ones who've been hurt the most. They yell... because deep down, they're scared."*

Latika looked up at him, thoughtful, *"Like you?"*

Rudra went still. The way she said it, so gently, so innocently, it hit something raw. But he managed a small smile, *"Yeah. Maybe like me."*

Latika frowned, turned away, puffing her cheeks, *"You only talk about Aagya didi. You don't talk to me anymore."*

Rudra tugged her cheek playfully, *"Okay okay, drama queen. How about a peace offering?"*

He reached into his drawer and pulled out a Dairy Milk Silk bar. Her eyes lit up like Diwali lamps, *"Oooooohhh! Okay fine. You're forgiven."*

She hugged him tight, and he hugged her back, his chest swelled with warmth.

"When Aagya didi comes next time, I'm going to hug her so tight! And I'll make all my friends play with her too. We'll have a party!", she said.

Rudra's heart melted. He looked down at her, and for a moment, he saw someone else. Another little girl, from another time. Innocent. Terrified. Holding a blood-soaked flower in her tiny hands. He swallowed hard and whispered, *"You know... Aagya used to be just like you when she was little."*

Latika replied in shock, *"What?! You've known her since childhood?!"*

Rudra flinched. Damn. That just slipped out. He replied nervously, *"Not really... just once, a long time ago. I saw her. That's all."*

Latika raised an eyebrow, *"Hmmm. I think I should tell everyone!"*

Rudra stopped her, *"Please don't. Let this be our little secret?"*

Latika grinned, *"Ummm.... Only if you give me something in return."*

Rudra laughed, *"Alright, your birthday's coming, right? You'll get a big chocolate box. And I'll bring Aagya too."*

Latika squealed with joy, *"Yayyyy! BEST. BHAIYA. EVER."*

She threw her arms around him again, practically glowing. Rudra ruffled her hair and smiled. He had no real siblings, never had a little sister to protect, tease, or spoil. But in Latika... He'd found one. A little ray of joy in a life full of storms. A mirror of the girl he once saved in a dark, forgotten closet. And today... maybe, just maybe, he'd saved that girl again, through someone else's smile.

.....

Back in the Avaan Mansion, the morning sun filtered through the grand windows of the Avaan estate, casting golden streaks across the marbled floors. Aagya stood in front of her mirror and for the first time in months, she wasn't draped in sharp silhouettes or cold fabrics. She stood before her walk-in closet, eyes drifting over rows of designer dresses, gowns, tailored blazers, and luxury shoes. Today none of them felt right. Her hand paused on a soft crimson suit. Simple. Traditional. Something she hadn't worn in years. She touched the fabric gently. Her lips curved into a faint, uncertain smile. Aagya slipped into the suit, pairing it with delicate gold jhumkas, a nude-toned lipstick, and her signature ruby pendant that rested gently against her collarbone. She turned to her shoe rack. Her fingers reached for nude heels. But she paused and thought, *"He's barely two to three inches taller than me... If I wear these..."*

She slipped them on, stood in front of the mirror, and frowned. Too tall. Too sharp. Too distant. She took them off. And slid into simple cream-toned flats instead. A quiet decision. A small, intimate rebellion against image. Aagya stood in front of her full-

length mirror, draped in a rich crimson suit with delicate gold embroidery, something she hadn't worn in years. Her long earrings shimmered against her cheekbones, and the deep neckline of her kurti was modest yet regal. She had done her makeup with unusual softness, a subtle blush, a hint of kohl, nude lips. Around her neck, as always, rested the ruby pendant Agastya had once given her.

She stared at herself for a long moment. No designer gown. No power heels. No sharp black blazer. Just a girl wrapped in a traditional attire... and something unfamiliar. Aagya spoke softly to herself, *"Why does this feel more like me than anything I've ever worn?"*

She couldn't recognize the girl she saw in the mirror. It was like looking at a completely different person. A strange calm settled over her. Her flats clicked softly as she descended onto the marble staircase. Her parents were already at the breakfast table. Her father looked up from the newspaper, eyes narrowing, *"What on earth are you wearing?"*

Her mother frowned, *"Are you going to a wedding?"*

Aagya tried to remain neutral and gave a composed reply, *"No. I just felt like wearing this."*

Her mother replied coldly, *"Traditional suits aren't 'mood wear', Aagya. What's going on?"*

Her father asked sharply, *"Are you meeting someone you shouldn't?"*

She paused. A muscle in her jaw twitched, *"I didn't know I needed permission for a meeting."*

Her father replied sternly, *"You don't. But you do need accountability."*

Her mother added, *"You represent the Aavaan legacy. One wrong move, and everything can be questioned... your choices, your alliances, your future. Especially with your history."*

Aagya clenched her fists, *"I'm aware of what I represent."*

Her father warned her, *"Don't make us regret giving you the reins."*

She didn't respond. She adjusted her dupatta with slow, deliberate grace, walked out of the dining room, and headed straight to the front door. No sooner was she almost out, than her mother called out behind her, *"If you do anything to embarrass this family, even once, we won't let it slide again."*

Aagya paused at the threshold. Then she turned her head ever so slightly.

Aagya replied without looking at them, *"I won't embarrass the family."*

She paused and then added, *"I'll just make them question everything they thought they knew."*

And with that, she stepped out. Aagya stepped into the garage. Her custom black Porsche glinted in the sun, its reflection catching in her eyes. She didn't call anyone. She opened the driver's side door herself. She always drove. She *hated* being driven. She sat in, buckled her seatbelt. She pulled out her phone, and she whispered like it was both a prayer and a curse, *"Siri! Set a route to The Taj Mahal Palace."*

The screen in front of her displayed the route to the Taj Hotel. Before starting the engine, she opened her phone. Scrolled to Megha and dialed. It rang once. Then twice. And she finally picked up, *"Ma'am... good morning. Is everything okay?"*

Aagya replied in a calm and composed tone, *"Cancel today's work. For everyone. Call it a maintenance day or give them whatever excuse you want. No meetings. No check-ins. No calls."*

There was a pause and then Megha replied, *"Okay. Can I ask – "*

Before she could finish, Aagya cut her in between, *"No."*

She then added in a soft tone, *"It's not a studio day. Not today."*

Megha replied quietly, *"Understood."*

Aagya ended the call. She placed the phone beside her and finally closed her eyes, letting the hum of the car fill the space inside her chest where silence had lived for too long. Her fingers hovered near the ignition. The weight of memory was beginning to press against her chest like a stone. But she shook it off and turned the key. The engine roared to life. And with a deep breath, she pulled out of the garage.

Meanwhile, Rudra stood before his wardrobe, fingers brushing past the muted blues and crisp whites, searching for something... different. Something that spoke louder than the words. His eyes paused at a splash of color buried in the corner, a crimson shirt. He reached for it slowly, as though retrieving a memory. The fabric was soft, smooth, like it had been waiting for this day. As he pulled it out, a voice echoed in his mind. His mother's voice, *"Red suits you the most, beta. It's your lucky color. Wear it when life gives you a big moment."*

The memory made the corners of his lips curl into the faintest smile. He ran his fingers along the shirt's edge, almost like holding onto her words, her warmth. Rudra whispered to himself with a dry chuckle escaping from his mouth, *"Lucky color, huh? Let's see if you're right, Mumma."*

He slipped it on. The crimson hugged his frame like a second skin, bold yet elegant. He paired it with sleek black jeans, polished boots, and his favorite silver Timex watch gifted to him by his eldest cousin brother who was a Colonel in the Army and worked as an Orthopedist. The watch had seen countless battles but was still ticking strong.

He gave a final glance in the mirror. The man staring back wasn't the broken boy from yesterday. Not today. Today, he was ready, or at least, pretending to be. He ran his hands through his hair, styling it with deliberate care. No loose ends tonight. Not on this battlefield. He gave one last look at the wardrobe and the door creaked shut. Rudra grabbed his wallet, his sketchbook, and his lucky pencil, the one that carried more than just a tool. It carried meaning. A promise. He thought of not taking trains today. Not for this. He booked a cab as he couldn't let sweat or the stench of a Mumbai local ruin this moment. The yellow-black cab rolled to a stop. Rudra stepped in and the cab moved. And now the big battle waited ahead of him.

After a long journey, he finally reached there, paid the driver via UPI and stepped out. The soft thump of the door shutting behind him was followed by silence, not the kind that surrounded him, but the kind within. One that had once screamed and now simply... waited. And then he saw it... **The Taj Hotel**. It was majestic, haunting, and unchanged. His breath hitched. He looked up slowly, eyes tracing the grand dome, the intricate latticework, the sandstone pillars standing tall like timeless sentinels guarding secrets of fire and blood. And suddenly, a shiver. Not of cold. Of memory. Gunshots. Screams. Blood on white marble. A little boy. A little girl. A ruby pendant.

Rudra's chest tightened. He closed his eyes and exhaled, grounding himself. His jaw clenched. Knuckles whitened. But then, like a soldier stepping onto a battlefield already lost once, he breathed through it, *"You're not that boy anymore. You're here now. Stand tall."*

He adjusted the collar of his red shirt. Straightened the cuffs. Ran a hand over his slicked-back hair. And then he stepped forward. Every footfall felt like marching through time. On his way inside, he stopped at a florist kiosk near the lobby. A small display of curated, exotic flowers was arranged in glass cylinders, each

labeled, priced, seasonal. Rudra leaned forward and spoke softly to the vendor. Ten minutes later, he walked away with a handcrafted bouquet, striking and meaningful. He looked at the bouquet and whispered, more to himself than anyone else, *"Even if she doesn't accept it... she deserves to be seen."*

He passed the security gates, nodding politely at the doormen. One of them, an elderly man in a navy turban, offered him a respectful glance in return. Maybe he'd seen those eyes before. Rudra didn't pause at the lobby desk or the restaurants. Instead, he turned down the quieter corridors, moving past the foot traffic and hushed conversations. His steps slowed as he reached a near-forgotten hallway, the one his mind had memorized since he was six. The air here was colder. Dimmer. His hand brushed the wall as he walked, trying to feel the same vibrations from that night. And then, there it was... **The Closet.**

It looked smaller now. But it was just as heavy. He reached for the handle. Held it. Breathed. And opened it. Dust greeted him. Mops, a forgotten plastic bucket, rusted hinges and the ghost of two children. He crouched slightly and looked inside, imagining the two tiny figures huddled together. Her tear-streaked face pressed to his shoulder, his trembling hand gripping hers tightly.

Rudra stepped halfway inside. His hand reached out and touched the inner wall, right where he sat once. His breath caught for a moment. Eyes shut. And then a staff member interrupted him, *"Excuse me, sir!"*

Rudra turned slowly. A young male staff member in a crisp beige uniform stood a few feet away, eyeing him with confusion and suspicion, *"This is a restricted area. May I know what you're doing here?"*, the staff member added.

Rudra raised both hands calmly, stepping back out of the closet and replied in a gentle tone, *"Nothing to worry about. I was just, revisiting something."*

The staffer narrowed his eyes, then touched his earpiece, *"Rajeev, come in. We've got a Code 7 in the west corridor. Possible trespasser near maintenance zone C."*

Rudra sighed. The man didn't look violent. But the uniform, the earpiece, and the tension in his posture said one thing — **Protocol**. And protocol rarely believed emotion. Within seconds, more staff appeared, two, then five, then eight. Some came from around the corridor bend, others through side access doors. They moved with quiet urgency, like a tactical unit on standby.

A female manager, dressed in a sharp indigo saree with a golden brooch, stepped into view. She was in her thirties but was in great shape, looked elegant, but her eyes were all business. They formed a half-circle around him. Security, house staff, and admin alike were alert. The manager stepped forward, *"Sir, I'm the duty manager here. May I ask who you are and what exactly you're doing in a secured hallway of this hotel?"*

Rudra didn't flinch. He just offered the calmest, most collected half-smile anyone had seen in that corridor, *"I'm not here to cause trouble. Just came to meet a memory."*

That wasn't enough. Security stiffened. One man's hand brushed near the baton looped into his belt. The staffers exchanged looks. One whispered into his wireless. The manager exhaled, trying to keep the scene from escalating, *"I understand, sir. But this area isn't open to guests or the public. I will need some identification."*

Rudra nodded, slowly pulled his wallet out, and took out his identity card which was crisp, worn at the edges, but very real. He handed it to her. She read it. Stopped. Looked up. Then looked again. And then, something shifted in her eyes. It was not a normal ID. It was the ID of a Territorial Army officer.

"You're... an officer?", asked the manager in a softer tone now.

Rudra nodded gently, *"Territorial Army. And a student at NIVSEA, Mumbai."*

She blinked. The staff stepped back slightly. Everyone seemed to exhale at once. The man who'd whispered into the wireless cleared his throat awkwardly. Rudra looked at all of them and then said, *"You don't need to worry. I respect your duty. I would have reacted the same way."*

The manager straightened up, now visibly composed and... embarrassed, *"I'm truly sorry, sir. We had no idea. You must understand... post everything this hotel has seen... we don't take any chances."*

Rudra shook his head, *"You did the right thing. No apology needed."*

And then he looked at the closet again, eyes softer now, *"I was just... there... during 26/11. That closet saved my life."*

The entire corridor froze again. Like someone had pulled oxygen out of the air. The older staff members, a few now approaching from behind, stopped in their tracks. Rudra took a step closer to the closet. His voice dropped into something almost reverent, *"I was eight. And that night, I hid here with a little girl... while chaos unfolded outside. She was younger than me. Crying. Lost. Her brother died protecting us. We didn't know each other. But we held hands and waited."*

His hand grazed the metal door, *"I haven't been back here since. It took me seventeen years to return."*

No one spoke. Not even the security team. Then, from among the staff a short, small-framed, elderly man, perhaps in his late sixties, with silver hair and a humble walk, stepped forward from the group. His Taj name badge was worn and scratched; a quiet proof of years served. His name was engraved on it — Rajinder Singh. He wore a white turban and had kind, shaking hands. His eyes were wet. He gently placed a hand on Rudra's shoulder. His

hand trembled slightly as he held Rudra's gaze, *"Beta... that night changed all of us."*

Rudra turned, startled by the voice, but the kindness in the old man's eyes made him stand straighter, not tenser. And then he turned back toward the closet one last time. Inside, only shadows waited. But now, they didn't feel so lonely anymore. The old staff member continued, *"I was here too... working the lobby shift. I saw what no man should. So many lives lost... so much blood. And I—I survived by hiding under the reception desk. Every time the clock hits 9:20, I still hear those shots."*

He looked past Rudra, his eyes misty, staring at a memory only he could see. He smiled and continued, *"But you... you came back. Today. Walked right into your fear. And you're no longer that little boy hiding in the dark. You're in uniform now... strong, calm... and brave beyond measure. You're stronger than you think. You came back here. Not many of us ever did."*

Rudra replied in a sobbing voice, *"I had to. For her. For the boy I left here."*

The old staff member addressed in an emotional tone, *"We're proud of you, beta. Truly. You carry this place with dignity."*

Rudra's eyes were stung. He reached out and gently held the old man's hand, squeezing it respectfully, *"I'm proud of you too, uncle. You've stayed here... facing those memories every single day for seventeen years. You're braver than any soldier I've met. I'm much prouder of you than you are of me."*

The old man chuckled softly and shook his head, *"No beta... you fought your demons and came back standing tall. And today, you've reminded us all... healing is possible. Even here."*

A tear slipped down Rudra's cheek. All around them, the remaining staff members clapped softly, overwhelmed by the exchange. Not because of the drama, but the dignity. The

manager, who'd been holding her wine glass, turned her face discreetly, wiping her eye. She straightened, cleared her throat and stepped forward, her eyes glistening too now. She gestured for her staff to step back.

"Sir, I apologize again. Please. You're welcome to stay. In fact, allow us to offer you and your guest a special table tonight. Taj's treat.", she said.

Rudra nodded, overwhelmed by the kindness, *"That's not necessary."*

The manager replied gently, *"It's not courtesy, sir. It's respect. This... is your space now. Take all the time you need. And sir! Please allow us to offer you a complimentary experience. A small gesture from the Taj."*

Rudra bowed a little, *"Thank you. I'll join the world shortly. I just need a few minutes alone. Also... I'm waiting for her. The one I shared those moments with."*

The manager was caught off-guard by this. But this made her smile as well, *"Of course Sir. Whenever you're ready, call me. My card."*

She handed him her gold trimmed business card. Rudra nodded in gratitude. She led the rest of the team away. As they all left, Rudra stepped back into the corridor. And that's when he saw her. Resplendent. And for the first time since he was a child... Rudra felt home walk toward him. The entire lobby seemed to pause. Heads turned. Waiters whispered. Even tourists forgot their selfies. And Rudra? He forgot how to breathe. She walked up slowly, hands behind her back. He quickly tucked the bouquet behind him.

As Aagya walked in through the main doors of the Taj, Rudra stood near the closet corridor with a bouquet hidden behind him, heart thundering in his chest. He saw her. And for a second,

everything stopped. Aagya, dressed in a stunning crimson suit, moved like poetry through marble. Her hair was open, soft waves brushing her cheeks. No heels today, just simple cream flats. She had looked at the stilettos earlier, then glanced at her height in the mirror and muttered, *"Not towering over Rudra today."*

Her parents would have fainted if they saw her now. She was soft, unarmored, and glowing. And Rudra? He was stunned speechlessly. She approached slowly, both hands behind her back, mimicking his posture. She noticed the bouquet he was hiding and smirked.

Rudra smirked, *"You're late."*

Aagya grinned, *"But I'm here."*

They shared a chuckle. Then she raised a brow, *"So?"*

Rudra cleared his throat, brought the bouquet out from behind him. It was a beautiful, handcrafted arrangement. She gasped softly. Her fingers brushed over the petals, eyes widening at the soft mix of deep reds, snowy whites, haunting blacks, and nestled among them, and a single pale pink bloom tucked in like a secret memory. Her breath caught. She didn't say a word. Her fingers trembled slightly. Her lashes fluttered like they were holding back something heavier than tears. She covered her face with one hand, trying not to break. Rudra reached forward, gently touched her shoulder. She lowered her hand.

He smiled, *"Thank you for coming."*

They chuckled. Awkward. Nervous. Rudra nervously pointed at the bouquet, *"I didn't know what suits you... so I chose a little bit of everything."*

She stared. Stunned. Then, her eyes landed on the center. There were her favourite blue Forget-Me-Not flowers. Her breath hitched, *"How did you... know?"*

Rudra shrugged, *"Lucky guess!?"*

She smiled, eyes glossy, *"Thank you!"*

Rudra gently took her hand, *"It's my honor, Your Highness!"*

They laughed at this together. He then asked her to come along. She hesitated but he comforted her and she couldn't say no. The silence inside the closet was heavy. Not suffocating, but sacred. Rudra and Aagya sat side by side, knees nearly touching. His hand gently held hers, his thumb tracing soothing circles over her knuckles. She hadn't spoken since stepping in; since that first deep breath brought with it the metallic scent of memory and a flood of everything she'd buried. Her eyes roamed the walls. The dusty shelves. The forgotten mop in the corner. The same crooked bulb hanging above them that had once flickered while gunfire echoed in the hallway. She remembered. She remembered everything. She remembered the blood. The fear. The cold. The silence. And the little boy who never let go of her hand. And now, here he was again. Still holding it. Tears welled in her eyes, but they didn't fall.

Instead, she turned slightly toward him, *"When I stepped in here that night, a part of me died."*

He didn't say anything. Just listened.

Aagya continued, *"But now... I think something just came back to life."*

She looked down at their hands, then back at the dusty floor in front of them, *"All these years... I thought I lost her. The little girl I was. The one who laughed. The one who believed."*

A long breath left her lips. She was trembling, but not out of fear. She looked at him and added, *"But you... You brought her back."*

Her voice cracked slightly, but she didn't let it fall apart. She turned to him, eyes shimmering in the dim light, and for the first

time she truly saw him. Not just the boy who once saved her life, but the man who understood her soul. She leaned forward just a little, forehead nearly touching his. And then, barely above a whisper, *"Thank you... for resurrecting my inner child... and reuniting me with her."*

He gently squeezed her hand. And in that silence, no words were needed. They sat there a little longer. They were no longer prisoners of memory, but survivors reclaiming a piece of themselves.

Aagya whispered, *"I thought coming back here would break me."*

Rudra asked, *"Did it?"*

She exhaled, *"No. It made me remember I wasn't alone. Even back then."*

Rudra turned, pressing a kiss on the crown of her head, *"You never were."*

They stayed like that for a long moment... in the dark, in the dust, in the heart of an old trauma, holding hands and rewriting memories. Together. Then finally, she sat up and wiped her tears and spoke in a half-laughing voice, *"Well. That was... intense."*

Rudra jokingly replied, *"That's kind of our brand."*

She nudged his shoulder, *"Come on. Let's get out before someone locks us in again."*

Rudra stood and offered his hand. She took it. When they finally stood, they didn't look back. Rudra held the door open. Aagya stepped out first and he followed her. They stepped out, a little steadier, a little lighter; not because the past had changed, but because they weren't carrying it alone anymore. And this time, when the door closed behind them... It didn't echo like fear. It echoed like closure.

The hallway was empty now. Still. She reached for his hand once again. Not out of fear, but by choice. They walked down that hallway slowly; their fingers intertwined. And as they reached the main corridor, just before the next chapter of their night would begin. Aagya looked at Rudra and smiled. A real one. Then she shifted. Rested her head on his shoulder. Not out of romance. Not out of impulse. But because she needed to. Because this time... she allowed herself to need someone.

10. The Feast of Forgotten Flowers

The door gently creaked closed behind them as if sealing away a memory, not burying it, but preserving it. Rudra and Aagya didn't speak for a moment. The hallway was quiet again. The air felt lighter now; not weightless, but breathable. Aagya stood still, her hand still brushing against Rudra's. He looked at her from the side, her eyes glassy but peaceful, her posture upright but softer, *"I'm proud of you."*

Aagya looked at him, her lips parting slightly. She was surprised, maybe even caught off guard by the gentleness in his tone. She didn't say thank you. She didn't need to. Her eyes did it for her. Rudra reached into his back pocket and pulled out the gold-trimmed Taj business card the manager had handed him earlier. He tapped the number into his phone, brought it to his ear, and stepped a bit away to make the call, *"Ma'am, it's Rudra. We're ready."*

There was a pause. And then a warm reply on the other end, *"Of course, sir. I'll have someone escort you both to the private garden-view table we prepared. Thank you for your patience."*

Rudra hung up and walked back to Aagya, offering his hand with an old-school charm in his voice, *"Shall we?"*

Aagya looked at his hand. For a second, her independent instincts flared. But then she reminded herself that she didn't have to be in control right now. She could allow herself to be held. She placed her hand in his. And they walked together, side by side, down the marble corridor. As they approached the main hall again, a young

hotel associate dressed in a classic black-and-gold uniform was already waiting near the concierge. He gave a respectful nod, *"This way, sir, ma'am. Your table is ready."*

Rudra gently shifted position, subtly moving so he walked on the traffic-facing side of Aagya, placing himself like a quiet shield. Every time another guest passed too close, he leaned just enough to block their path. Aagya noticed. Every time. And her chest warmed at the silent gesture. They walked past the central dome, through a vine-draped corridor, and entered the private dining garden. It was a quiet open space nestled at the back of the hotel. Lamps glowed warmly along the low walls, and a pair of musicians strummed soft sitar strings under a canopy of fairy lights. The table was set for two. White napkins, shining silver cutlery, crystal water glasses, and a centerpiece of red orchids and golden fairy roses.

Rudra let go of her hand, stepped forward, and like a true gentleman, pulled out Aagya's chair for her. She looked at him, amused, *"Since when did you become so... chivalrous?"*

Rudra replied with a smirk, *"Since I realized that even dragons deserve a little courtesy."*

She laughed and the sound was soft, unfamiliar... almost childlike. He didn't say anything. He simply adjusted his own chair, nodded toward the bouquet, and gently placed it down in front of her. She reached out slowly. Her fingers hovered over the arrangement, like it might vanish if she touched it wrong. It wasn't just beautiful. It was intimate.

Deep red roses whispered of unspoken passion. Black calla lilies curved in bold silence. A few white tulips softened the space between. And in the very center, tucked almost shyly, was a single, pale pink cherry blossom. Her hand trembled. She didn't say a word. Not at first. She simply looked up at him, eyes glassy, the kind of gaze you give someone who just peeled open a wound

you forgot you were still carrying and said, *"This bouquet... it's not random, is it?"*

Rudra shook his head, *"Not even close."*

He leaned forward on the table, elbows on the linen, voice soft but clear, *"The roses... they're for the kind of love that survives war. And the kind of grief that never fully leaves."*

Aagya questioned, *"The dark red ones?"*

Rudra replied, *"Yes. For the fire. Yours. Mine. Us."*

He continued, not breaking eye contact, *"The calla lilies... they're strange. People either fear them or worship them. They're not soft. Not welcoming. But they command space. Just like you."*

Aagya exhaled. Slowly. He wasn't trying to flatter her. He was telling the truth.

Rudra continued, *"The tulips are... maybe hope. Or an apology. For all the things the world never gave you."*

He let the moment breathe before lifting a single finger and lightly pointing at the blue Forget-Me-Not flower, *"That one's for the little girl I remember. Crying in a closet. Clutching something in her bloodstained hands. I didn't realize what it was then. But when I found out these were your favorite... I knew."*

Aagya whispered, *"A petal. From a flower Agastya gave me that morning."*

Rudra added, *"And you held on to it. Even when everything else was falling apart."*

Aagya swallowed hard, *"No one's ever... remembered me like this."*

Rudra comforted her, *"Maybe they never saw you. The real you."*

Her jaw tensed, and she blinked away the wetness in her eyes. For a moment, neither spoke to the other. The waiter arrived with two glasses of cucumber-mint welcome drinks and handed them

menus with a polite bow, *"Please take your time. Let me know when you're ready to order."*

Aagya glanced at the leather-bound menu but then set it aside. She leaned forward, placing her elbows gently on the table, eyes narrowing at Rudra, *"Okay. Spill. How did you know those were my favorite flowers?"*

Rudra looked up from his menu slowly. A soft smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth, *"Let's just say... I asked someone who used to know you. Back when you weren't Queen Avaan. Someone who remembered your real self. And no, don't ask who."*

Aagya narrowed her eyes, *"Who?"*

Rudra scoffed, *"I'd rather not say. Just... someone who reminded me that softness wasn't always a crime in your world."*

Aagya spoke immediately, *"Wait – who?"*

Rudra rose a brow, *"Told you. Don't ask. You're not going to get it out of me."*

Aagya crossed her arms, *"You're infuriating."*

Rudra grinned, *"And yet... here we are."*

She sighed, annoyed, and charmed at once. Aagya held his gaze. She didn't like secrets. But for some reason... she let this one go. Rudra lowered his voice, *"When I searched for forget-me-nots and cherry blossoms... I saw a photo. A little girl holding a half-torn petal in her palm. It hit me like a punch. I remembered. That night. That closet. You wouldn't let it go, not even when your brother's blood was still warm on your skin. Even in all that chaos."*

She looked down. Eyes fixed on her fingers now curled in her lap as he continued, *"It stayed in my head. And later, I put two and two together. Thought maybe... it meant something. Something from someone."*

Aagya's throat tightened. Rudra asked, *"Your brother gave you that petal, didn't he?"*

Aagya barely nodded, *"Just before he buttoned my dress. Said I was his lioness. Gave me this pendent and called it a talisman."*

Her voice broke at the end, but she cleared her throat quickly. He reached out. Placed his hand over hers. Firm. Gentle. Unshaking, *"You've always carried your grief like armor. But grief isn't armor, Aagya. It's... weight. It's okay to put it down."*

She didn't respond. She didn't pull away either. She went still. She finally whispered, *"Thank you. For remembering."*

Rudra replied softly, *"How could I not?"*

The silence between them was no longer heavy. It felt sacred now. Rudra then added, *"Let's order. Something high in protein. I don't want you to compromise your diet."*

She stared at him for a beat, struck by the seamless care laced into his tone. She teased him, *"You sound like my trainer."*

He replied, *"Correction... I sound like someone who gives a damn."*

Aagya smiled. A small one. But a real one. They browsed the menu, flipping through pages crafted more like art than listings. After a minute, Rudra signaled the waiter. Eventually, the waiter returned, and they gave their orders.

Aagya, unapologetic as always, chose the most luxurious high-protein item available. She chose a Grilled Atlantic Salmon served on a bed of asparagus with saffron beurre blanc and a side of quinoa tabbouleh. She also asked for a truffle-dusted rocket and walnut salad with shaved parmesan.

Rudra scanned the menu like a soldier reading enemy terrain. He chose the leanest, simplest, and cheapest protein-rich item: Tandoori Chicken Tikka, served with mint chutney, onion rings and two butter naans. He requested it with butter.

Aagya teased him, *"Such a minimalist."*

Rudra shrugged, *"I train hard. Eat clean. Save cash. But also give myself a treat on special occasions."*

She chuckled. The waiter noted it all and asked, *"Still water or sparkling?"*

Rudra and Aagya spoke at the same time. Rudra said ***Still*** while Aagya said ***Sparkling***. They looked at each other and laughed for the first time since entering.

Rudra then asked for sparkling water. As the waiter left, Rudra leaned back, resting his palms on the table, exhaling, *"This menu makes me feel like a monk in a sherwani."*

Aagya chuckled, *"That... is the weirdest image I've ever had. Thanks for ruining monks."*

Rudra gave a mock serious reply, *"Anytime."*

Rudra shifted in his chair, trying not to look too self-conscious, though his words betrayed him.

"But honestly... I've no idea what the hell sparkling water even is. Never even heard of it before until this very moment.", he added while scratching the back of his neck.

Aagya froze for a beat, then burst out laughing. Her laugh echoed through the half-empty restaurant, drawing a few curious stares from nearby tables, *"Wait, wait, wait... you mean to tell me that Mr. 'Monk in a sherwani' doesn't even know what sparkling water is?"*

Rudra's ears went hot. He slumped a little, trying to cover his embarrassment with mock arrogance, *"Don't laugh! You said it so confidently, like it's the holy grail of drinks. I thought it was... I don't know... some fancy flavored water for ultra rich people who wear sunglasses indoors."*

Aagya leaned forward, still grinning, her eyes sparkling with mischief, *"It's literally just water with bubbles, Rudra. Carbonated. Like soda... except without the sugar or flavor. Just... fizzy water."*

Rudra blinked. His shoulders sank, *"So... they just add gas to water and charge triple the price? Sounds like a daylight robbery."*

Aagya chuckled again, shaking her head, *"Exactly. That's sparkling water. And still water? That's just... normal water. It's what you drink every day."*

Rudra slowly turned redder, realizing how obvious it sounded when she explained it like that. He tried to hide it by pretending to read the menu, but Aagya caught the blush crawling up his cheeks, *"You're blushing, Rudra. Don't tell me the warrior is embarrassed by water."*

Rudra groaned, covering his face with both hands, *"I should've just ordered lassi."*

That sent Aagya into another round of laughter, and for the first time, the heaviness between them lightened. Silence followed, but it was the good kind. It was the kind that settles after a storm, not before one. Moments later their food arrived, steaming and elegant. Aagya's tenderloin was plated like art. Rudra's grilled chicken looked plain, but he didn't mind. She noticed his unease while eyeing the prices earlier, but didn't say anything. The plates were placed like artwork. The fragrance of spices, truffle, citrus, and char filled the garden air.

They ate slowly, not out of etiquette, but because neither of them wanted the moment to end. They ate comfortably. Conversation drifted from childhood quirks to funny school incidents. Aagya even laughed loudly and unguardedly when Rudra recounted how he once fell off the school stage trying to dodge a chalk thrown by his teacher.

"She missed the board and hit my pride. Hard.", said Rudra.

Aagya giggled, *"You? Embarrassed? Never thought I'd see that day."*

Rudra replied, *"You bring out the worst in me."*

Aagya corrected him, *"I bring out the real you."*

They toasted to that with their glasses of sparkling water and let their plates empty slowly as the soft notes of sitar continued behind them. The candle on the table flickered gently in the wind.

At one point, Rudra leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand, *"You know, when I first saw you on that rooftop... I never imagined this."*

Aagya smiled, *"Neither did I. Honestly, I thought you were a cocky, brooding menace."*

Rudra grinned, *"Still kind of am."*

She laughed again. And for the first time, really the first, Aagya allowed herself to enjoy the moment without guilt. Rudra then told her stories from his childhood; of pranking his schoolteachers, of getting stuck in an old cupboard trying to play hide-and-seek. Aagya laughed so hard at one point that she almost dropped her fork.

"I was ten, okay? The cupboard betrayed me.", said Rudra.

Aagya laughed, *"Sounds like karma."*

She shared one or two stories too, though most were surface-level. She didn't have many funny memories from her own childhood.

"I don't remember much. I think I... forced myself to forget.", said Aagya.

Rudra didn't push. Instead, he said, *"Then let's make some you'll want to remember."*

Her breath hitched. As the last few bites disappeared from their plates and the soft tunes of the live sitar player wound down,

Rudra leaned back, gently patting his stomach with a satisfied sigh. Aagya was sipping the last of her infused cucumber-mint water, eyes soft and serene in the flicker of candlelight. But inside Rudra's chest, a different kind of storm was brewing. He had calculated everything in advance. Checked the Taj menu online. Made rough estimates. Ordered the leanest, cheapest item. Still... this was the Taj. And Aagya's salmon, truffle salad, the fine-cut glasses; everything screamed luxury. The kind of luxury his wallet couldn't comfortably breathe in.

He glanced at her. She was glowing. Not from the ambience. But from within. And for a second, he thought, *"Damn it, even if it breaks me, it's worth it."*

He subtly signaled the waiter and asked, clearing his throat, *"Uh... can we get the bill please?"*

The waiter smiled, *"Of course, sir. Just a moment."*

As soon as the waiter walked away, Rudra's shoulders stiffened. He reached into his back pocket, slowly pulling out his folded wallet. Inside were two neatly stacked notes, one debit card (possibly near its limit), and a military ID. There was nothing that screamed to afford this meal. His fingers tapped the wallet nervously on the table. Aagya noticed. Of course she did.

"You okay?", she asked, raising a brow.

"Yep. Just... post-meal math.", said Rudra trying to play it cool.

She smirked but didn't press further. The waiter returned, but instead of a leather folder, he held nothing in his hands. He leaned forward with a polite nod, *"Actually, sir... this evening is on the house. Courtesy of management."*

Rudra blinked. Once. Twice... *"I'm sorry... what?"*

The waiter gestured discreetly with his eyes, toward the far end of the garden. Rudra turned. There she was... the manager,

standing beside the musicians, a delicate crystal wine glass in her hand, partially raised in the air. Her lips curved into a proud smile. Their eyes met. And in that silent moment, she raised her glass slightly higher as a silent toast and nodded. Rudra, overwhelmed but composed, nodded back in respect, slowly placing his hand over his chest in a soft, almost military-style gesture of gratitude.

Aagya turned to look and asked with curiosity, *"What was that?"*

Rudra smiled faintly, *"Let's just say... not all battles are fought with guns. Some are won with memories."*

The moment passed like silk, gentle and light, but left a powerful imprint behind. A few minutes later, as the stars settled deeper in the night sky and the candles on their table melted a little further down, Aagya stood from her chair, *"I'll just freshen up. You?"*

Rudra replied, *"Yeah. Me too."*

They walked together through the quiet corridor leading to the **lavish washrooms** of the Taj. Split at the archway, they exchanged a look, something between comfort and thrill, and parted for their respective doors.

Inside the women's washroom, Aagya stood before the ornate golden-rimmed mirror, surrounded by velvet wallpaper and softly playing instrumental music. She opened her clutch and pulled out her lipstick, compact, and blotting tissue. But before touching anything, she paused. She looked at herself. Really looked. The kajal had smudged a little. Her hair, while still flawless, had begun to soften from the sea breeze. Her ruby pendant glimmered at her throat. But it wasn't the outer imperfections she noticed. It was the glow. Her eyes were... lighter. Not because of the lighting, but because for the first time in years, the weight behind them had shifted. She then whispered to her reflection, *"I don't hate you today."*

And then slowly, she smiled. A real one. A soft, imperfect, utterly human smile. She blotted her lips, dabbed a bit of rose tint on her cheeks, and brushed her hair behind her ears. For the first time, it wasn't for a photo shoot. Or an event. Or a mask. It was for *her*.

Inside the men's washroom, Rudra stood at the sink, palms cupped under the cool stream of water. He splashed it across his face once. Twice. Then stared into the mirror. Water dripped down his jaw. His red shirt, slightly wrinkled now, hugged his shoulders from the walk. His eyes were still heavy, but not from trauma. They held something else tonight. Peace. Purpose. Rudra spoke to himself exhaling a huge chunk of air, *"You did good, soldier."*

For a moment, he didn't see the man with the sketches or the army medal. He saw the six-year-old version of himself with wild hair, trembling hands who was hiding in a closet, holding a little girl's hand. And beside that image, he saw who he'd become. A protector. A friend. Maybe... something more. And for the first time in a long, long time... Rudra allowed himself to feel proud. Not for the muscles. Not for the medals. But for the man who could sit across from a woman who'd built castles around her pain and gently remind her how to be free. He wiped his face, adjusted his shirt, and ran his fingers through his damp hair.

After a while, they stepped out of their respective washrooms almost simultaneously, like two threads woven into the same beat of time. Rudra turned the corner first, a towel still in his hand, drying his palms. Aagya emerged moments later, slipping her compact into her clutch as she lifted her eyes and there he was. They nearly collided. For a second, both froze.

"Oh... hey.", said Rudra.

"Hi.", blinked Aagya.

They were both caught off guard and tried to mask the sudden rush of warmth they felt in that moment. Her cheeks tinted with the faintest rose. He noticed. So did she. And that made it worse. And when she looked at him, and he at her... they both paused. Two mirrors. Two reflections. But this time, they weren't reflecting who they used to be. They were meeting as who they'd finally become. A silent pause stretched between them. It was neither awkward, nor uncomfortable. It was soft and intimate. As if the walls of the Taj had paused their ancient stories just to let this moment breathe.

Rudra teased her, *"You clean up well."*

Aagya mock-rose a brow, *"I always clean up well."*

Rudra grinned, *"Touché."*

He extended his arm toward the corridor that led to the exit. She linked her arm into his without hesitation, and they walked out together past the gilded hallways, ornate pillars, and the same marble that had once borne their blood seventeen years ago. But today, it carried something else. Closure. And maybe... a beginning.

As the automatic doors opened, the Mumbai night breeze welcomed them like an old friend. The air was cooler now. Softer. The sound of the sea whispered in the background. Outside, Taj's iconic stone archways were bathed in amber light. Luxury cars waited in a neat line. Tourists took photos near the fountain. But Rudra and Aagya? They simply stepped out of that world like it didn't belong to them hand-in-hand; untamed and unscripted.

Across the street, nestled between a bookstore and a designer scarf boutique, a small gourmet ice cream cart was parked, decked with fairy lights and handwritten chalk signs. Aagya's eyes lit up. She suddenly turned her head, *"Wait... chocolate hazelnut swirl. I know that cart."*

Rudra playfully smugged, *"I may or may not have planned our route around it."*

She stared at him, *"You serious?"*

Rudra replied, *"No. But I'm going to pretend I am if it gets me brownie points."*

She laughed openly. No restraint. The kind of laugh that reached her eyes and made her glow even under streetlights. When they crossed the road, Rudra subtly stepped ahead when a fast bike sped by, his arm half-shielding her and reached the cart. Aagya noticed it and that act made her feel butterflies and a sense of safety in her stomach. Something she hadn't felt in ages.

The ice cream vendor, an elderly man with a proud mustache and red cap, recognized Aagya instantly, *"Hello Beta! Chocolate hazelnut, double scoop, waffle cone, extra crunch, right?"*

Aagya laughed, *"You do remember."*

The vendor looked at Aagya and then at Rudra, *"She used to come here after every big win in school. Alone. Quiet girl. Always dressed sharp. Never smiled."*

Rudra turned to her, his eyes playful, *"Didn't smile, huh?"*

Aagya smirked, accepting her cone, *"I had my reasons."*

Rudra turned back to the vendor, *"One for me too. Whatever she's having. But smaller. She'll steal half of mine anyway."*

The vendor replied playfully, *"Smart man."*

They both took their cones, hers slightly more glamorous, his humble and classic. And then, like something out of a film frame, they began walking slowly along the Marine Drive stretch behind the hotel, ice cream in hand, shoes tapping gently on the stones. The Arabian Sea shimmered beside them. Lamps glowed like tiny moons lining their path. Tourists murmured in passing, a child

squealed in delight chasing soap bubbles, and someone played a violin at the far end of the promenade. They didn't speak much. Words weren't needed here. Their shoulders brushed occasionally. Aagya licked her cone slowly, eyes half-closed, lost in the rhythm of the night.

Rudra asked, *"You okay?"*

She nodded, *"For the first time in years... I think I am."*

They stopped walking as they reached a slightly raised stone platform overlooking the sea, the same spot where the waves hit louder, the sky felt bigger, and the sunset would've looked like a painting had it not already dipped below the horizon. Rudra sat first. Aagya joined. Both quietly licked their cones. She looked sideways at him, his gaze fixated on the sea.

Aagya spoke with amusement, *"You always get this serious when you're with me."*

Rudra replied, *"I always get this honest when I'm with you."*

She turned fully to him now, her hand lowering the cone slightly, *"That's either the most beautiful thing someone's said to me... or the scariest."*

Rudra shrugged, *"Maybe both."*

She didn't respond. Just smiled. A real, deep, fluttering smile and leaned her head softly onto his shoulder. He exhaled. Not in shock. Not in passion. But in peace. The kind you feel when the world quiets down for just a little while, and all you can hear is the ocean reminding you that you're still alive. They sat like that. Two silhouettes under a violet sky. Ice cream in hand. The sea stretched infinitely before them. No throne. No battlefield. Just Rudra and Aagya. Humans. Bare. And finally... **home.**

11. Drenched in What We Never Said

The twilight deepened into indigo. The stars were beginning to wink into existence one by one above the Arabian Sea, and the sounds of the world began to fade into the hum of waves and the distant call of a seagull. Aagya was still resting her head on Rudra's shoulder, the last bit of her ice cream slowly melting into the waffle cone. Her eyes were fixed on the endless horizon, and his were quietly and reverently on her. And then suddenly out of the blue he said, *"Don't move."*

Aagya raised an eyebrow, sitting up slightly, *"Why? What are you –"*

But before she could finish, Rudra had already swung his bag around and pulled out his worn-out sketchbook. The edges were frayed. The pages bent from use. It looked like it had survived years of memories, because it had.

"Just... stay like that. Right there. Don't change anything.", said Rudra.

Aagya sat still. She didn't know why she obeyed so quickly. Maybe it was his tone. Soft and awestruck. Like he was looking at something sacred. She straightened her back. Let her face fall into its natural expression. Calm, curious and unguarded. For once, she wasn't performing. And that's exactly how he wanted her.

Rudra sat cross-legged in front of her on the stone pavement, the golden streetlamp and sunset behind him casting his profile in soft shadows. He flipped to a fresh page, took a breath, and began

to draw. Lines. Strokes. Shading. Detail. It was as if his hands weren't working from sight, but from memory. From a thousand echoes of moments with her, every glance, every silence, every laugh, every breakdown.

After a while, Aagya teased him, *"How's it coming, Picasso?"*

Rudra replied without looking up, *"Quiet. A Muse doesn't talk while she's being immortalized."*

Aagya scoffed in mock, *"Muse? Oh wow. You are romantic when you're in artist mode."*

Rudra smirked, *"Don't ruin it."*

Minutes passed. Rudra's eyes flicked between her face and the sketchpad. Aagya tried not to move, but her heart was drumming so hard in her chest, she wondered if it was echoing out loud.

And then, Rudra spoke while sketching, *"Smile."*

Aagya replied annoyingly, *"I already am."*

Rudra looked up for a second, *"Not the one you wear for the world."*

She paused. Something in her chest twitched. He knew. Of course, he knew. And so... she let go. Her lips curved inwards slightly, then out came a raw, open, unpolished smile. The kind that looked like it had been waiting years to surface.

Rudra stopped sketching. He stared for a moment, not at the page, but at her. He whispered, *"Now... that's the one."*

And he finished the drawing after some time, Aagya leaned forward, curious, *"Can I see it?"*

He turned the sketchbook around slowly. And she gasped. It wasn't just her. It was... Her. But not as a warrior. Not broken. Not battle-worn. It was Aagya in her goddess form. Drawn under the golden hour light, her features glowing; serene and divine. Her long hair flowed like silken twilight, and her posture was regal

yet peaceful. She sat on a lotus-shaped pedestal with one hand raised in quiet blessing, the other placed over her heart as if cradling something sacred within. Behind her, the golden sun dipped halfway into the ocean, casting a halo around her silhouette. The entire composition radiated divinity and softness. The strength without violence, power without pain.

Aagya blinked. Once. Twice. Her throat dried, *"This... isn't me."*

Rudra closed the sketchbook, *"It's how I see you."*

She didn't know what to say. Her lip trembled. For a second, she wanted to hide her face, to brush it off with a joke. But the way Rudra was looking at her, she couldn't. He leaned in. Raised his hand slowly. Tucked her hair behind her ear. Let his fingers trace the line of her jaw, gently lifting her chin.

"You're not perfect. You're not flawless. But you fight. Every day. Against memories. Expectations. Silence. That's divinity to me.", said Rudra looking straight into her eyes past the Avaan mask.

Aagya's heart nearly burst. But, she looked away. The cracks in her armor trembled again.

"You're wrong, Rudra. I'm not this. I'm not sacred. I'm... a mistake. I've hurt people. Broken things. Failed... again and again.", she replied, sobbing.

Her voice cracked. The mask was slipping as she added, *"I wasn't born for worship. I was born for... destruction."*

He tore the sketch out of his book and handed it to her. He placed it carefully in her hands and said, *"You weren't born to be worshipped. You were born to be understood. And you don't need to be perfect to be loved. You just need to be seen."*

She looked at the sketch again.

"The day you look at yourself the way I drew you... is the day you'll understand everything I've been trying to say.", he added.

Tears shimmered in her eyes. But she didn't let them fall. He didn't push. They sat in silence. The waves whispered behind them like an orchestra of memory.

After a while, Rudra stood up, brushing his jeans, *"We should get going. You'll catch a cold. And my landlady will think I've been kidnapped."*

"Wait.", she said.

He turned immediately.

"I'll drop you.", she added.

Rudra replied awestruck, *"No, it's fine. I'll take the local. I always do."*

Aagya crossed her arms, *"You're not ruining that shirt in that sweaty train. And you look too good tonight. I'm not letting that go to waste."*

Rudra grinned, *"You like how I look tonight?"*

Aagya interrupted his dream, *"Don't push your luck."*

He chuckled but still hesitated, *"Seriously, Aagya. It's out of the way for you."*

Aagya replied, *"I drive when I need to breathe. You'll be doing me a favor."*

Rudra asked again, *"You sure?"*

She gave him *that look*. He raised both hands in surrender, *"Alright. But I'm paying the toll."*

Aagya smirked, *"It's on the house. Let's go."*

They walked side by side back toward the Taj's parking space.

Outside her Porsche, Rudra paused for a second, still a little overwhelmed, *"Thank you. For... today. For this version of you."*

Aagya looked at him. No mask. No facade. Just soft, vulnerable peace.

"Thank you again, Rudra. For make me feel alive and feel real happiness after ages.", she said.

And with that, they slipped into the car with the engine purring to life, the road ahead glowing under streetlamps. But nothing in the city shined brighter...than what had just been healed inside them. The interior smelled like luxury leather and vanilla... sleek, minimalistic, and distinctly her.

She adjusted her seat, then reached for the dashboard, flipping through her playlist and smirked, *"I'll be DJ tonight. Don't worry. You'll live."*

Rudra gave her a playful glare, then chuckled as the car slowly rolled out of the Taj's front entrance, *"Do I even have a choice?"*

She laughed and the moment they hit the road, the stereo filled the cabin with soft piano keys, slowly building into something familiar...

Taylor Swift - "Enchanted"

Rudra blinked. Aagya sang along, softly at first, then with that breathy hum she did when she forgot someone was beside her. He turned to look at her, and for the first time in a long while, he didn't feel like a background character in someone else's story. She looked like peace in motion. Her hair was flowing with the breeze from the slightly open window, her fingers tapping the steering wheel in rhythm. She had taken the Bandra-Worli Sea Link road which had a cinematic view of the sunset, almost zero traffic and an extremely romantic ambience. She had intentionally taken this route because she wanted to make this evening special and romantic for him.

One by one, her playlist transitioned through the most iconic romantic tracks from Taylor Swift: **"Enchanted"**, **"Lover"** **"You Are in Love"** and finally **"Cruel Summer"** which was her favorite. As **Cruel Summer** played, Rudra found himself... bouncing. Not

dancing, just... vibing. Aagya noticed it and bit her lip to suppress a smile and teased him, *"Look at you! You're such a Swiftie now."*

Rudra replied in mock horror, *"I have no idea what that word even means."*

Aagya laughed, *"It means you're officially cute."*

Rudra rolled his eyes. But inside? His chest warmed. After the playlist faded into silence for a second, Rudra spoke, *"Can I play something?"*

Aagya curiously replied, *"Sure. Just... no death metal."*

Rudra smirked, took her phone gently, opened YouTube, typed something in and hit play. The song was **Apna Mujhe Tu Laga** from the movie **1920: Evil Returns**. A haunting, heartfelt melody filled the cabin with raw vocals, piano undercurrents, aching lyrics. Aagya blinked. She had never heard it before.

Rudra spoke softly, *"The first time I saw you... on that rooftop, remember? Scarf flying, eyes full of fire? This is what started playing in my head. I didn't even know your name yet."*

Aagya couldn't reply. She just stared ahead, her fingers tightening around the steering wheel. The lyrics spoke of recognition. Of pain wrapped in familiarity. Of finding someone you didn't know you were missing. Both of them listened in silence; not the awkward kind, but the sacred kind. The kind where you didn't need to say anything because the music had already said it all. She turned to glance at him once. He was already looking at her. A small, nervous smile passed between them.

The car slowed down as they approached Rudra's modest society entrance. A group of children played cricket in the parking lot nearby. Aunties stood gossiping on balconies, their attention briefly turning toward the black luxury car as it rolled in. The Porsche stood still under the melancholy night, its silhouette

melting into the misty golden streetlights of Rudra's quiet society. The air was heavy... humid, trembling, expectant... like the sky had been holding back tears all day and was now moments from breaking down.

Inside the car, silence wasn't silence. It was everything else. The kind that wraps itself around the throat, velvet-soft but suffocating. Aagya finally broke the silence, *"We're here."*

Rudra turned to her with a mix of awe and disbelief in his eyes, *"This... was the most beautiful day of my life."*

Aagya smiled and replied, brushing a strand behind her ear, *"Same."*

There was a pause. Rudra grinned, *"And don't forget... we're sworn enemies to the world. You wouldn't want to ruin your ice-cold Queen Avaan image now, would you?"*

She rolled her eyes but laughed. Something about the way he said her name... like she was more than just a brand or a façade. Rudra exhaled and reached for the door handle. But before he opened it, he turned, *"Ohh!! I almost forgot. There's someone who wants to see you again."*

His voice was casual. Too casual. But his eyes were betraying him. They were tender and raw. Aagya replied with confusion, *"Who?"*

Rudra smiled, *"Latika. The little girl from my building. You met her that day... remember?"*

Aagya blinked, and then the memory struck. She remembered the notorious little girl who had escorted her to Rudra's room, the one who smiled wide when Aagya waved at her. The one who had reminded her, just a little, of herself before the world got too loud. Aagya replied fondly, *"That tiny bossy one? She was adorable."*

Rudra laughed, *"Yeah, well... she's been talking about you non-stop since that day. And guess what? Her birthday is coming soon."*

Aagya blinked, *"She remembers me?"*

Rudra gave a soft smile, *"Of course. She's declared you her favorite person. Told all her school friends that you're the Queen of Earth and Mars."*

Aagya chuckled. A sound Rudra would bottle if he could. Rudra added, *"She made me promise I'd bring you. Said if you came, it would be the best birthday of her life."*

Aagya stared at him, blinking away a warmth rising behind her lashes. The way Rudra talked about her... It wasn't just affection. It was family. And something in the way he said it... made her feel like she was being invited into that family too.

Aagya smiled and nodded, *"Tell her... I'll be there. I wouldn't miss it for the world."*

Rudra exhaled and replied in a relieved but mock-serious tone, *"Good. Otherwise, I'd have had to deal with a full-blown Latika rebellion."*

They both laughed. Then Rudra added, *"I'll see you soon, then."*

Aagya replied, *"You better."*

He grinned. Aagya didn't look away. She just watched him, head tilted slightly, as if trying to memorize him. Something wild flickered behind her eyes. He stepped out of the car, shutting the door gently. He walked slowly toward his building's gate, shoulders slightly slouched. Not sad. Not tense. Just... unfinished.

Inside the car, Aagya's fingers curled tightly around the steering wheel. Her breath hitched. The leather felt too cold. Too empty. Something snapped. She shoved the door open and stepped out. The wind met her like an old lover. Urgent, breathless, and wild. She shouted his name. Her voice echoed. He stopped. Turned.

And then, time staggered. She ran to him. Hair flying. Dupatta trailing behind her like crimson fire. Her flats slapped the pavement, and in those seconds, nothing else existed. Not her legacy. Not his past. Just this moment. And then, she crashed into him. She threw her arms around his chest, burying her face into him. And just like that, the sky cracked open and the rain fell like a curtain call after the final act. Soft at first, then pouring. Just like the day they met.

He wrapped his arms around her instantly, pulling her closer. The sky shattered. They stood like that in the middle of the driveway soaked, breathless and safe. Rain fell in sheets thick, ruthless, and unstoppable. It came down in waves, drenching them within seconds. But they didn't move. They didn't flinch. Rudra's arms wrapped around her like instinct. No hesitation. No confusion. Like he had been waiting his whole life to be needed like this. Aagya buried her face in his chest, her fingers clutching the back of his soaked shirt. His heart was hammering. Hers was breaking open.

"Thank you, Rudra...", She spoke, breathing heavily, almost trembling.

Rudra leaned in closer, his hand rising to cradle the back of her head. Aagya added in a voice that was barely a whisper, *"For bringing her back."*

Rudra stayed silent. Aagya continued with her voice breaking, *"My inner child. I didn't even realize when I lost her. But you... you brought her back to me. You made her feel safe again."*

Rudra shut his eyes. The rain slid down his lashes, blending with the tears he wouldn't admit to. His voice was low and husky, like something pulled from the depths of him, *"She never left. She was just waiting for you to stop surviving long enough to start living."*

Their breaths synced... shallow, warm, and echoing through soaked fabric. Rudra whispered into her hair, *"You're safe with me, Aagya.. Always. And if the world tries to hurt you again... I'll burn it to ashes."*

Her heart slammed against her ribs. She replied in a soft but trembling voice, *"What if this is all just... a beautiful dream? A moment that'll vanish by morning?"*

He pulled back, placed both hands on her rain-kissed cheeks, and looked directly into her eyes, *"Then I'll fight sleep itself. Even if I have to become Kumbhkaran. Because I'm not letting this dream end."*

She laughed with half joy and half heartbreak. When Aagya pulled back slightly, water streamed down both their faces. Her eyes were wide. His were stormy. For a long, suspended moment they just looked at each other. The sexual tension between them had no shame now. It uncoiled slowly, curling around their legs, slipping under their skin.

Aagya's gaze dropped to his lips. Rudra didn't look away. Their faces hovered just inches apart. Lips parted. Breaths caught. She could feel the heat radiating off his chest through his drenched shirt. He could feel the way her fingers trembled against his wrist. Then she looked up at him... soaked, vulnerable, divine. And he... lost his words. Rudra put her hair strands behind her right ear with his left hand, *"You look like a goddess who just walked out of war and made the whole universe bow to her."*

Aagya whispered while her tears mixed with the rain, *"Like the sketch?"*

Rudra replied with a soft smile, *"Exactly like the sketch."*

He reached up slowly, as if touching her without permission would crack her open. His fingertips traced her jawline. Gently tucked a drenched strand of hair behind her ear. There was an unknown spark and tension between them waiting to be

unleashed. Then, he leaned forward. She closed her eyes and surrendered herself to that moment. She thought he'd kiss her. He did kiss her. It didn't land on her lips, but her forehead. It wasn't a soft kiss. It was a vow. A grounding. A prayer pressed into her skin.

"I'll never let your inner child die again, Aagya. I'll burn the world down before I let it break you again.", he said.

Her eyes fluttered. For one long moment, they just stood there, bodies close, hearts exposed, the rain trying its best to drown them in truth. Then, she stepped back. Just a little. Their hands still touched. But their eyes... Their eyes said everything that hadn't been spoken yet. Sexual tension spiked again. Rudra's eyes trailed down to her mouth, lingered, then darted back up. Aagya saw it. She bit her lower lip, then let it go slowly and seductively without even realizing it. Her eyes sparkled with something untamed now. Rudra swallowed hard. The air around them practically hummed with restraint. But then, Rudra stepped back and smirked faintly, *"You should go. Or the rain will get jealous."*

Aagya laughed, not because it was funny, but because he made everything feel easier. She turned toward the car, paused, glanced over her shoulder and spoke in a teasing tone, *"Text me when you dry off. I don't want my 'protector' to fall sick."*

Rudra grinned and bowed, taking out his imaginary hat, *"Yes, milady."*

They both laughed at this. Aagya bit her lip trying to hide how much happy she was in that moment... with him.

Rudra then added in the same tone, *"Text me when you reach home safely. Okay?"*

She nodded and then got into the car. Rudra stayed outside, rain still falling around him like a veil of magic and madness. He

watched her drive away. Not with longing. But with reverence. As if she had become the one prayer, he had never dared to ask for... and somehow, the universe had answered anyway. He gave a final glance, soaking her in like a memory he never wanted to lose and walked toward the society gate.

She drove afar and then stopped at a point where he was still visible. She stood there for a moment, watching him disappear behind the security check, his shirt clinging to him from the rain, his silhouette turning into shadow. Her heart was fuller than it had been in years. She watched him until the shadows swallowed him. Her heart was pounding in places she didn't even know existed. The wipers slid once across the windshield. And she whispered to herself, *"I think I just fell for a boy who once saved me... And didn't even ask for anything in return."*

She started the car and drove back home.

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The Porsche pulled up slowly into the marble driveway of the Avaan Mansion. Aagya sat still in the driver's seat, watching the raindrops race against each other across the windshield. Her hands were still trembling slightly. Not from the cold, but from the weight of everything she was feeling. Rudra's scent still lingered faintly in the air. His warmth still lingered on her skin. She touched her forehead where he had kissed her. Closed her eyes. Held that moment like a prayer. But reality doesn't wait. The main door of the house opened before she could even step out of the car. Her mother stood in the foyer with folded arms. Her father flanked her, face taut with disapproval. A butler stood awkwardly behind them, unsure whether to announce her arrival or run for cover.

She opened the door and stepped out, flats squelching against the wet driveway. Her crimson suit clung to her frame. Her dupatta hung damp and heavy over one shoulder. Hair dripping. Mascara

faintly smudged despite her best waterproof attempts. But she didn't care. She looked radiant. Alive. And that only seemed to irritate her parents further.

Her mother shouted at her, *"Aagya! What the hell is wrong with you? Do you have any idea what time it is?!"*

Her father added, *"We've called you fifteen times! Your phone kept saying switched off! You've been gone all day. Where the hell were you?!"*

Aagya replied calmly, *"I was out."*

Her mother shouted again, *"That's not an answer."*

Aagya replied dryly, *"Didn't know I needed to file a report every time I left the house."*

Her father stepped closer, *"You think this is funny? Do you realize you're carrying our name? Our reputation? You disappear for hours without a word, come back soaking wet like some – some –"*

Her mother cut in, *"– Like someone without any class or sense of dignity!"*

Aagya stared at them both. Blank. Expressionless. Then spoke in a flat voice, *"Anything else? Or can I go to my room?"*

Her father replied, *"If this happens again, you're not stepping foot outside this house. Do you understand?"*

Aagya replied quietly, *"Crystal clear."*

Without another word, she turned and walked past them. The butler instinctively moved aside, bowing slightly. She ignored him. Her heels tapped softly on the marble as she climbed the staircase, one step at a time with each step heavier than the last. She reached her door. Opened it. Closed it behind her. Locked it. The moment the lock clicked, her body sagged like a puppet whose strings had been cut. She walked to the bed, peeled off her soaking dupatta, dropped it on the floor, then sat on the edge of

her bed. Her phone buzzed. A message. Not from Rudra. Just Megha, asking if she wanted dinner. She didn't respond. Instead, she buzzed the butler via the intercom, *"Tell the chef to send dinner up. I'm not coming down."*

The butler murmured a yes and hung up. She opened her side drawer and carefully placed the sketch Rudra had gifted her of the divine version of herself he had drawn in golden hour light. The one that had made her cry and blush at once. She stared at it for a while and then folded it slowly. She then changed into her pajamas and laid on the bed. Then reached under the mattress to a secret compartment she had once asked a carpenter to build. From it, she took out two other sketches Rudra had given her. One of her crying in the closet. One of her broken queen self with the ruby. Now three versions of herself stared back at her — The Child, The Weapon and The Goddess. She stared at all of them for a long time. Then finally, gathered them in her arms like fragile treasures and placed them carefully in the compartment again. This time, she lingered. Closed the lid with reverence. And whispered softly to herself, *"Thank you..."*

Then she collapsed on the bed face first into her pillow and cried. Not like a wreck this time. But like a girl who had just remembered what softness felt like. What being cared for without any expectations actually meant. What it meant to be safe. But the warmth didn't last. Because after the tears dried, she reached for her phone again. Clicked open WhatsApp. Clicked on his name. No blue ticks. No reply to her *"I'm home safe"* message. She scrolled up. Saw her previous messages. Rudra had always replied. Always. But that night, he didn't.

She called. It rang once. Then the robotic voice: *"The number you are trying to reach is currently switched off..."*

She frowned. Called again. Same result. She sat up straighter. Tried texting.

"Hey... made it home. Hope you did too. Text when you can?", she typed.

Delivered. Not read. She waited five minutes. Typed again: *"Rudra...?"*

Nothing. Her chest tightened. Panic crept in quietly like a shadow crawling under the door. She redialed. Still switched off. Her breath shortened. She put the phone down and stood up pacing. Her hands shook. She didn't know why this felt so scary. He was probably just asleep. Or his phone died. right? But something felt wrong. So deeply, bone-deep wrong. She sat back down and texted again, *"Please reply. Just say you're okay. Anything."*

The text sat there. Mocking her. Read receipts: grey. Like a heart still beating, but barely. She held the phone to her chest. Again. Clutched it like a lifeline. Like she had in the closet, seventeen years ago. And whispered, almost in a breath, *"Don't disappear. Not you. Not now. Not after everything."*

The rain still tapped at her windows like a memory knocking gently. And she waited in silence. Her eyes stared at the screen until sleep quietly dragged her under. Still waiting. Still scared. Still hoping.

12. After the Embrace, Before the Blood

The morning sun peeked through the blinds, but the weight in her chest felt heavier than any light could lift. Aagya jolted awake, her phone buzzing softly in her hand. She rubbed her eyes and immediately glanced at her screen. Still no message. No reply to her text. Her breath caught. She tried to reason with herself, *"Maybe he was too tired... maybe he just forgot..."*

But the doubt in her voice was louder than hope. Aagya stared at her phone screen for what felt like the thousandth time. The blue ticks were still missing. She had texted him almost eight hours ago. Her own words echoed back at her like a cruel joke. But there was nothing. No *"delivered."* No *"seen."* No reply. No call. No dot-dot-dot typing bubble.

She chewed on her lower lip, legs curled beneath her on the couch. Her diary lay open beside her untouched. Her phone rested against her chest, clutched like it was his hand she was holding. She had never felt like this before. Not even during investor pitches. Not during brand controversies. Not even the day her parents threatened to disown her. This was different. It wasn't ego. It wasn't pride. It was fear. She had felt this only once before. The night her brother died. Her thumb hovered over the call button again. This time, she didn't overthink it. But the reply was the same, *"The number you are trying to reach is currently switched off."*

Her heart skipped. Then thudded. Hard. Her skin went cold. Eyes wide. She sat up straight and redialed. **Same response.** Once.

Twice. Thrice. Still no answer. Aagya whispered to herself, *"Rudra... this isn't funny."*

Her voice cracked. She stood up, pacing across her room like a storm bottled in human form. Her brain raced through scenarios.

"Maybe he left his phone on silent."

"Maybe the battery died."

"Maybe the network dropped."

But deep down... she knew something was wrong. She could feel it in her bones that something had gone **terribly** wrong. The blood drained from her face. She sat up in bed, heart racing now. She didn't even bother brushing her hair before getting dressed and storming out for the studio. Aagya pushed the studio doors open with tension radiating from every inch of her. Simran, seated near the mood board, looked up. Aagya asked them, *"Where the hell is Rudra?"*

Simran replied, confused, *"He's not here yet. He didn't call either."*

Aadarsh added gently from the lighting station, *"Maybe he had a late night, you know... personal stuff?"*

Megha asked, *"Is everything okay?"*

Aagya's voice dropped cold, *"We don't have the luxury of disappearing. Not anymore. Not with twenty days left."*

She turned to the team, *"We finish the script by tonight. I don't care who's missing."*

The team looked at each other, then silently nodded and got to work. But Aagya wasn't calm. She was spiraling inside. Hours later, just before lunch break, her phone buzzed. It was a call from an unknown number. She hesitated, then answered. A small, trembling voice broke through the line, *"Aagya didi...?"*

Aagya replied, worried, *"Who's this?"*

The voice returned, sobbing, *"It's.... it's Latika!"*

Aagya stood up instantly, *"Latika? What happened?!"*

Latika broke down, *"Please... please help. Bhaiya – Rudra bhaiya – he's... he's really hurt. He saved me from bad men... but now he's in the hospital. He's in the ICU. He's not waking up..."*

Aagya staggered back, hand gripping the table, *"What?! What are you saying?!"*

Latika now cried harder, *"Please come fast... He's admitted in Lifecare Hospital... It's near our building... I don't know what to do..."*

Aagya replied softly trying to stay strong, *"I'm on my way, Latika. Just hold on. I'm coming. Be brave, okay?"*

She ended the call and turned to find the whole team watching her. Geeta asked nervously, *"Aagya...? What is it?"*

Aagya swallowed hard, *"Rudra... he's in the hospital. ICU. He got attacked last night. He saved a kid. That's the one who just called me."*

Simran's hand flew to her mouth. Everyone stood in silence. Aagya spoke sharply, *"We're leaving. Now."*

An hour later at Lifecare Hospital, the car barely stopped before Aagya pushed the door open and sprinted to the reception and asked breathlessly, *"Rudra! Rudra Suwigya! ICU! Where is he?!"*

Before the receptionist could respond, a voice called behind her choking through tears, *"Aagya didi!"*

Aagya spun around. The moment their eyes met, something cracked inside both of them. Latika rushed toward her. Aagya dropped to her knees and pulled her into her arms, *"Hey hey hey... I'm here. I'm here now..."*

Latika replied in a trembling voice, *"He saved me, didi... he saved me from them... they tried to hurt me but Rudra bhaiya..."*

Aagya hugged her tighter, then gently pulled back, *"Where is he now? Please... take me to him."*

Latika nodded and took her hand, guiding her through the corridor. She pushed past, heels echoing in the sterile corridor. Her vision blurred with tears and she refused to let fall. Two Territorial Army officers stood guard outside the ICU.

"Ma'am, no civilians beyond this point.", said one officer.

Aagya asked, *"I need to see him. Please – he's my –"*

Before she could say more, a woman's voice came from behind. It was Latika's Mother, *"Let her go. She's family. Let her see him."*

The officers hesitated, then nodded silently and stepped aside. She finally saw him through the glass. Wires. Tubes. Oxygen mask. Blood seeped through the bandages on his side. Monitors blinking erratically. Her knees buckled. She pressed her hand to the glass, a sob ripping out from her chest, *"No... no, no, no... please..."*

A doctor stepped out, *"He lost a lot of blood. We've managed to stabilize him for now, but he's not out of danger yet. He was found unconscious near a children's park. Multiple attackers. It seems... he saved a little girl's life."*

When they came inside the ICU, the sterile scent hit Aagya like a slap. Then she saw him. Unconscious. Pale. Wires attached to his chest. Bandages over his side. Dried blood staining the gauze. Breathing shallow. Her legs nearly gave out. She stumbled to the chair beside him and slowly sat down, her trembling fingers reaching for his hand, *"No... no no no... what happened to you..."*

Her head dropped to the bed as tears began to fall. Her team watched from the door, frozen in disbelief. Simran whispered to Geeta, *"She's never... I've never seen her cry."*

Ayush spoke quietly to the others, *"What's this? She's crying for the guy she used to roast daily?"*

The team quietly stepped back to give her space. Aagya spoke again, still holding his hand, *"Rudra... wake up, idiot. You promised you'd never let our dream end. Please...."*

Latika walked in slowly, sat beside her and whispered, *"Didi... can I tell you what happened?"*

Aagya looked up, eyes swollen, *"Yes. Please."*

Latika sat beside Aagya on the cold steel bench just outside the ICU. Her little hands clenched the hem of her frock, knuckles pale. Her eyes were swollen from crying, her voice hoarse. Aagya bent down to her level, brushing a strand of hair from Latika's cheek. Her own voice was soft now, maternal even, laced with trembling care, *"Latika... tell me what happened. Take your time. I'm right here."*

Latika sniffled, wiped her nose with her sleeve, and began in a broken, scattered rhythm... the kind that only children have when trying to make sense of nightmares, *"I... I was playing near the swing... after school. I forgot the time. It was getting dark but I was waiting for mummy... and then..."*

She looked down, her feet swinging slightly above the floor, *"I saw some uncles... not from our building. They were standing near the park gate... and whispering something. One of them had a knife. I saw it. I got scared."*

Aagya's eyes widened slightly. She reached out and held Latika's hand, *"And then?"*

Latika whispered, *"I tried to hide behind the pillar. I was shaking so much... and then I saw Rudra bhaiya. He was running. Like... fast fast. And he hit one of them like in the movies..."*

She looked up at Aagya with wide, innocent awe and continued, *"He fought all of them, didi. He was like a hero. Like a superhero. But then... one uncle... he tried to come to me. He had a knife. Rudra bhaiya shouted at me to run. I wanted to... but my legs wouldn't move. I was so scared."*

She broke down again, tears slipping down her cheeks. Aagya pulled her into a soft embrace, *"You're okay now. You're safe. You were so brave, sweetie. So brave."*

Latika hiccupped between sobs and said, *"Bhaiya saved me. He... he pushed that man away and they both fell on the bench and... and I saw blood. So much blood. He kept fighting even when he was bleeding. I saw him fall... he looked at me... and smiled. Then he fell. He didn't move."*

Aagya's lips parted, but no words came. Her heart was in her throat. Her mind was screaming, but her voice had disappeared. Latika wiped her tears and continued, *"I ran to get help. I shouted... people came... all the neighbors. Mummy-papa came too. They called the ambulance. Bhaiya didn't wake up... even in the ambulance. And then... and then the army bhaiyas came. They didn't say anything but they looked very concerned about him as if they knew him..."*

Aagya stared at Latika, blinking away her own tears, *"Why would they be there in the first place?"*

Latika looked down again, quieter now, *"They gave him a salute when they put him on a stretcher. Everyone was looking. They said that they were just respecting his bravery as a civilian. Some people were crying. They said... he saved the whole colony."*

Aagya reached for Latika's cheek, gently lifting her face, *"He saved the most important part of it."*

Latika sniffed and leaned into her, *"Will he be okay, didi? Please tell me he'll be okay..."*

Aagya's eyes glistened. Her voice shook, *"He has to be. He promised he wouldn't leave again. And Rudra never breaks promises."*

Latika smiled faintly, wiping her nose again with the same sleeve, *"I made a card for him... I wanna give it when he wakes up. Can I, didi?"*

Aagya nodded, brushing her fingers over Latika's hair, *"Not just that... when he wakes up, we'll throw the biggest celebration he's ever had. You, me, and everyone who loves him."*

Latika's eyes sparkled, even through the sadness.

.....

There was darkness. It wasn't sleep. It wasn't death. It was something in-between. A slow, syrupy void. Like falling through water you couldn't see, heavy and silent. Rudra floated in it, untethered. Memories flickered like distant lightning: Latika's scream, a blade slicing skin, warm blood, a crooked smile, and then... Aagya. Her voice. Her touch. He wanted to reach for her, but his limbs wouldn't obey. His body was screaming somewhere, but the pain was far away, muted. Like thunder underwater. He heard beeping. Monitors. The rustle of fabric. The faint clink of metal on the tray. Then, a hand. Warm. Steady. Familiar. Fingers wrapped around his. A sob. Then her voice, breaking through the haze, *"Come on... you stubborn idiot. You don't get to die like this. Not after what you did. Not after what you told me."*

Rudra's brow twitched, the first sign of life. Aagya gasped, *"Rudra? Hey – hey, you with me?"*

He tried to open his eyes. They were heavy. Everything ached. He felt like he'd been hit by a truck and dragged through hell twice. But her voice... He'd follow that voice into fire. His right eye blinked open slowly. Blurry outlines. Blinding white lights. And then, her face. Aagya. Tears slipping down her cheeks. Her lipstick smudged. Eyes bloodshot. Her hair was undone. Beautiful. Real. His throat was sandpaper. He tried to speak.

Nothing came. Aagya leaned closer, placing her hand on his forehead, *"Don't speak. Just... just stay awake. Please. I'm here. I'm right here."*

Rudra swallowed hard. A cough rattled his chest. Pain bloomed everywhere, sharp and angry. But he didn't care and said, *"...Latika?"*

Aagya replied with relief, *"She's okay. You saved her. You saved everyone, Rudra."*

A breath escaped from him. His eyes fluttered, *"...how bad?"*

Aagya replied, wiping his forehead, *"Three deep wounds. Two cracked ribs. A dislocated shoulder. A concussion. Fifteen stitches. And a very long scar right here – "*

She gently points beside his ribcage, *" – but you're alive."*

A small smirk ghosted over Rudra's lips, *"That's all?"*

Aagya replied in a half-laughing and half-sobbing tone, *"Shut up. You're lucky I didn't kill you myself."*

He coughed, and she immediately leaned in with water. She brought the straw to his lips. He took a slow sip. Then another. The pain receded slightly. He looked at her, like he really looked at her. Mascara stained. Skin pale. Eyes fierce. He asked her, *"You came? For me?"*

Aagya inhaled sharply, *"Of course I came for you, you dumbass."*

She lowered her head, pressing her forehead to the back of his hand. He moved his fingers. Slowly. Painfully. And curled them around her. Silence wrapped them like a blanket. Then, the door creaked open. Latika peeked in, clutching a handmade card with a poorly drawn superhero holding a shield and wearing a big red scarf that said **"Rudra Bhaiya."**

A nurse tried to stop her, but Aagya raised her hand, *"Let her in."*

Latika tiptoed in. Eyes wide. Afraid. Rudra smiled as best he could, *"Hey, champ..."*

Latika burst into tears, ran over, and gently threw her arms around him, *"I thought you were gone..."*

Rudra replied jokingly, *"Not that easy to kill, kiddo."*

Latika tried to giggle, but it came out like a sob. She reached out, touching his fingers, *"You look scary."*

Rudra chuckled faintly, *"Good. It means they didn't win."*

Latika sniffled, then took a shaky breath, *"I made this for you... when you were still sleeping."*

She gently unfolded the card she'd clutched so tightly. It was a crayon-colored drawing of Rudra Bhैया with a red cape and a heart-shaped shield, surrounded by stick-figure stars and a sun with a happy face. Inside, in her crooked but careful handwriting, it read:

"My hero didn't leave me.

My hero fought the monsters.

My hero always comes back.

I love you, Rudra Bhैया."

She placed it on his chest again, right above his heart and gently pressed it down with both her little hands and whispered, *"I know you don't like showing pain. But this one time... let this stay close."*

Rudra's throat tightened. He couldn't speak. He simply rested his hand over hers, over the card, a quiet, tearless thank-you. Latika looked at Aagya, *"He needs to sleep now, didi. Doctor uncle said not to talk much."*

Aagya nodded, brushing Rudra's hair back from his forehead, *"She's right. You rest. I'll be here when you wake up."*

Rudra blinked slowly and then held her hand as if he'd lose her forever if he didn't, *"Stay... please."*

Aagya replied softly, *"I'm not going anywhere."*

His eyes fluttered shut. This time, not from injury but peace. She sat back, still holding his hand, as the machines beeped softly beside them. Outside the window, the rain began again.

The hospital room was quiet. Latika had been taken home. The team had left to give them privacy. Night has fallen. Only the low hum of machines kept them company. Rudra was propped up slightly now, a faint IV still attached to his arm.

Aagya was about to leave when Rudra stopped her, *"Aagya... wait."*

She paused at the door and turned, *"You need rest."*

Rudra spoke, eyes holding hers, *"I need you to know who I really am."*

She said nothing, but the shift in her expression said that she was listening. Rudra continued, *"There's so much you don't know. So much I've hidden. Not because I didn't trust you... but because I didn't know how."*

Aagya replied, *"You don't owe me anything, Rudra."*

Rudra replied in a firm voice, *"But I want to. I want to tell you everything. Not as Rudra, the team member... or the guy you fought with every day... but as the boy who held your hand in a dark closet and swore to never let go."*

Aagya's breath caught. He continued, *"Not here. Not now. But when I'm better... I want one hour. Just you and me. No scripts. No roles. No masks."*

Aagya replied softly, *"And if I don't like what I hear?"*

Rudra replied, giving a weak smile, *"Then I'll still be glad I told you. Because the truth deserves a voice, even if it breaks me."*

Aagya stood still for a moment... then walked back, leant down, and kissed his forehead gently and said, *"Get better first, Tiger. Then we'll talk."*

She came out of the ICU and closed the door behind her. Rudra lay still. Machines hummed. That kiss from Aagya's soft lips lingered onto his skin like an armor beautiful and strong enough for him to survive the worst and the most inhuman tortures of hell with a smile and he won't even feel the slightest bit of pain at all.

Outside, Aagya didn't leave. Not even for a minute. She didn't take calls. Didn't text anyone. She sat on that cold bench outside his room for the rest of the night, staring at the floor, occasionally looking up just to check if he was breathing. Every beep from the monitor stabbed her heart. She whispered his name like a prayer. Over and over again.

A prayer for the boy who taught her how to breathe again.

A prayer for the warrior who carried children to safety before collapsing himself.

A prayer for the boy she was falling for... with no backup plan.

13. The Oath Beneath the Scars

The sterile silence of the hospital room was broken only by the low hum of machines. Moonlight spilled through the half-closed blinds, painting silver streaks across Rudra's bandaged body. He lay motionless, chest rising and falling, but his fingers twitched. His brow furrowed. And in the depths of unconsciousness, the dream began:

The night was still. Mumbai's chaotic heartbeat had slowed to a lull, blanketing the city in deceptive calm. The scent of rain still hung in the air, but this wasn't a night of romance. Not anymore. Rudra had just stepped out of Aagya's car a few minutes ago. His shirt was still damp, not just from the rain, but from the ghost of a hug that lingered on his chest like a phantom brand. Aagya had held him like the world would collapse if she let go. Her voice... soft and trembling, had whispered, *"Thank you... for resurrecting my inner child."*

That line clung to him like incense in a temple. He smiled at the thought as he walked up the stairwell to his block; her scent still gently laced in his collar. Then, his phone buzzed. The tone was encrypted.

Sender: Lt. Gaurav Singh

Message: *"Need your eyes on something. Suspicious activity reported behind your society's kids' play area. Unmarked movement. 10 mins ago. Could be nothing. Or not. Civilians could be at risk. Confirm location. Stay sharp."*

Rudra's pupils dilated. He didn't need a second warning. "*Could be nothing*" never meant "*nothing*." His expressions hardened. The soft man who was just dropped home by Aagya vanished like smoke. The soldier returned. He slid his phone into silent mode, triggered voice recording, a standard Territorial Army protocol, and spun on his heel. No uniform. No backup. No hesitation. He descended the back stairwell like a phantom, boots silent on stone. Shadows welcomed him. The night thickened. He slipped around the alley corner into the garden area where the children usually played. But tonight, the air was wrong. Too still. Too sharp. Like the night was holding its breath.

That's when he saw them. There were ten men in dark clothes with no branding, no identifiers, no phones and no talking. Their movements were too rehearsed. Too clean. Predators? Or maybe the ones he's been after? Rudra's instincts screamed. Three by the swing set. Two near the underground water tank. One near the closed security booth. Four circling behind the apartment's flank. A blade shimmered. Then another. One of them checked a silencer-fitted pistol like it was a cigarette. His jaw clenched. And then, he saw her. Latika. Crouched behind the cement pillar near the small playground slide. Her tiny hands clutched her sketchbook like a shield. She hadn't gone home yet.

The world tunneled. One breath. One decision. No time to think. He moved. The first man didn't even see him coming. Rudra launched himself off a bench, his elbow driving down into the back of the attacker's skull with the force of a piledriver.

CRACK.

The man collapsed, twitching. Rudra snatched the blade mid-fall, spun, and buried it into the thigh of the next attacker with a primal growl. The man screamed as blood sprayed across the garden wall. Rudra yanked him forward by the collar and smashed his forehead into the bark of a neem tree.

Thud. Thud. THUD.

The third man, the one with the gun, turned just as Rudra lunged. He caught the man's wrist, twisted hard, dislocating it instantly. The pistol clattered to the ground. Rudra brought his knee up into the man's gut, then grabbed the gun and smashed it sideways into his temple. Teeth shattered. Blood spurted.

Three down. But the sound had drawn the rest. Rudra ducked behind a cement bench as gunfire erupted. Bullets whizzed past. One grazed his shoulder, ripping the fabric. Another struck the bench, cracking concrete. Rudra dove. Rolled. Then he heard the scream, "*Bhaiyaaaaaa!*"

His blood ran cold. He turned. A man was running towards Latika, knife out, eyes wild. Rudra bolted forward and shouted, "*Latika! RUN!*"

She froze. He didn't. His boots pounded the ground. He tackled the attacker at full speed, shoulder-first, sending both of them crashing into a wrought iron bench. The metal bent under their weight. But Rudra's side exploded in pain. His vision flashed red. He looked down. A blade was buried deep into his ribs. The bastard had stabbed him during the charge. He gritted his teeth and snarled, grabbing the man's collar, "*Should've aimed for my heart.*"

He grabbed the man's head and smashed it into the edge of the bench. Once. Twice. Blood burst like paint on canvas. The body slumped. But Rudra couldn't stand properly anymore. He staggered. Vision blurred. Another came from behind, metal rod in hand. But before he could understand, the rod smashed against his temple. His ears rang. He dropped to one knee, dazed. But his eyes? They were still on Latika. She was frozen, trembling behind the temple pillar. Her tiny voice cracked through the chaos, "*Bhaiya...*"

Rudra bled from the mouth now. The world was spinning, but he smiled. Everything spun. His ears rang. His vision swirled in crimson clouds. The last attacker stood over him now, panting, feral, victorious. *"Territorial Army, huh?" he spat, voice laced with venom. "Let's see how brave you are when you're dead, Captain."*

He raised the rod again. But just before it fell, Rudra's hand moved. Fast. Instinctively. From the grass beside him, he snatched the bloodied blade dropped by the second man he'd taken down earlier, the same one he'd disarmed by the swing set. The handle dug into his cut palm, but he didn't care. With a snarl of pure adrenaline, he slashed upward.

Zzzzzzzzzzzz.

Not toward the body, but toward the face. The blade tore across the attacker's cheek. A brutal, diagonal gash from the side of his nose to the jawline. Flesh opened. Blood gushed. The scream that followed was inhuman, *"AAAAARGHHHH!!"*

The man dropped the rod, stumbling backward in agony, his hands pressed to the wound. Blood oozed through his fingers, hot and dark. He looked down at Rudra, hate and fear tangled in his gaze. Rudra lay motionless again, eyes barely open, but a flicker of vengeance danced in his broken expression, *"I want you to live. So I can kill you properly... next time. Coz now I'll remember you. And I will... come for you!"*

The man, now shaking and panicking, turned and ran into the darkness, disappearing into the narrow construction alley behind the garden wall. Latika ran towards Rudra. Rudra bled more from the mouth now. The world was spinning, but he smiled. He limped forward. Dropped to his knees in front of her. Pulled her into his arms, *"Shh... Champ... it's okay. I got you."*

He tried to stand. He couldn't. His legs gave out. He collapsed onto the grass with a dull, wet **thump**. His eyes fluttered. "*Please... don't go bhaiya ... please...*", said a sobbing Latika.

He reached for her hand. His grip was weak. Sirens echoed in the distance. Floodlights flared. Security guards charged in from every angle armed with batons, shouting in panic. Some residents came running, alerted by the gunfire. But all Rudra heard was Latika's soft crying. The grass beneath him was warm with his blood. Everything began to fade. Latika screamed Rudra's name. But he heard none of it. His world collapsed into silence. His last image was the innocent child he'd protected, still holding onto his hand, unwilling to let go. And then came darkness.

Rudra jerked awake with a sharp gasp, body tense, breath ragged. Sweat glistened on his skin despite the cool air. His eyes flicked around the dim room, disoriented. He reached for his side instinctively, pressing against the bandages. A long beat. He swallowed hard, "*...Still alive.*"

He exhaled slowly. But sleep wouldn't come again. Not for a while.

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The air inside Lifecare Hospital's private wing had grown quieter, heavier. It was past midnight, and the world outside moved unaware that something far more critical than a life was being guarded inside Room 407. Rudra lay still on the hospital bed, hooked to machines that beeped softly in rhythm with his pulse. A deep gash decorated his side, his arm was bandaged heavily, and his cheekbone had started to bruise under the soft light. The doctors had stabilized him, but the storm hadn't passed. Not yet.

And then, heavy footsteps echoed across the marble floor. Three men in crisp olive-green uniforms approached, their boots in sync. The air around them changed with their presence like

gravity itself recognized their authority. One of them, a tall, broad-chested officer with a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, walked ahead. His shoulders bore the **Ashoka emblem** with the insignia of a **Lieutenant General**. It was unmistakable. His face was lined not by age but by duty, and his eyes scanned everything before him with precision. Beside him were two other officers — one a **Major General**, lean and sharply built, the other a slightly younger **Brigadier**, stocky but silent, his gaze intense.

As they approached Rudra's room, a nurse began to speak only to be cut off with a glance from the Lieutenant General.

"Evacuate this wing," he ordered. "Ten minutes. Nobody enters. Nobody listens."

"Yes, sir!", the nurse saluted instantly and began moving with urgency.

Within minutes, the hallway outside Rudra's room was cleared. Curtains were drawn. Doors closed. Security guards stood at every corner, now briefed to silence. The door creaked open. Rudra's eyelids fluttered at the sound. The moment his eyes focused, he tried to rise instinctively. His soldier's reflex was still intact. He winced, pain shooting through his side. Still, he lifted his bandaged arm in salute, *"Lieutenant General Pratap Singh, sir..."*

"At ease, Rudra. You've earned that bed.", replied Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh.

Rudra exhaled and slowly rested back, his salute lowering respectfully. The other two officers entered and positioned themselves around his bed. Pratap Singh sat on the visitor chair beside him, hands clasped over his knee, eyes locked on Rudra. Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh continued after a pause, *"We've heard everything. Every single detail. You were outnumbered. Unarmed."*

Injured. And still, nine out of ten hostiles neutralized. Civilians unharmed. You even saved a child."

Brigadier Rajeev Kapoor spoke next, voice rough but warm, *"You've always been exceptional, Rudra. But this? This was... exemplary. The kind of thing legends are built on."*

Rudra's throat bobbed and he was overwhelmed. He tried to speak, and his voice came hoarse, *"I just... did what needed to be done, sir. That girl... Latika. She reminded me what I'm here for. She's like the sister I never had. We may not be connected by blood, but we are by heart."*

Major General Ayaan Bakshi replied, *"You're the best T.A. officer we've ever had, Rudra. Hell, we still wish you were full-time with us."*

Rudra managed a half-smile, *"I've got my own dreams to chase, sir. But if the country ever calls... I won't blink before laying it all down. That's a promise."*

The room fell into a warm silence for a few seconds. Major General Ayaan raised an eyebrow and half-jokingly asked, *"Let me guess... not the 'settle down and buy a farmhouse' kind?"*

Rudra replied with a soft chuckle, *"No, sir. I want to build India's greatest anime empire. Stories that heal. Stories that inspire. Stories that give broken kids a reason to keep going. Just like they once gave me."*

The three officers exchanged intrigued glances. Brigadier Rajeev Kapoor tilted his head, *"Anime, huh? That's... different."*

Rudra replied with his eyes glowing, *"Goku... was the father I never had. The way he always stood back up no matter how many times he was beaten down. That taught me resilience. Taught me strength."*

He paused and then continued, *"Naruto taught me how to survive loneliness. How to carry pain... without letting it turn you cruel. He made me believe that being an outcast doesn't mean being a failure."*

He paused and then continued with a bittersweet smile, *"Luffy... showed me the value of loyalty. That your people, your nakama, matter more than power, wealth, or victory. He reminded me that protecting someone is the most sacred thing a man can do."*

He continued with his gaze distant now, *"Spider-Man taught me that even when life breaks you, when you've lost everything, you still choose to do the right thing. That heroism is about the choices you make when no one is watching."*

He continued with his voice barely above a whisper now, *"And Ash Ketchum... he made me believe that dreams are worth the chase, no matter how ridiculous they sound. That childlike hope? I've clung to it like a prayer."*

There was a quiet pause. The three senior officers listened without any interruptions or dismissive glances. Just attention. He continued with his voice steadier now, *"But beyond just fiction, I want to tell our stories too. The ones this generation has forgotten. Our roots. Our legacy. I want to build a world-class anime universe. One that brings Ramayan, Mahabharat, Dashavatar, and the Vedas to life, frame by frame."*

He paused and then continued with reverence in his voice now, *"Not as just myths. But as what they truly are. Our history. Our essence. Stories of cosmic wars, divine emotions, sacrifice, dharma. They're more epic than anything Japan or the West has ever created. And they deserve to be told with that same level of craft... or even higher."*

The room was still now. They could hear the breath shift. Lt. General Pratap Singh was impressed by his reply. He asked, *"You want to animate the Ramayan... like how the Japanese did?"*

Rudra replied with a soft smile, *"No sir. I want to animate the Ramayan in a way that even they look at and say 'This... this is beyond us.'"*

Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh stepped forward and spoke in a deep voice, *"You don't want to escape into stories. You want to resurrect them."*

Rudra nodded, *"I want to remind our children that they were born from greatness. That we didn't need Marvel or Dragon Ball to tell us about gods, heroes, and cosmic battles. We've had them in our blood all along."*

Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh smiled with a surprising warmth, *"Rudra, my lion-hearted warrior! You charge into enemy fire like a missile with a moustache only to lie here comparing yourself to so many characters? (steps closer, lowering voice with dramatic flair) You've got shrapnel in your ribs and you're still ranking anime power levels like it's a war council! (places a hand over his heart, mock solemn) Truly, you are a paradox in boots... brave on the battlefield, but inside? A walking, talking manga panel! (smiles with pride) You're already a soldier in more ways than one, Rudra. Keep chasing that dream. Just don't forget which one of those boys also knew when to put on the mask... and when to take it off."*

Rudra smiled voice soft now, *"I won't, sir. I promise."*

Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh replied with a slow, proud smile, *"You may just be the most unusual soldier I've ever met, Rudra. But perhaps the one this country needs most."*

Then he paused, walked up to Rudra and placed a hand on his shoulder, *"Just remember... We need both the sword and the story. And one day, you'll have to decide which hand holds which."*

A brief silence. The officers said nothing for a moment. And then... The Lieutenant General's expression sharpened. Brigadier Rajeev Kapoor spoke, *"Alright, Captain Rudra. Time to brief us. What exactly happened?"*

Rudra struggled upright. The pain was sharp, but he endured it. The Brigadier moved forward to assist, placing a cushion behind him. Rudra nodded in thanks. Then, with clear eyes, he began,

"They weren't just armed thugs, sir. They were trained. Coordinated. They didn't just attack my society, they came for me. They knew who I was. And they tried using Latika as bait to lure me out. A calculated, personal hit. If it weren't for Lt. Gaurav Sir's alert, I wouldn't have survived."

The room tensed. Ayaan frowned, *"Any confirmed identity on the men?"*

Rudra replied, *"Not yet. Most are untraceable. But one... he got away. Before I passed out, I slashed his face across the left cheek with his own tactical blade. Deep scar. He won't be hard to recognize again. I've decided on a code name for him - Scarface."*

"Smart.", said Pratap Singh.

Rudra nodded once, then added with steel in his tone, *"They're with Lashkar-e-Qayamat. I'd bet my life on it."*

A long pause followed. The weight of that name hung in the air like poison. Pratap Singh stood up slowly, folded his arms behind him, and paced once across the room, *"So it begins."*

Rudra continued, *"As far as infiltration goes, I've collected considerable intelligence from Aavaan Studios. Audio, visuals, meetings, device clones. It's all stored in a drive. It's triple-locked, hidden in my apartment, coded to my biometrics. Only I can unlock it."*

"And the Mansion?", asked Maj. Gen. Ayaan.

Rudra replied, *"Not yet breached. But that's next. Once I recover enough to move."*

Rajeev Kapoor leaned in, *"Any suspects inside the Aavaan Empire? Anyone who might be aiding Lashkar-e-Qayamat from the inside?"*

Rudra paused. Then shook his head firmly, *"Not yet. I don't work on assumptions. I won't ruin an innocent life based on doubt. We're not here to find enemies, we're here to uncover traitors. There's a difference."*

Pratap Singh turned. His face unreadable, *"Spoken like a true soldier. Keep that line sharp, Rudra."*

He walked to the door. The other two followed. But at the threshold, the General paused. Looked over his shoulder. His tone... changed. Low. Quiet. But heavy with layers, *"One last thing..."*

He turned fully to face Rudra, *"You know what this mission means. What's at stake. I believe in you, Rudra. Always have."*

He paused and continued in a gentler, but intense tone, *"But don't forget... you're emotionally compromised. I know about her. Aagya."*

Rudra flinched, but he didn't respond, *"I've read the file. I know about the closet. The trauma you both carry. That scar isn't just on your chest, it's between you two. And I understand."*

Rudra gulped in tension. Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh continued, *"But love? It's a battlefield too. And sometimes, it clouds more than it heals. So here's my only command: Let your heart feel. But let your duty decide. If she ever becomes the line between loyalty and longing, you know which side a soldier must stand on."*

A long silence followed. Rudra stared down at his hands. Then he slowly raised his head and saluted, *"Yes, sir."*

The officers nodded and left. The door clicked shut. And Rudra let the silence take over again. The machines beeped. The lights flickered faintly. He laid back, stared at the ceiling and thought of her. Of her smile in the rain. Her tears on his chest. Her tiny voice whispered, *"Thank you for resurrecting my inner child."*

Rudra spoke in his mind, *"I'd die before I let that child get hurt again. But if duty ever tells me to choose... how do I walk away from the only person who ever made me feel human?"*

A single tear escaped down his eye. He didn't wipe it. Because for the first time in years... he didn't know what hurt more. His wounds. Or his heart.

14. The Taste of Home

The morning sun spilled gold across the pale green walls of Lifecare Hospital, but inside Room 407, it wasn't the sun that woke Rudra. It was a flicker of white silk and silver jhumkas. The door opened softly, and Aagya walked in dressed in an ivory-white traditional suit that glowed against her skin, her hair tied into a loose bun, black bindi firm on her forehead. She wasn't alone. Behind her came the whole crew. All of them carried Get-Well gifts which included a few hand-scribbled cards, some snacks, even a soft toy shaped like a camera. But Rudra's eyes couldn't leave Aagya. Her heels tapped lightly on the floor... then paused. She looked down at them, then stepped aside and slipped them off, switching into white flats she'd tucked into her bag and muttered under her breath, *"Heels make me taller than him. No. Not today."*

When she finally looked up again, Rudra was already smiling. It was the first real smile he'd cracked since waking up. Aagya walked to his bedside and held out a small bouquet. It wasn't grand, but it was precise. Red roses and Forget-Me-Nots.

"I'm not very artistic like you. So... I just brought what felt right.", said Aagya.

Rudra took the bouquet in slow, reverent hands. His fingers trembled just slightly. He looked up at her, eyes glassy with gratitude and innocence, *"No one's ever... done even this much for me. And these..."*

He looked down at the blue petals tucked among the crimson blooms, *"These mean more than I can ever say."*

Aagya's chest tightened. Her eyes shimmered. They both remembered that closet. That night. That one flower clenched between their bloody hands.

Simran leaned beside Saadhna, whispering, *"Is it just me or... something's different about her?"*

Saadhna replied to her half-smiling, *"She's glowing. Like... not Aavaan glowing. Really glowing."*

Ravi added, *"Dude. I brought a get-well kaftan. I suddenly feel underdressed."*

Aadarsh further added, *"I told y'all to coordinate colors. She's in bridal mode!"*

Everyone laughed, even Aagya, who playfully narrowed her eyes at them. Megha, standing to the side, arms crossed tightly, remained silent. Her eyes were scanning Rudra more analytically than emotionally. Ramesh snapped a photo, *"Okay, okay. Everyone settle down. Let the man speak."*

Rudra raised a hand, gesturing for calm and then spoke, *"I actually... I need to say something to all of you."*

Everyone stopped. Jokes melted. Aadarsh sat straighter. Seeta pulled off her headphones. Rudra took a shallow breath. His voice was steady, but heavier now, *"We've got 16 days left. That's all. And this... this dream we're building together... needs to be done. No matter what."*

Ayush replied, *"Do we even have a final storyline yet?"*

Aagya took a step forward, nodding confidently, *"We do. I finalized it yesterday. It's the journey of a warrior princess... someone who thinks she doesn't need saving, but ends up being the one who gets saved. And in doing so... she finds her own strength."*

Geeta replied, *"And the knight?"*

Aagya glanced at Rudra. He didn't speak, just watched her, *"He's not her savior. He's the mirror she needed. That's all."*

Seeta added, *"And the ending?"*

Aagya bit her lower lip, *"Still figuring that out."*

Rudra gave her a quiet smile. Not smug. Just... knowing, *"Maybe that's because your ending and the story's ending... are one and the same."*

Aagya turned to him. This time, she didn't blush. She held his gaze, steady and grounded, *"Whatever. Don't think I'm letting you off that easily. You're supposed to be resting, not stressing about deadlines."*

Everyone laughed.

"And she's back.", said Ravi.

Aadarsh added, *"Yep. Queen Aavaan mode: activated."*

But Rudra lifted his hand again, calm, cool, composed, *"This film matters to you. That means it matters to me. So I'll do my part. Sketches, frames, key animation... It'll all be done within a week. Promise."*

Aagya felt butterflies in her stomach by this statement of Rudra.

"Even from a hospital bed?", asked Mishika.

Rudra replied with a smile, *"Especially from a hospital bed."*

Everyone smiled again. Aadarsh mock-saluted. Simran wiped at her eye and pretended it was dust. Aagya turned to the crew, *"Okay. Out. All of you. I need a moment with this idiot."*

Everyone shuffled out laughing, offering waves and *'Get well soon's'* and *'Don't die, loser'* and *'Draw my portrait next!'*

As the door closed behind them, Aagya sat on the chair beside Rudra's bed.

"You didn't have to come dressed like that just to stun me into silence.", said Rudra.

"Shut up and tell me if you've eaten anything yet.", replied Aagya.

Rudra chuckled, *"Nope. I was... still dreaming about you when you all barged in."*

Aagya narrowed her eyes, picking up his brush and holding it like a weapon, *"Brush. Or I will shove this up your –"*

Rudra raised his hands in the air and surrendered, *"Alright, alright! But... walking's hard right now. If you help me to the bathroom... maybe I'll survive."*

She rolled her eyes but helped him up gently, her arms stronger than he expected.

"Woah!! You're stronger than I imagined.", said Rudra in amazement.

Aagya replied, *"You've barely seen anything."*

Rudra added, *"I can't wait to."*

They chuckled. Inside the washroom, Rudra stood brushing slowly. Aagya leaned against the sink. Rudra asked with a mouth full, *"You were jealous, weren't you?"*

"What?", replied a clueless Aagya.

Rudra added, *"When all the girls were clinging to me."*

Aagya rolled her eyes, *"Delusional much?"*

Rudra replied, teasing her, *"You're cute when you're jealous."*

She flicked water at him and then punched him lightly. He flinched dramatically, *"Ouch! You hit me!"*

"You deserved it.", replied Aagya.

Rudra replied, *"Okay, okay. I surrender. Don't open the stitches."*

They laughed again. Then Rudra sobered slightly, eyes meeting hers in the mirror. She handed him a towel after he was done.

"By the way.... I've brought something for you.", she said, smiling nervously.

Rudra raised an eyebrow, *"Oh no. Don't tell me it's a weapon. I'm still paying this hospital off with my blood."*

Aagya grinned with a mock scowl, *"Shut up. Idiot."*

They went to his stretcher. Aagya sat beside Rudra again, adjusting the pillow behind his back gently as he leaned a little forward. There was a calmness in the air now, one layered with unsaid emotions and tightly held confessions. She reached into her canvas bag and carefully pulled out a small, steel tiffin box. Her hands trembled, not from the weight, but from what it held.

"This is... well, this is the first time I've ever cooked. And I made it for you.", said Aagya.

Rudra's teasing expression vanished. His lips parted slightly. He looked at her, really looked. His eyes softened and his pupils dilated as he spoke, *"You... cooked? For me?"*

Aagya replied, avoiding eye contact, *"Yeah. Egg biryani. With some aloo. I know it's basic. But... I tried."*

She opened the lid. The scent wasn't restaurant-level, and the curry was slightly uneven, but it was warm... like comfort and effort and something she never gave anyone before. Rudra spoke with a slight tease, *"Are you sure this isn't poison disguised as affection?"*

Aagya rolled her eyes, *"Eat it or I'll pour it over your stitches."*

Rudra chuckled. He picked up a spoon, crushed the egg and potato softly into the rice, and took the first bite. His eyes closed. He chewed. Then he opened them slowly, but didn't say anything.

"Too spicy? Or... too bland? Did I mess it up? Should I have –", asked a panicking Aagya.

Rudra interrupted her quietly, *"It tastes like home."*

That one line shut her down. Her breath caught. She didn't expect that. He looked at her, a tiny sheen in his eyes now, *"You know, for someone who's never cooked before... this? This is sacred. You made something... just for me. And that means more than you know."*

Aagya's throat dried. Her lips trembled. For someone who spent her life living up to the name of Queen Avaan. That praise meant more than any standing ovation she'd ever received.

She spoke in a low voice, *"I... I've always been told I'm not enough. Not perfect enough. Not Avaan enough. This was the first time someone just... appreciated me. Even though I didn't know what I was doing."*

Rudra reached forward, despite the dull ache shooting through his torso, and touched her hand, *"When something's made with love, it doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to be real. That's what you gave me."*

Her walls crumbled. She fell forward, gently, resting her forehead against his chest, careful and tender. Tears slipped from her lashes like dew off a petal. *"Thank you... for making me feel like enough."*, she whispered.

Rudra winced, his body still weak, but he pulled her into his arms nonetheless. His voice was a whisper now, husky from pain and sincerity, *"Just... be careful. I don't want these stitches popping open because of how beautiful you cry."*

She pulled away with a small laugh, *"Shut up."*

For a long time, they just sat there in silence. Breathing the same breath. Hearts matching rhythm. And then, his voice again, quieter, *"You still smell like jasmine and coffee. Drives me insane."*

Aagya whispered back, *"You still make me feel like I'm more than just a crown and a name."*

They smiled. Soft, crooked and broken smiles. The kind two wounded people wear when they find peace in each other's storm. He leaned his head on her shoulder this time. And they stayed like that. Still. Together. Rudra had just finished the last bite of the biryani, licking his lips softly, as if still tasting her affection in every grain. He set the spoon aside, his fingers brushing the edge of the tiffin like it was a gift far more precious than silver and spoke, *"You know... I haven't achieved much in this life. But if someone asked me what my proudest moment is... it's this right here."*

Aagya teased him, raising an eyebrow, *"Eating a very average egg biryani?"*

Rudra replied with an innocent smile, *"No. Being the reason you made it."*

Aagya froze. Her lips parted but no words came out. Her heart had leapt up so hard she felt it might land on her tongue. He turned to her, their knees almost touching. And then, softly, as if afraid the moment might shatter, *"Aagya... If I had died that night... saving Latika... I wouldn't have regretted anything. Because I got to be this. For you."*

He smiled faintly. Peacefully. Like someone who had finally found a purpose. But Aagya's breath hitched. Her heart slammed against her ribs. She surged forward and pressed her hand to his mouth, *"Don't. Don't say that. Not even as a joke."*

Rudra stilled. His eyes widened just slightly at the tears threatening to pool in hers, *"If you ever talk like that again, Rudra... I swear, I'll never look at you again."*

He didn't respond. Didn't argue. Didn't smirk. He just nodded once and kissed her palm. The contact was electric. Her skin

tingled. Aagya began to pull away from him, trying to compose herself. But Rudra didn't let go. He grabbed her wrist gently, but with firm intention and pulled her back. Her back landed softly against his chest. They were close. Too close. Her breath caught in her throat. Rudra's lips brushed against the shell of her ear, *"You may not want to look at me, Aagya... but how will you erase me from your thoughts?"*

His voice was a smoldering whisper. Not a question, but a dare. Aagya's breath hitched. Her throat was constricted. She tried to wriggle away, tried to be defiant, but the warmth of his breath on her neck sent goosebumps through her.

"Don't test me.", she whispered.

"Oh, but I will.", replied Rudra.

A split-second later, she twisted in his hold, turned around swiftly and in one fluid move, climbed onto his lap. Rudra's back hit the headboard with a soft thud as she pinned him down, both legs straddling him now, her face inches from his. Her hands went to his shoulders to balance herself, and her breath caught again when she realized just how close they were. *"You don't worry about what I'll do, Mr. Miyazaki. That's my business."*

Her voice dripped with challenge. Her eyes glinted with wicked heat. Rudra looked up at her, his gaze dragging slowly down her neckline. She was intoxicating. Dangerous. Divine. He didn't flinch.

"You think you're the only one who can be unpredictable?", she grinned devilishly.

She brought her hands to his throat, not tightly, but enough to establish dominance. She placed her hand on his throat, not choking, but claiming. Rudra looked up at her, surprised, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips, *"You like choking people now?"*

"I like controlling things that are hard to control.", replied Aagya, breathing heavily.

Rudra replied with a wicked smirk, *"And I like people who try to control the storm... only to become it."*

Without warning, Rudra's right hand came up, closing around her throat, not roughly, but enough to reverse the power play. He tilted his head slightly, *"If I wasn't half broken right now, I would've shown you what real dominance feels like."*

Aagya let out a dark, sultry laugh, rubbing her palm over his right wrist gently and whispered in his ear, *"Then heal soon, Tiger. I'll be waiting to find out."*

Their eyes locked... wild. Intense. Hungry. Rudra slowly sat up, even with effort, never breaking eye contact. His arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer. Aagya's breath hitched as her chest pressed to his. She could feel him getting hard while she was still sitting on top of him, but now... his face was just inches from her breasts. He leaned up just a little, his face levelled with her chest, so close he could feel the heat of her skin through the fabric. His voice was hoarse now, strained by restraint. Her chest rose and fell against his. Rudra's eyes flicked down once. Just for a heartbeat. She saw it. He looked stunned. Almost reverent.

Their eyes locked. Wild. Intense. Hungry. The kind of hunger that wasn't about bodies, but about everything they had been holding back, finally breaking through the cracks. She could feel him getting hard and that turned her on even more. Rudra slowly pushed himself upright, even with the effort tugging at the muscles in his arms. He didn't look away from her for a second. His hands instinctively found her waist... not to claim, not to restrain, but because he needed something real to anchor himself to. Aagya's breath faltered. Her chest brushed his... just enough contact to send a confused jolt down her spine, not because of anything sexual, but because she had never let anyone this close

ever. Rudra leaned in slightly, his face rising toward hers. Not towards her body. Towards her. Her heat. Her breath. Her power.

His voice came out rough, restrained, like he was fighting his own heartbeat, "Aagya..."

Her name sounded different on his lips. Less like an address. More like a confession. He trailed off, as if words failed him. And then she felt him hard, needing and restrained against her thigh, and it sent a wildfire rushing through her veins. Their eyes locked. She saw the storm inside him, the man trying to hold back the animal. And for once, she didn't want him to. His gaze flicked downward for a heartbeat. Not at her body, but at the impossible closeness between them. His expression shifted to shock, awe and something almost reverent. Aagya noticed. Of course she noticed.

She tilted her head, lips curving in a devilish smirk, *"What happened to all that big talk about dominance, Tiger?"*

Something dangerous flickered in his eyes. Not lust. Not aggression. Something deeper. A challenge accepted.

"You want dominance?", he murmured.

Before she could answer, he moved. Not rough. Not crude. But swift and precise, like an instinct he didn't know he had. He shifted their weight, flipping her gently yet firmly onto her back, pressing her down into the mattress. The world spun for a second before she found herself pinned to the mattress, breath catching in her throat. His body hovered above hers, his arms on either side of her face, caging her in. Not crushing, not forcing... just present, surrounding her like a storm cloud ready to break. Her gasp escaped before she could swallow it. Not fear. Not discomfort. Just the shock of someone finally matching her intensity. Matching her fire.

Their faces were mere inches apart. Aagya gasped, not in fear, but in stunned exhilaration. Her heartbeat raced. Her body trembled

with anticipation. He grasped both her wrists in one hand and pinned them above her head. With his free hand, he reached up and slowly tucked her hair behind her ear. Then, with his thumb and forefinger, he traced the curve of her jaw, lifting her face slightly. Her eyes fluttered shut. Rudra leaned closer. The air thickened with electricity.

Rudra's hands slid up her wrists, gathering them in one firm hold above her head. Not in a sexual way, but in a don't-run-from-this way. His other hand came up slowly, tracing a line from her temple to the back of her ear, brushing away a strand of hair that had fallen forward. The gesture was impossibly gentle for someone who had just flipped her moments ago. Aagya's eyes fluttered shut, her breath trembling. Rudra leaned in closer. Close enough that she felt the warmth of his breath against her cheek. Close enough that one wrong move would turn this moment into something neither of them could ever take back. The air between them thickened. It was electric, aching and magnetic.

Aagya whispered, almost involuntarily, "*Rudra...*"

His thumb grazed the curve of her jaw, lifting her chin just a fraction. Not claiming. Not demanding. Just... seeing her. The real her. The girl behind the walls. The storm behind the noise. His forehead touched hers for a half-second, their breaths blending in the quiet. And in that fragile moment, it wasn't about dominance or control or anger. It was about being seen painfully and fully by someone who wasn't supposed to matter and somehow suddenly did.

Aagya's voice broke the silence, soft but shaking with unspoken things, "*You don't get it... you're -*"

He cut her off. Not with a kiss, but with a whisper that landed like fire, "*You terrify me.*"

Her eyes snapped open. He wasn't talking about fear. He was talking about the loss of control he felt around her. The pull. The gravity. The same gravity pulling her toward him. His grip on her wrists loosened, just slightly, giving her the choice to pull away. She didn't. Instead, she raised her hands to his face, curling her fingers lightly against his jaw. His breath hitched. It was the sharp, involuntary kind that said this was affecting him far more than he wanted to admit. The world around them blurred. Just two hearts pounding too loudly. Just two breaths shaking in the same rhythm. Just two storms learning, for the first time, that someone else could match their chaos.

And then, their lips met. Not desperate. Not sloppy. Not sexual. A slow, deep, trembling kiss. A kiss that tasted like surrender and defiance at the same time. A kiss loaded with every argument, every wound, every unspoken truth. A kiss that said:

"I see you."

"I hate that I see you."

"And I can't look away."

Rudra broke the kiss first, barely pulling back, his forehead still resting against hers. Aagya whispered breathlessly, "...What are we doing?"

Rudra answered with the only truth he had, *"Losing control."*

For a long moment after the kiss, neither of them moved. Their breaths overlapped. Their foreheads still touched. But everything else inside them was breaking apart. Then he paused. His lips were just a breath away from hers when suddenly Lt. General Pratap Singh's words came crashing back:

"I hope you understand the importance of this mission, Rudra. I trust you won't let your emotions, or that girl.... compromise it. I know what she means to you. What you two went through. But a soldier's first loyalty... is to his country."

The guilt. The weight. The fear of losing her to his world. It all came flooding back. Rudra froze. His entire body went still. He pulled back, resting his forehead against hers, eyes shut. Barely. Just enough to breathe. Just enough to rebuild the armor he'd let slip. His eyes dropped from hers, not out of guilt, but out of panic. Emotional panic. Because he finally understood something:

He had crossed a line he could never uncross.

He stood up abruptly. Not violently. But sharply. Like someone yanking their hand away from fire right after getting burned. Aagya blinked, stunned by the sudden coldness.

"Rudra...", she whispered, hating how fragile her voice sounded.

He didn't look at her. Not once. He ran a hand through his hair, trying to steady his breathing but failing miserably.

"You shouldn't have done that," he muttered under his breath.

Aagya felt something inside her drop. *"I shouldn't have done that?"*, she snapped, pushing herself up on her elbows. *"You literally –"*

"I know what I did," he cut in sharply.

The tone wasn't angry. It was fear. He wasn't scared of her. He was scared of what she did to him. Aagya sat up fully now, heartbeat warping into frustration.

"So what?" she said, voice tight. *"You're just going to pretend it meant nothing? Like you didn't feel –"*

"Don't!", he said. Soft. Firm. Begging.

Her lips parted. He didn't sound like the Rudra she fought earlier. He sounded like someone fighting himself harder than he ever fought her.

"Rudra...", she whispered.

His shoulders tensed.

"You don't understand," he said quietly. "If I let myself feel anything for you –"

He stopped. The rest of the sentence collapsed in his throat. Aagya's breath caught.

"– what?" she pushed. "What happens if you do?"

He looked at her now. For the first time since the kiss. And the look wasn't cold. Or angry. Or dismissive. It was of fear. Shaken. Devastated.

"Then I won't stop.", he replied.

The words hit her like a blow. Silence crashed between them. Not empty silence. But charged, suffocating, electric silence.

Aagya swallowed hard.

"So you run away?" she whispered. "That's your solution?"

Rudra looked away again, jaw clenched.

"I shouldn't have touched you," he said. "I crossed a line."

"You think I care about lines?", she snapped.

"You should.", he said, voice breaking just slightly. "Because I can't afford to lose control around you again."

Aagya stood up now, anger and ache mixing in her chest.

"So we're just going to pretend this didn't happen?", her voice shook.

Rudra didn't answer. Which was the answer. He simply stared at her. Aagya looked away, hating the sting in her eyes. Rudra took one slow step backward.

"Aagya..." Her name was a whisper, a wound. "I can't be what you want."

She laughed once with a cold, broken sound, *"You don't even know what I want."*

Rudra's eyes softened painfully, *"That's exactly why I'm scared."*

With that, he turned away. Aagya's throat tightened. Her fingers curled into fists.

"Coward!", she choked out.

Rudra froze. One heartbeat. Two. Three. Then, without turning around, he said quietly, *"If I was a coward... I wouldn't have kissed you."*

The air shifted. Her heart dropped. He stepped up.

"And if I stay..." he whispered, just loud enough for her to hear, *"...I'll do it again."*

Rudra turned to her now; his gaze was vulnerable and raw. He reached forward and held her shoulders. Aagya's eyes brimmed with a storm of emotion which included shock, frustration, longing, fear, and something she didn't want to admit. She clenched her jaw.

Rudra leaned closer, pressing a kiss to her forehead, *"I don't want to be another scar in your story, Aagya. When you choose me... I'll be yours. But until then, I'll protect you. Even from myself."*

She sat in silence, his words echoing in the hollow of her chest. And though she said nothing, her heart had already answered him. Rudra's breath faltered. His hands trembled just for a second. His heart, which had been beating for her, suddenly remembered what else it was beating for. There was a silence that was broken only by the sound of her heart screaming.

She lowered her eyes, something soft crumbling in her. Then turned away... because she didn't want him to see the tears gathering in her lashes. She sat up slowly, adjusting her kurti, the silence between them now thicker than any words could slice. She didn't speak. He didn't apologize. And that... made her want him

even more. The moment had passed. Not shattered, but stored. Preserved for some future that neither of them could name yet.

"When will you be discharged?", asked Aagya.

"Doctor said... one week, if healing goes smoothly.", replied Rudra.

She nodded, then looked away as if processing the sudden reminder that time was slipping.

Rudra turned toward her, seriousness replacing the softness in his eyes, *"Aagya, before you go... could you do me a favor?"*

Aagya replied softly, *"Anything."*

Rudra continued, *"My laptop and sketchbook. They're in the top drawer of my desk at home. I need them here. I... want to work."*

She looked at him with wide eyes, *"You need rest, not work."*

Rudra replied with a gentle smile, *"This project? It matters to you. Which means it matters to me. But this time, I don't want to make it Aavaan Perfect."*

He leaned forward slightly, *"I want it to be... Aagya Perfect."*

Her heart skipped a beat. That blush she always tried to bury bloomed across her cheeks like wildfire. Before she could recover, he reached up... his fingers tracing along her jaw, then lifting her chin ever so slightly, *"I haven't achieved a lot in life. But if being the reason behind your smile counts as an achievement... then maybe I'm not a total failure after all."*

Her lips trembled. Her heart soared and ached all at once as she said, pulling herself together, *"Shut up. Just... shut up. Don't you dare say that again."*

Her voice cracked. She stood up, collecting her things, swallowing the weight in her throat. She stood still for a moment, catching her breath. Then turned toward him one last time, *"You focus on healing. And I'll make sure we finish what we started."*

She paused. A ghost of a smile flickered on her lips, *"Because this time, I'm not fighting alone."*

And with that, she walked out of the hospital room. The door clicked shut behind her. Aagya walked out of the hospital room, her breath heavy, her heart heavier. She didn't turn back. She couldn't. If she did, she knew she wouldn't be able to leave. Rudra had just shattered her; not cruelly, but carefully. And that was worse.

Behind her, Rudra sat still. The moment she was out of sight, his shoulders slumped, and a single tear rolled down his cheek. He gripped the bedsheet tightly in his fist.

15. The Calm She Built

Aagya stepped out of the room with thunder in her stride. The Queen was back. Her team was waiting near the entrance, murmuring and glancing her way unsure of what version of Aagya they'd face today. Geeta stepped forward cautiously, *"Aagya... are you – "*

Aagya cut her off in a sharp voice, *"We're going in. No distractions. No breaks. No excuses. For the next two weeks, we give it everything we've got."*

Simran blinked. Aman exchanged a glance with Saadhna. Ayush spoke, half-whispering, *"She's on to something this time."*

Aagya ordered silencing everyone, *"And let me make one thing clear. I don't care if it's day or night. Sleep is a luxury we've lost the right to. We're finishing this film. We're winning that festival."*

Her team nodded, a little stunned, a little inspired. They followed her from the hospital into the studio. As the huge doors closed behind them and lights flickered on, Aagya took her place in the center. She looked at the storyboard. Then, at the director's chair. Then down in her hands. And in a whisper, she said, only for herself, *"For you, Rudra... I'll make it Aagya Perfect."*

Meanwhile inside the ward, the door clicked shut with a soft thud, but for Rudra, it sounded like a cannon in a battlefield. He stared at the space she'd just walked through as if it still held her shape. His fingers, the ones that had briefly brushed against hers, still tingled like they remembered the electricity better than his chest did. His eyes lowered to the small tiffin she had left behind on the table. It sat there like a memory he wasn't ready to touch.

It was her love, wrapped in aluminum and doubt. But he did. He picked it up with a kind of reverence he'd never shown to medals or badges. With one hand trembling slightly, whether from the ache in his body or the storm in his heart, he couldn't tell. He opened the lid. The scent hit him first. A burst of the leftover spice, muddled with overcooked rice and the faint sweetness of fried potatoes. It wasn't gourmet. It was confused, messy, unevenly spiced and yet somehow, exactly what he needed.

He chuckled, voice hoarse, *"God, what am I doing...?"*

He knew he'd hurt her. He could feel it in her silence; in the way she left... like a storm bottling itself up. But what choice did he have? He was a soldier bound by duty. And she was the only piece of his life that ever made him want to live. He smiled. It wasn't perfect. But it tasted like home. And home was something Rudra hadn't tasted in years. Every spoonful wasn't just food, it was a memory being written. Her stubborn hands probably fumbling in the kitchen, pretending she didn't care, all while praying he would. It broke him gently. He blinked. A tear slipped down before he could stop it. He didn't wipe it. He let it fall onto the steel lid of the tiffin.

"Maybe this... is what happiness feels like.", he whispered to himself.

He leaned back against the pillow, bones sore from more than just injury. His eyes wandered upward to the ceiling. It was sterile, white, boring and yet somehow... it looked softer tonight. He took the last bite with almost ceremonial precision, licking the spoon clean like it was the last taste of her presence. And then he smiled again. A small, wrecked, boyish smile. The kind only she could pull out of him. Despite everything... the war, the secrets, the mission, the ache... he felt something stronger than pain. Hope. And a very loud whisper inside him said, *"She came back. She always comes back."*

The food wasn't perfect, but it tasted like everything he never thought he deserved.

"She's going to burn the world down to build her dream... and I'll be the flame if she lets me.", he spoke to himself.

He was still recovering, still sore. He leaned back, staring at the ceiling. He wasn't sure if it was the food, the love, or the ache. But something in him had changed. Rudra murmured to himself, *"She gave me a reason... I just hope I don't become hers to regret."*

A breeze came in through the window. And in that silence, the fire in his chest didn't hurt anymore. Because he finally understood what he was fighting for. He was the happiest man on Earth. And she was the only reason. But in that quiet moment, the shadows returned. Heavy and familiar. His duty. His past. His silence. He shut his eyes. And the ceiling wasn't white anymore. It was fire. Gunmetal. Screaming children. A sudden memory surged like a grenade. He was 21. Borderline cadet. Blood on his boots. A child, no older than six, was crying with her lungs breaking while clutching a broken doll. Behind them, flames devoured homes. Smoke carved scars into the sky. A voice screamed through the comms.

"You're not here to feel, Rudra. You're here to serve. Remember that.", said Lt. General Pratap Singh.

He did remember. Every. Single. Day. His eyes snapped open again. He wasn't there. He was here. Alone. With her memories and a heart that didn't want to be alone anymore. He pressed his palm over his chest. The pain wasn't gone. But it had a name now — **Aagya**.

He closed his eyes, letting the silence settle over him like a blanket stitched in hope. The room was quiet again. Rudra sat against the headrest, eyes half-lidded, body worn but mind restless. The

empty tiffin lay neatly closed beside him like a finished letter he didn't know how to reply to.

Just then, the door creaked open. A soft knock wasn't even needed. The night-shift nurse stepped in. She was in her mid-thirties and had calm eyes with her hair neatly pinned. She carried a tray with meds and a blood pressure monitor. She paused when she saw the tiffin on the side table and gently teased him, *"Looks like someone had a home-cooked meal."*

Rudra turned his face toward her with a faint smirk forming at the corner of his mouth, *"Not exactly home. But yeah... something like it."*

She began wrapping the cuff around his arm, her movements practiced, professional. But her eyes stayed curious, *"So she brought it for you... huh?"*

Rudra replied, *"...Yeah. She did."*

The nurse replied warmly, *"Hmm. That's how you know it's real, you know? Food made without saying 'I love you'... but seasoned with it anyway."*

Rudra's jaw flexed slightly as he spoke, *"I don't know. She probably hates me right now."*

The nurse chuckled softly, *"Good. Means she cares. Hate is loud love wearing armor."*

He exhaled through his nose, a laugh caught halfway between pain and surprise, *"You're surprisingly poetic for someone holding a needle."*

The nurse grinned as she checked the reading, *"That's because I've been treating broken bodies long enough to understand broken hearts."*

She clicked the machine off, unwrapping the cuff gently and asked, *"She's not just anybody, is she?"*

Rudra looked at the tiffin again as if it still radiated warmth and replied, *"No. She's the part of me I thought died in some other version of my life. She makes me feel like... maybe I'm still worth saving."*

The Nurse paused, not out of pity, but respect and said, *"Sometimes, we survive the war... but forget how to come home."*

Rudra's eyes met hers. For the first time, they looked tired... not from pain, but from carrying too much silence, *"I don't think I even know what home is. But when she handed me that food... I think I tasted it."*

The Nurse smiled. No pity. Just warmth, *"Then hold on to that taste. Wounds don't just heal with stitches, Rudra. Sometimes they need memory. And sometimes... a little potato in biryani."*

He chuckled, genuinely this time, *"Can't believe I'm taking love-life advice from someone who just gave me a tetanus shot last night."*

The nurse replied playfully, *"And I'll keep giving them if you keep acting like life's just another warzone."*

They both chuckled. She picked up her tray, glanced one more time at the empty tiffin. The nurse walked to the door and spoke before leaving, *"Next time, tell her to add a little more salt. Not in the food... in her forgiveness."*

Rudra smiled faintly. But this time, it wasn't broken. It was hopeful.

"I'll try.", he said.

The nurse smiled and left. As the door closed again, the silence returned. But it felt softer now. Less empty. And Rudra leaned back, one hand still resting on the edge of the tiffin. Not as a soldier. Not even as an artist. But as a man... who finally had something... someone to come back for.

.....

The afternoon sun hung low over Mumbai's skyline, casting long golden beams across the city like silent spotlights. Inside Avaan Studios, the buzz of pre-production had begun to crackle. Phones rang, laptops chimed, and team members shuffled across polished marble floors with coffee cups and storyboards in hand. Aagya stepped into the studio, not with her usual queen-like flair, but with the swift, focused pace of a woman possessed. She had left Rudra's hospital room barely an hour ago. Her heart was still conflicted, her thoughts still tangled from everything he had said, done... and not said. But her face showed none of that. The mask was back. The Avaan mask. Smooth. Untouchable. Uncracked. Still, something in her walk had changed. She wasn't here to parade power anymore. She was here to build.

She then stepped into the studio's main workspace. Her hair was tied up in a loose ponytail, strands falling over her face as fatigue mixed with determination. This wasn't the queen in heels from the festival. This was the real her... unfiltered, unmasked, and ready for war. She walked to the large glass wall at the far end of the room. The Mumbai skyline glittered outside. It was distant and unaware of the storm she was about to unleash. Leaning slightly against the wall without breaking her stride, she pulled out her phone and hit the name she never saved, but always remembered. The line rang twice before his voice answered, calm and still laced with sleep's last traces, *"Hello?"*

Aagya replied in a firm but casual tone, *"Hey... just wanted to let you know that I've reached the studio. Everyone's starting to settle in. From now on, it's days and nights both. No more delays. We're getting this done."*

There was a beat of silence, and then she heard the faintest smile in his voice, *"Didn't waste a second, did you?"*

"Not in the mood to sit around and cry over an egg biryani, you know.", she replied.

"Fair. Still, thanks for the call though.", said Rudra half-laughing.

"You're welcome. And... I thought you should know. I'm not backing down", she spoke with a confidence he had never felt in her voice before.

His voice softened, sharpened like steel folded by fire, "Good. I expect nothing less from you."

Aagya spoke slightly amused, "You sound like you just woke up."

Rudra replied with a half-smile in his voice, "Because I did. It's called recovery, Miss Avaan. You should try it sometime."

Aagya replied with a mock serious tone, "Noted, Sergeant Sketchbook."

She smiled to herself. It was strange how easy their banter had started to feel like they had been doing this for years. The breeze outside swept gently against the glass, as if Mumbai itself was eavesdropping on their late-night call. But then his tone shifted to soft and steady, "Listen... Since you're stepping into this full throttle... there's something you should remember."

Aagya replied with mild curiosity, "Hmm?"

Rudra continued, "Treat your team like family. Not subordinates. This project of yours. It's your vision. And it won't survive on commands. It'll survive on belonging. But while you're leading the charge, don't forget this isn't a kingdom. It's a crew. They aren't your soldiers. They're your spine."

She blinked, caught slightly off guard. That wasn't something she expected from him, especially not tonight. She replied, "That's... surprisingly emotional coming from you."

Rudra replied, chuckling faintly, "Trust me, I'm not the emotional type. But I've been in enough... let's just say... units... to know this. You can't fight a war alone. You need people who believe in you when you

lose sight of the map. I've seen people follow a man to hell. Not because he yelled the loudest, but because he listened when no one else did."

Her fingers subconsciously tightened around the window ledge. Rudra continued, *"In a team, everyone carries something. Insecurities, talent, pain, brilliance. You don't order that kind of chaos. You earn it."*

The words landed deep. She didn't reply. Not because she didn't have anything to say, but because something inside her had paused, quietly processing. She finally spoke, *"Sounds like experience talking."*

Rudra chuckled, *"Let's just say... I've seen what happens when leaders forget that the people behind them aren't just names on a list. They're lives. They're your strength. You treat them like they matter, and they'll carry your vision on their backs without asking why."*

The glass beneath her fingertips felt warmer now. Or maybe it was just her.

"Why are you telling me all this, Rudra?", she asked.

He replied, *"Because you're not just leading a crew, Aagya. You're building something that'll outlive you. And if anyone's capable of doing that... it's you. But only if you lead with purpose, not pressure."*

It wasn't praise. It wasn't flirtation. It was something else entirely. Respect. Raw and real. And it shook her more than any insult ever had.

She spoke after a pause, *"You're different today."*

He replied softly, *"No. You're just hearing me differently."*

Something in her shifted. Not broken. Just... shifted.

He continued, *"Give them space to breathe inside your vision. Let them stitch their hearts into the frames. Only then will this film belong to all of you. Not just to Avaan."*

She swallowed slowly and spoke after a pause, *"You really think I can do this?"*

Rudra replied with utmost confidence, *"I know you can. But only if you stop ruling, and start trusting."*

There was silence between them for a moment. A silence heavier than sound. She finally spoke with a real smile, *"Thanks, Rudra."*

Rudra chuckled, *"You're welcome. And Aagya...?"*

"Yeah?", she replied with curiosity.

He replied, *"All the best. But please don't burn yourself out before the fire even begins."*

She smiled, a real one this time and not an Avaan-polished one. Just... hers.

"I'll try.", she said.

Rudra replied with quiet conviction, *"No. Don't try. Do it."*

And just like that, the line went dead. She stared at the screen for a moment longer before slipping the phone into her pocket. Somewhere behind her, the hum of machines returned, screens flickered, coffee machines hissed. Her team was waiting. The night was long, and the battle had just begun. But tonight, Aagya wasn't alone in the storm. Not anymore.

.....

It was nearly 2:30 PM, yet the main workroom buzzed with soft energy. Laptops hummed, coffee mugs clinked, and scribbles rustled across storyboards. A faded playlist of low-fi beats played in the background. It was enough to keep the team awake, but not overwhelmed. The massive LED board lit up the room with rough drafts of character sketches, narrative beats, and scattered quotes. And at the center of it all stood Aagya. Hair tied in a casual ponytail, sleeves rolled up, black joggers and a white

oversized shirt. She didn't look like a CEO tonight. She looked like a leader. Firm, focused... and trying *damn hard* to hold herself together. Her eyes betrayed a quiet storm, but her face wore the same calm smile she had mastered years ago.

Geeta spoke, stretching her arms, *"Yaar Aagya... We're working on a real film for the first time, not just a client brief."*

Aagya grinned slightly, *"Because this one's not for the market. It's for madness."*

She paused and then added, *"And madness... is the purest form of cinema."*

Simran replied mock-pouting, *"Okay but serious question. Are we even allowed to like you this much?"*

Saadhna added laughing slightly, *"Yeah, you've been weirdly nice lately. Should we be worried?"*

Aagya replied with a chuckle, *"Relax. I'm still Queen Aavaan. Just... with less decapitation tonight."*

Everyone chuckled. But they could sense the shift. She wasn't barking orders tonight. She was building something *with* them. Tables were cluttered with papers, snack wrappers, markers, script notes, and a whiteboard covered in chaos.

Ayush spoke while chewing gum, *"Yo, the sound design ideas for the dream sequence are ready. We'll pitch tomorrow."*

Aadarsh added, *"And I've mapped out lighting cues for the opening five scenes. It's gonna feel like a dystopia without shouting dystopia."*

Ravi spoke half-asleep, *"Costume mood board's done. But if no one feeds me soon, I might stitch myself a sandwich."*

Aagya said, grabbing her phone, *"Already ordered. Shahi Paneer and Dal Tadka along with Butter Naan, Steamed Rice and black coffee for everyone. Coming in 15."*

A collective cheer filled the room.

Mishika spoke, *"Wait... since when did you start caring about our appetite?"*

Aagya replied with a half-shrug and a half-smile, *"Since the moment I realised this team isn't just here to execute my vision. They are the vision."*

A moment of warm silence passed through the room.

Megha smiled and spoke softly to herself, *"She's changing."*

.....

The team had regathered and this time not around authority, but around something shared. A digital projector hummed softly as dim studio lights faded, casting the room into a low, focused glow. Concept sheets fluttered gently on the walls, pinned like fragments of a yet-unwritten prophecy. Aagya stood at the center. No longer on a pedestal, but still a presence that held gravity. A pointer in her hand, eyes not cold, but sharp with purpose. There was warmth now. Not softness, but fire tempered by direction.

She addressed, *"Forget the climax for now. That ending... it'll come to us. But what matters right now, is the beginning. Where she starts. The world she wakes up into. The lies she's told. The silence she learns to obey."*

She clicked the remote. The slide changed. A stark visual lit up the screen. There was a girl in a spotless uniform walking through a city stripped of color and joy. Shattered windows. Hollow buildings. Banners screaming obedience. Eyes vacant. Spine straight.

Aagya continued in a firmer voice now, *"She's not a rebel. Not yet. She's someone trying to belong in a system that's already broken. She learns to be perfect. To be quiet. To be everything they told her she must be... until she isn't."*

A stillness spread through the room.

Simran leaned forward, almost whispering, *"This isn't just a story... it's a slow-burn scream."*

Ravi added, *"It's raw. And weirdly... beautiful. Like a rebellion that hasn't been born yet."*

Geeta spoke carefully, *"You really think they'll approve it?"*

Aagya paused. For the first time tonight, her eyes drifted. Not with doubt, but clarity. She breathed in, slow, steady. Then she turned back to the team. And when she spoke, it wasn't defiance. It was a declaration: *"They will. Because this time... I'm not asking. I'm telling."*

A hush fell over the group. Not because she'd silenced them, but because something in her voice made them feel it too. This wasn't just a film. It was her fight. And now, it was theirs too.

16. One Team, One Dream

The food had arrived. Everyone sat like a creative battalion with messy plates, open laptops, and sleepy eyes. Aagya walked to each person personally and handed out rolls, filled cups, checked comforters laid out in the studio's rest area. She'd arranged sleeping pods, emergency toiletries, and even heat packs. The food smelled like comfort. Steam rose from greasy paper boxes, foil wrap crinkled under eager fingers, and the studio air turned warm with spice and soft laughter. Everyone had gathered into one large semicircle where half were on beanbags, some were cross-legged on yoga mats and others huddled over portable tables. Rolls, cutlets, parathas, and thalis made their rounds. A few carried their laptops like shields, still open beside their dinner, frames paused mid-edit, scenes frozen mid-light.

Aagya didn't sit right away. Instead, she moved across the floor like a silent commander turned caregiver. She was handing Ravi his sugar-free lemon soda without being asked, checking if the heat pack was warm enough for Ayush's shoulder, adjusting the pillow beneath Seeta's back, refilling cups with water before anyone noticed. And she wasn't doing it out of obligation anymore. She wanted to. Her fingers brushed against every plate and every hand with a quiet presence. The woman who once barked orders now offered napkins.

Seeta whispered to Shyam, *"She's really doing it, isn't she?"*

Shyam replied watching Aagya move, *"Yeah. For the first time... It's not Avaan Studios. It's our studio."*

Aagya finally sat right in the middle and spoke, *"Okay. If you've all stopped being afraid of me for ten minutes... let's talk."*

They laughed and then gathered closer, plates balanced on knees. Aagya spoke to Geeta, *"Geeta! You're a genius with breakdowns and beat sheets. But... I realized I've never actually asked you: What made you want to direct?"*

Geeta replied smiling, mid-bite, *"My nani. She used to tell me stories so vividly, I saw camera angles in my head before I even knew what a camera was. And then DDLJ happened. The rest is chaos."*

Aagya replied, *"Note to self... let Geeta direct the climax if I ever faint on set."*

More laughter erupted. Aagya's gaze shifted to Megha, *"Megha! I've yelled at you more times than I can count. But you've never walked out. Why?"*

Megha shrugged with a quiet smile, *"You don't yell because you're cruel. You yell because you're scared someone will let you down. I stayed because I get that."*

Aagya froze for a second. That landed deeper than expected. She looked away for a breath, then turned to Simran, *"Simran! You're a quiet storm. What's your guilty pleasure?"*

Simran grinned, *"Old Bollywood horror flicks. Like... screaming wigs, bouncing chandeliers, plastic skeletons... all of it. I study it all. Unironically."*

Everyone burst out laughing. Ravi added wiping his made up tears, *"You light up horror. I sew through trauma."*

Aagya smirked, *"Right. Costume king. What's one outfit you wish you never made?"*

Ravi replied instantly, *"The 'rebel princess in leather bikini' I stitched for that music video. I still have nightmares."*

Mishika added with disgust, *"Ugh, and I had to do glitter body makeup on that sweaty backup dancer."*

Everyone laughed as Aagya turned to her, *"Mishika. Tell me! What's the one face you'd give me after 12 hours of shooting and I say, 'One more take'?"*

Mishika replied, dryly, *"Depends. Do you want death glare, silent weeping, or the 'accidental brush drop'?"*

Ayush laughed, *"She's got a menu!"*

Aagya turned to him now, *"Ayush! Our sound guy who's the master of banter. What's your dream project?"*

Ayush finally spoke low and clear, *"A war film where silence is more terrifying than the gunfire."*

Everyone paused. Even Aagya nodded, impressed.

Aagya then turned to Adarsh, *"Adarsh. Our Lighting King. What's one scene you still dream of lighting?"*

Adarsh smirked, *"A monsoon kiss under a train bridge. Diffused tungsten. Blues and silvers. Close-up. You'd cry just looking at it."*

Shyam commented, *"Goddamn, I just teared up hearing it."*

Aagya now turned to the twins, *"Shyam, Seeta. The Chaos twins. What's the worst fight you've had in the edit room?"*

Seeta replied instantly, *"When he wanted to cut to black on a kiss."*

Shyam replied, *"It worked narratively!"*

Seeta further replied, *"It worked emotionally, you idiot."*

Aman jumped in, *"Let's not fight, guys. Let's camera roll this."*

Aagya spoke, smiling at him, *"Aman. Cameraman with sniper precision. That reminds me... you once caught my reflection in a glass and kept it. Why?"*

Aman shrugged, *"It wasn't you. It was Avaan... blurred. Soft. The real you peeking through."*

Aagya didn't say anything. For a moment, the group just sat... full, fed, real. No hierarchy. No studio. Just voices, laughter, people. A team. A family.

The clock struck 12:01 AM. A new day had started. Aagya spoke quietly while holding her coffee, *"You know... Rudra once told me that if I treat this team like a family, we might just create something bigger than a film."*

Geeta replied raising her glass, *"Then let's raise our rolls to him."*

Everyone spoke in unison with some laughing, *"To the Ghost!"*

They clinked their paper cups and rolls mid-air like knights of a round table, under harsh fluorescent lights, eating cold food, chasing immortal dreams. And somewhere deep in her chest... Aagya smiled. Because tonight, she wasn't building alone. She had an army now. A messy, brilliant, sarcastic, unpredictable army. And they were hers. The laughter settled slowly into a warm hum, like the final chord of a perfect jam session. Food wrappers rustled, and someone opened a jar of toffees. Aadarsh tossed one toward Shyam, who caught it like a reflex.

Aagya leaned back slightly, her gaze flickering across the room. Not as a director, not as a studio head, but as a quiet observer. Then she cleared her throat, gently, *"Alright. Since we're being honest tonight... Let's talk about the Ghost."*

Everyone looked up. Aagya continued smirking slightly, *"I want to know what you all really think of Rudra."*

There was a pause. Then, Seeta blinked, *"Um... honestly?"*

Aagya grinned, *"Brutally."*

Geeta raised a hand, *"Okay, I'll go first. When I met him, I thought he was mute. Like, literally. Then he spoke once and I felt like I'd been to therapy and boot camp in the same sentence."*

Laughter again. Simran added, *"The first time I saw him sketch, I thought... this guy's either a genius or haunted. Turns out he's both."*

Saadhna further added softly, *"I hated how quiet he was. But now I think... he was just listening more than the rest of us ever have."*

Ravi grinned, *"He still scares me. That stare? Feels like he's undressing your entire life story and stitching it into a sketch."*

Mishika said, *"I used to think he was rude. Now I think... he just doesn't waste words. Like... he speaks only when it matters."*

Ayush nodded slowly, *"He's the only one who notices when the silence is too loud. And somehow... makes it part of the story."*

Aadarsh added, *"He doesn't fit in. And maybe that's what we needed... someone who doesn't fit in... to hold all the pieces together."*

Shyam and Seeta exchanged a look.

"I used to call him NIVSEA's Ghost, right? Now I think he's more like... the soul of this damn thing.", said Shyam.

"We were all pieces. He's the glue we didn't know we needed.", Seeta added.

Everyone went quiet for a beat. All their eyes turned to Aagya. She wasn't smiling now. Not exactly. But her eyes held something softer. Something... humbled. She looked at the toffee in her hand, then backed up, *"I fought him every step of the way. I mocked his silence. Doubted his methods. Hell, I nearly threw him out on the first day."*

She looked around the room and then continued, *"But somehow... here we are. Working like a machine. Eating like a family. Trusting each other. And every piece of that... began the day he challenged me."*

A soft silence followed. One that didn't feel awkward. Just... honest.

Geeta spoke softly, *"He didn't break the system. He just... made space for something real to grow."*

Simran added, *"And we were all too busy proving ourselves to notice."*

Aagya took a deep breath and looked toward the studio door where Rudra once stood in silence so many times, like a shadow. Now, he was more than that. He was the reason. She spoke softly, *"That boy we all hated... is the man we ended up needing."*

No one argued. Because they knew it was true. Somewhere far from the studio, wherever Rudra was now, his absence had become their centre. Their fire. Their family. And Aagya? She finally let herself *feel* it. And then Megha broke the moment, *"Aagya ma'am... Can I ask you something personal?"*

Aagya turned, eyebrow raised, *"Since when did that stop any of you? And please just call me Aagya. I'm your friend, not your boss."*

That one statement made Megha the happiest she had ever been. She replied, *"It's just... this change. You've been... softer. Stronger, but... softer. Especially since... Rudra."*

A few murmurs echoed. Aagya replied casually, *"What do you mean?"*

Megha leaned forward, *"This whole Rudra thing. You talk like you hate him... but it kinda sounds like you don't?"*

Geeta grinned, *"Correction! It sounds like she thinks about him... a lot."*

Simran replied in excitement, *"Oh god, are we doing this? Are we really doing this?!"*

Ravi sang dramatically, *"Aagya and the Ghost... sitting on a storyboard, sketching –"*

Aagya cut in, blushing, *"Shut up, all of you!"*

Laughter exploded again. But it wasn't mocking. It was warm and teasing. It was family. Aagya tried to hide the red slowly creeping up her cheeks, but it was no use.

Saadhna added, *"Come on, tell us. We know something happened. You two don't look at each other like enemies anymore."*

Geeta spoke playfully, *"That man looks at you like he's sketching your soul."*

Aadarsh added, *"And you look at him like you're trying not to feel something."*

Aagya laughed nervously, rubbing her thumb across her ruby pendant.

Shyam spoke, *"That rooftop spark? C'mon, it wasn't just electricity from the wiring."*

Seeta added, *"And the hospital? You came back glowing, queen. Spill the tea now!"*

Everyone leaned in. And for a moment, Aagya hesitated. But then... she sighed. And sat down cross-legged among them like one of her own crew. No podium. No heels. No Avaan mask. Just Aagya, *"...fine."*

Ravi replied, *"YES! Finally!!"*

Aadarsh teased, *"God has answered our prayers."*

Saadhna spoke in a mock dramatic tone, *"Reveal your sins, Queen Avaan."*

Everyone cheered softly like kids waiting for bedtime stories. Everyone now sat closer with bean bags and floor cushions merged into one communal space. Simran rested her head on Saadhna's shoulder. Ravi and Mishika were giggling at something on Aman's camera. Ayush quietly played a low lo-fi

beat on his speaker, and Shyam and Seeta whispered edits for the teaser cut.

Aagya leaned against the desk. Not as a boss. But just... as a girl. Megha nudged her gently. Aagya rolled her eyes, but she was smiling now. A little worn, a little tired, but genuine. She took a breath. And sat down, *"You all know what happened to my brother Agastya, right? That night at the Taj, in 2008?"*

Everyone nodded slowly. Their expressions sobered.

Geeta replied gently, *"You told us... he sacrificed himself to save you."*

Aagya replied, *"Yes. But there's something I never told anyone. Not even my parents. Something I locked so deep inside me... I forgot it myself... until a few days ago..."*

She clutched the ruby pendant around her neck, *"There was another boy there. Covered in blood. Scared. And when Agastya... fell –"*

Her voice cracked slightly but she continued, *"... that boy grabbed my hand... and pulled me into a supply closet. Held me all night. Told me his name."*

She swallowed, *"His name... was Rudra."*

Silence. So thick, even the air stilled. Everyone gasped at this revelation.

Simran spoke up, *"Wait!! That Rudra?"*

Aagya nodded, *"Yes. We survived that night together. But I forgot his face. Even his name. Trauma does that. But he remembered me. Every detail."*

Shyam spoke softly, *"Damn....."*

Simran added gently, *"And he knew... before you did?"*

Aagya looked up, tears in her eyes, *"Yes. He recognized me from my pendant when we first met."*

She held it firmly and continued, *"From the way I cried. He remembered it all."*

Saadhna whispered, *"That's why he's always been so... distant... yet protective."*

Aadarsh replied emotionally, *"And you... you didn't even know?"*

Aagya shook her head, *"I buried it. Like I buried every part of my childhood after that night."*

She inhaled deeply. Then, surprisingly... smiled.

Ayush blinked, *"What kind of person carries something like that... in silence?"*

Aagya replied softly, *"The kind that survives through art. That bleeds in charcoal instead of tears."*

A moment passed. Then she looked at all of them.

Ravi spoke barely breathing, *"And he never told you?"*

Aagya replied, *"Not until I went to his place."*

Gasps. Loud. Collective. Questions erupted from all corners. Aagya couldn't help but laugh. A sad, small sound... but real.

Aagya calmed them all down and spoke, *"I went to his place after he gave me that sketch... in Dharavi. I was very angry and I wanted to kill him. Not because he hurt me, but because he saw the real me. When I reached there, I saw the way people respected him, the kids he taught, the elders who loved him like a son. I saw his home. It was small, humble, covered in sketches. No luxury. Just... soul. And when I finally asked him why he drew me like that..."*

She held up the folded canvas from her bag and unwrapped it. Everyone leaned forward. It was her as a little girl, bloodied, lost. And behind her was a queen made of rage and silence.

Simran said softly, *"That's... heartbreak in art form."*

Mishika added, *"He saw past the Avaan mask."*

Ravi asked in disbelief, *"He never said anything? Never tried to make you remember?"*

Aagya nodded, *"No. He said I had buried those memories for a reason. And he didn't want to force them back."*

She took a breath and told them everything that happened between that night. Everyone was stunned. And for the first time, no one made a joke. No sarcasm. No smirks. They never thought of hearing something like this at all. Only a silence that carried weight now.

Aagya continued, *"I think... he saved me."*

Silence blanketed the room. Aagya wasn't sure if anyone even breathed.

Geeta replied, softly, *"Wait... what do you mean?"*

Aagya took a deep breath. Her fingers brushed her ruby pendant. And then, gently, she began. Everyone hushed like obedient school children.

"Well... he took me on a... kind of date?", she said blushing.

The room froze for a second. Ayush screamed, *"Wait! Rudra asked you out? Voluntarily?"*

Aagya nodded slowly, *"Well, he didn't say the word 'date.' It was more like... an escape."*

Mishika exclaimed, *"Oh. My. God."*

Aagya continued, *"It started with a message. Just one line. 'Meet me where it all began.' And I just knew that it was the Taj. My hands shook. My chest felt... heavy, but good-heavy."*

She paused, eyes distant now. Megha interrupted curiously, *"Wait! Is this the day when you asked me to give everyone the day off and relax?"*

Aagya blushed more, *"Maybe....."*

Everyone started teasing her about it which made her blush even more. She then told them about the morning of the date how she'd walked past rows of designer outfits, power heels, and Prada only to stop at a soft crimson suit with delicate embroidery that hadn't seen daylight in years. How she'd looked at her reflection and seen a stranger who was softer, unfamiliar, but *real*. She described her parents' reactions. Their suspicion. Their disapproval.

"I wore crimson. Not designer, not cold. Just... me. It was the first time I left Aavaan behind. My parents saw me and panicked. Thought I was eloping or something. It got ugly. But I left anyway.", she said.

Ravi grinned, *"Aavaan Studios: 1, Sanskari Parents: 0."*

Saadhna spoke proudly, *"That's bravery, not rebellion."*

Shyam added, *"That's cinema. Continue."*

Aagya smiled and did. The bitterness in her voice melted into reflection, *"Even after listening to so much harshness from them... I still went."*

She told them about reaching the Taj only to find Rudra being caught up in the middle of a chaos which was all a result of serious misunderstanding. She told them how calmly he handled the entire situation and how that old staff member recognized him from that tragic day when 26/11 happened. She also told them about how he stunned her by bringing her favorite flowers for her which she had no idea as to how he got the knowledge of. A hush fell over the group.

Simran spoke finally, *"That gave me chills."*

Ayush added, *"Same."*

Aagya blinked, grounding herself, *"Then I arrived. I've never seen anyone look at me like that. Like I was the start of something. Like I was everything he ever wanted and needed."*

She paused, the words catching. She told them how they went back to the closet. The one they had been trapped in during the attacks. How they just sat there. Two people reclaiming a memory. And when she told him how he brought her inner child back. The one she buried under press releases and performance.

Seeta spoke teary-eyed, *"God, Aagya..."*

Then she told them about lunch which the Taj hosted for them as a complimentary gesture of honor for him by the manager. Their talks, the vibes, the live sitar, candlelight, food, art. She kept on asking him about how he knew about her favorite flowers and how he kept talking about a mutual contact but refused to give up the name.

Megha spoke, *"Who could it be, huh?"*

"No idea. By the way, I had salmon. He, being Mr. Frugal and Fit, had grilled chicken. No butter, no naan.", said Aagya.

Aman groaned, *"That man's a monk."*

Ravi added, *"No, he's broke and disciplined. My worst nightmare."*

Aagya laughed and she looked at her hands again, *"God, I laughed like a teenager. He told me he got stuck in a cupboard during hide-and-seek. I couldn't breathe."*

Shyam replied, *"Rudra? Playing Hide and seek? I refuse to believe this."*

Simran added, *"He actually had a childhood? Damn."*

Aagya smiled. But her voice dropped when she spoke again, *"He asked about Agastya... gently. Without pity. Without pretending to understand. And then he said something I can't forget."*

She looked at Seeta and spoke, *"He said... 'If I can't understand you, then I don't deserve you.'"*

All the girls gasped and felt butterflies in their stomachs. For a long second, no one spoke. She then told them how after lunch they went for ice cream to her favorite spot and ate chocolate hazelnut swirl and how the vendor still remembered her order from her school days. About how he told Rudra that she never smiled back then.

Megha replied, *"You were too busy ruling kingdoms."*

Aagya grinned and continued, *"Then we walked to Marine Drive. Shoes off. The sea beside us. No words for a while. Just... presence. He said he's more honest around me. I said that was either beautiful or terrifying."*

Ayush replied, *"Let me guess. It was both."*

Aagya nodded and then told them about how he suddenly asked her to be still and started sketching her. About how he called her his muse and after he was done how he handed her the sketch only to leave her completely shocked and overwhelmed at the same time.

Her voice lowered, *"It was me. But not me. Not the brand. Not the facade. It was me as he saw me – a goddess. Fierce. Divine. And I broke. I said I didn't deserve that image. That I was made of failure and destruction."*

Simran asked softly, *"And what did he say?"*

Aagya replied, *"He said... 'You weren't born to be worshipped. You were born to be understood.'"*

Silence. No one breathed.

Aagya whispered, *"And for the first time... I believed that I could be loved."*

She took a long breath and then told them about how she forced him to let her drop him back home and everything that happened in her car from her playing Taylor Swift's songs and making him

vibe to it to, to him playing '**Apna Mujhe Tu Laga**' and leaving her speechless and the way his lowkey expressed his care for her through that song.

Megha sniffled, *"I'm gonna lose it."*

Geeta spoke with one hand on her chest, *"God, why don't we get these kinds of dates?"*

Aagya's voice softened as she reached this part of the story. Her tone changed. Slowed. Like every word held the weight of a memory she wasn't ready to let go of.

Aagya continued, *"...And then I drove him home. Or at least, that's what I told myself. That I was dropping him off. But honestly? I didn't want the night to end. Not yet. So I just... lingered. Outside his building."*

Everyone listened in silence now. The studio's air was still and charged with a strange electricity.

Aagya told them how he got out of the car, said his goodbye and invited her to Latika's birthday and started walking. And how she just sat there holding the steering wheel like it was the only thing tethering her to reality. She then paused, smiling softly.

Saadhna asked, *"Wait... who's Latika?"*

Aagya replied, *"Oh I forgot. She's a kid who took me to Rudra's room when I went to his chawl. She's a cute and notorious kid. She's his not-real sister but close enough to be one. He told her about me. She teased him mercilessly. Called me '**bhabhi**' the second she heard my name. She even said she'd punch him if he messed it up."*

Geeta spoke impressively, *"I like her already."*

Megha added, *"She sounds iconic."*

Aagya smiled and continued, *"And then I did something stupid. Or brave. Or both. I got out. I ran to him."*

Megha whispered, *"In the rain?"*

Aagya nodded, *"In the rain. Just like the first time we met. It wasn't planned, okay? But the sky cracked open the moment I touched him."*

Simran gasped, *"You ran into his arms?"*

Aagya spoke with distant eyes and a thickening voice, *"I threw myself into his chest like I belonged there. He didn't even flinch. Just wrapped his arms around me like he'd always known I'd come back."*

Ayush grinned, *"Cinematic as hell."*

Aagya spoke quietly, almost a whisper, *"And that's when I said it. Not 'I love you' ... not yet. But something more personal. I said... 'Thank you... for bringing her back.'"*

Ravi asked cluelessly, *"Her?"*

Aagya replied with a bright smile, *"My inner child. The one I buried long ago. The girl who used to laugh without checking her tone. Who cried without feeling guilty. He brought her back. That part of me that could still... hope."*

Her voice broke for a second. Everyone stayed respectfully silent, *"He didn't say much. He just held me. The rain mixed with whatever tears I didn't even know I was crying."*

And then, she looked up meeting every single eye in the room, *"Then I asked him 'What if this is all just... a beautiful dream? A moment that'll vanish by morning?'"*

She paused and then spoke, *"To that he whispered the one thing that undid me."*

She took a breath. Her voice lowered, *"Then I'll fight sleep itself. Even if I have to become Kumbhkaran. Because I'm not letting this dream end."*

Megha gasped. Saadhna held her chest. Shyam murmured *"damn"* under his breath.

Aagya smiled faintly, *"Yeah. Exactly like that. And the way he said it... it wasn't performative. It wasn't a line. It felt like a... vow. Like he meant it."*

Simran asked out of curiosity, *"Okay, but did he kiss you?"*

Aagya looked at her blinking slowly, *"I thought he would."*

Saadhna spoke instantly, *"Wait, what?!"*

Aagya blushed slightly, *"Our faces were this close. Like... lips-parted, breathless close. I even closed my eyes for a second. I thought it was happening."*

Ramesh replied in a teasing tone, *"And?"*

Aagya replied, *"He kissed me. Just... not where I expected."*

A hush fell as Aagya continued, *"He kissed my forehead. Gently. Like a grounding. Like a prayer. And then he said... 'You're safe with me, Aagya. I'll burn the world down before I let it break you again.'"*

Simran covered her mouth. Mishika looked like she might cry.

Aadarsh softly said, *"Damn, that's some serious alpha-protector energy."*

Aagya shook her head, *"But it wasn't about dominance. It wasn't about power. It was about... devotion. The kind that doesn't need to be loud. It was raining. It was healing. It was tense. And restraint."*

She looked down for a moment, *"The sexual tension was insane. I felt it. I know he did too. But he didn't act on it. He stepped back. Smirked. And said... 'You should go. Or the rain will get jealous.'"*

Ayush replied, *"That's it. I'm writing that down."*

Aagya chuckled softly, *"I teased him, told him to text me when he dried off. He told me to text when I reached safely. And then I drove away."*

She paused again to let the silence breathe.

Aagya concluded, *"But I didn't make it far. I stopped the car and just stood there... watching him walk away through the rain. Like a fool. Or maybe... someone who had just fallen."*

Geeta whispered, *"You did fall. Didn't you?"*

Aagya smiled slowly, *"Yeah. I think I did."*

Everyone nodded. And in that warmth, Aagya didn't reply. She just smiled... and finally let herself believe she wasn't alone anymore.

Then, Megha leaned forward, *"And now? How do you feel about him?"*

Aagya looked at her hands. Then the sketch. Then the pendant, *"I don't know. That's the truth. I don't know. I don't understand what this is. Is it guilt? Is it history? Or... something more? But every time he's close... I feel less broken."*

Geeta softly smiled, *"Sometimes, that's enough."*

Shyam spoke to Seeta, *"She doesn't know if it's love. But she knows it's home."*

Seeta replied to him, *"And maybe... maybe that's what love really is."*

The room fell silent again. But this time, it was warm. Complete. Healing.

Simran spoke in a half-whisper, *"So... Rudra. The brooding boy. The sketch-monkey. He's the reason we're sitting here like this, isn't he?"*

Ayush added, *"Not just as colleagues. But as something more."*

Aadarsh added, *"A team."*

Mishika further added, *"No. A family."*

Everyone nodded. Aagya looked at them, her eyes glistening but proud, *"He gave us that. Without even asking for it."*

Ravi mock sighed, *"Damn. And I called him fungus."*

Laughter broke the tension. It was soft and affectionate.

"We should call him back.", said Aman.

Megha teased Aagya, *"Only if Aagya says please."*

She rolled her eyes but didn't argue. Instead, she whispered to herself, *"He's always been there. Quiet. Waiting. Just like that night."*

The team watched her, not just as their director, but as Aagya... the girl who once hid in a closet with a stranger and now stood, not with a crown, but with a heart. She smiled at the memory.

"You know... for the first time, I didn't feel like a brand or a burden. Just... me. He didn't treat me like a legacy. Just Aagya.", she said proudly.

Geeta asked softly, *"And how did it feel?"*

Aagya looked down, *"Scary. Warm. Familiar."*

She glanced at them, suddenly shy and continued, *"Every time he touches my hand, something clicks. Like déjà vu. But not the annoying kind. The kind that makes you feel like... you're home."*

Megha replied teary-eyed, *"Aagya... that's not nothing."*

Simran added, *"It's not love. Yet. But it's not nothing either."*

Aadarsh asked her gently, *"Do you want it to be something?"*

Aagya didn't answer at first. Her fingers tightened around the pendant. Then she spoke softly, *"I'm not sure. My whole life, I've built walls. So many. And he just... walks through them. No force. Just presence."*

She wiped a single tear and continued, *"He makes me feel seen. And that terrifies me."*

Ayush replied, *"But he also makes you feel safe."*

Aagya nodded, *"Yes. Like Agastya used to."*

Shyam spoke quietly, *"Maybe... that's not a coincidence."*

Saadhna added, *"Maybe that's fate. Or trauma. Or both."*

Geeta further added, *"Whatever it is... it's real. And it's yours. Don't rush to label it."*

Ravi advised, *"Just don't run from it."*

Mishika smiled, *"Let it breathe. Like your best shots."*

Aagya looked around. Each one of them... once strangers, once subordinates, were now looking at her like... something more. Not as the boss. But as one of them. Aagya closed her eyes just for a second. A tear escaped before she could stop it. And this time, she didn't brush it away. She let it fall. And for the first time in years, she didn't cry alone.

She smiled again after some time wiping her tears, *"You know what's funny?"*

Everyone replied in unison, *"What?"*

Aagya replied, *"The boy I once mocked as a parasite... ended up teaching me what it means to lead. Not like a queen. But like a sister. A protector."*

Seeta replied, *"Not every ghost haunts."*

Shyam added, *"Some bring us back to life."*

And in that moment, under the flickering warmth of studio lights, amidst editing laptops and leftover samosas... something magical happened. A girl who had always walked alone, finally belonged. And a team once fractured by ego, finally became a family.

17. The Quiet Before Her Storm

The hum of Avaan Studios had faded into a soft lullaby. After hours of laughter, chai, dinner, and confessions, the team had finally surrendered to exhaustion. The glow from scattered fairy lights danced on steel beams above, flickering gently as bodies curled into their sleeping pods. Some were already snoring, others were whispering half-dreams before sleep claimed each one of them. Each pod was like a tiny cocoon. It was a safe, warm, temporary home to people who had, unknowingly, become each other's family tonight.

Aagya lay still in her pod, arms folded beneath her head, eyes fixated on the ceiling. Sleep refused to come. Her heart beat louder than the city outside, and her mind replayed tomorrow's dread like a scratched vinyl. She had to face them... her parents. She had to show them her story. And for the first time in years, Aagya Avaan... was nervous. Not because she doubted her story. But because, for the first time, the story wasn't *for* them. It was for herself.

After several still, restless minutes, she pushed aside the soft grey blanket, stepped out of the pod in silence, and tiptoed out of the resting area. Her bare feet padded lightly against the studio floor as she slipped into the hallway, dimly lit by the emergency night lights. She didn't head toward the washroom. She just needed air. Or maybe... him. She pulled her phone out. Scrolled. Clicked. The call connected. One ring. Two. And then:

"Hmm... hello?", Rudra answered in a groggy but soft voice.

"Did I wake you?", she asked.

"You didn't. Just caught me in the middle of an argument between my pillow and gravity.", he murmured.

She smiled. The tension in her shoulders eased a little.

"I just... I wanted to say thank you. For what you said. About family. About leadership.", she said.

There was a pause on his end. And then he said, *"Hmm... Looks like someone listened."*

Aagya replied with a smile, *"They did. All of them. You should've seen them tonight, Rudra. They were happy. Comfortable. Like... they belonged. Like we belonged."*

Rudra spoke in admiration, *"You built that."*

Aagya added, *"No. We did. You reminded me how to."*

Rudra replied gently, *"Well then... you're welcome."*

There was silence for a moment. Not awkward, just peaceful. And then she said it in a bit of a nervous tone, *"Listen!! Tomorrow... I'm going to talk to my parents. I'll pitch them the story. The new version."*

Rudra's voice sharpened just slightly, not in judgment, but in concern, *"And the climax?"*

She smiled faintly, looking out the glass window at the faint city lights beyond, *"I'll figure it out. I always do."*

Rudra softly chuckled, *"There's that Aavaan fire again."*

"Don't mock it.", she replied.

Rudra spoke with sincerity, *"I'm not. I love it."*

The words hung in the air like jasmine in monsoon... heavy, fragrant, disarming.

"You walk like you command storms, Aagya. You speak like every sentence has a legacy. But... when you said you were nervous... I realized something.", he added.

She waited, her breath caught.

He continued, *"That I'm falling for the girl behind the legacy. The one who feeds biryani with eggs and potato, and blushes when someone calls her out."*

Aagya blushed hard this time but tried to control it anyhow, *"You say the cheesiest things sometimes."*

Rudra replied, *"I know. I rehearse them in my sketchbook."*

She laughed. Soft. Genuine. And suddenly, she wasn't nervous anymore.

"You should rest now. Heal faster. We need you back on the battlefield.", she said.

He replied, smiling through the phone, *"Yes, Commander Queen Avaan!"*

"Don't call me that.", she said

"Okay. Goodnight, my lioness.", he chuckled.

Aagya breath hitched. She couldn't speak for some time.

Rudra spoke, *"Aagya?... Are you there?"*

Aagya spoke finally, *"You know... Agasthya Bhaiya used to call me that."*

Rudra replied, *"I know. That's why I chose it. You need all the strength you need for tomorrow's war."*

She smiled the brightest smile she had ever done in her entire life in that particular moment. Even a tear dropped from her eye. The way he noticed and remembered such small details about her always overwhelmed her.

"Goodnight... Tiger.", she said.

And then she ended the call. For a moment, she just stood there hand still on the phone, eyes still soft. And then she heard a sound behind her. She turned and froze. Megha stood by the corridor wall, arms folded, wearing her oversized hoodie and an even bigger grin.

Aagya blinked, *"Megha?! What are you – how long were you – ?"*

Megha grinned wider, *"Long enough."*

Aagya narrowed her eyes, *"Why are you smiling like that?"*

Megha replied, *"Because... I've never seen you like this before."*

Aagya replied, crossing her arms, *"Like what?"*

Megha walked towards her and spoke, *"Like you. Not Queen Avaan. Not the strategist. Not the boss. Just... Aagya. Who calls boys at midnight with 'thank yous' and blushing sarcasm."*

Aagya spoke with a mock scoff, *"I wasn't blushing."*

Megha replied with a smirk, *"Sure. And Rudra isn't secretly a poet."*

They both laughed and then went quieter.

"I like this version of you. It's... real.", said Megha.

Aagya replied gently, *"I think... I like her too."*

They began walking back toward the pods side by side with their steps light. But after a few steps, Aagya slowed down. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Wait a second...", Aagya spoke with curiosity.

Megha played innocent, *"What?"*

Aagya said, *"The forget-me-not flowers... the ones Rudra brought for me that day. He said it was a 'lucky guess'."*

Megha replied looking up at the ceiling whistling poorly, *"Mmhmm. Totally random. Cosmic alignment. Destiny."*

Aagya raised her eyebrows, *"Megha!!!"*

Megha grinned like she was caught red-handed because she actually was, *"Okay, okay! I might've... accidentally mentioned how you loved them. Once. Loudly. In front of him. Twice. Okay maybe thrice."*

Aagya smiled, shaking her head, *"You little traitor. So, you're the one who told him, huh?"*

Megha mock bowed with her hands up, *"Guilty as charged. Your honor, I regret nothing."*

They giggled again, lighter now... like little girls in a sleepover. And for the first time that night, Aagya wasn't dreading tomorrow. Not anymore. The storm within had calmed. Together, they walked back toward the pods. Two girls in slippers. Two women in power. One secret, moonlit moment stitched quietly between them.

Megha and Aagya walked slowly back toward the cocooned silence of the studio's resting area. The corridor lights glowed dim, golden. Their slippers whispered across the floor. Soft, grounding reminders that for once, everything didn't need to feel like war. They didn't speak much. They didn't need to.

Just as they reached the row of sleeping pods, Megha paused and gently touched Aagya's shoulder, *"Tomorrow... whatever happens, we're with you."*

Aagya looked at her. The sincerity in Megha's eyes didn't feel like supporting staff. It felt like family. She replied, *"I know."*

She climbed into her pod quietly pulling the blanket over her, curling sideways to face the tinted glass wall. Outside, the city blinked like it always did, but somehow... it felt calmer. She could still hear faint breathing and soft murmurs from other pods.

Simran had left her DSLR charging beside her bed. Saadhna's sketchpad was half-open, balanced on her chest. Aman had passed out mid-scroll, his phone hanging from his hand. The twins, Shyam and Seeta, had whispered themselves into synchronized sleep like a rhythm only siblings knew. Aadarsh was softly snoring, while Ayush had his noise-cancelling headphones on, likely still dreaming in surround sound. Mishika was rolled up like a burrito, even her mascara wipes scattered next to her. Ravi had a silk scarf over his face... aesthetic even in unconsciousness.

And in the middle of all of them, Aagya felt something she hadn't in years... Peace. She wasn't trying to manage anyone. She wasn't trying to impress. She wasn't Avaan Studios' heir. She was just Aagya. And

this wasn't just a team anymore. It was a home she didn't know she was allowed to build. She reached for her phone again. Unlocked it. Looked at Rudra's name. Paused and then typed:

"Hey. I meant what I said. Today felt like... belonging. You were right. Again."

She stared at the message. Then didn't send it. Instead, she locked the screen...

and whispered to herself, *"I'll tell him after tomorrow... when it's finally ours."*

She smiled at no one. And finally, this time her eyes closed and sleep came.

.....

The next morning, the world was just waking up. The studio was still wrapped in the hush of sleep, fairy lights dimmed to their final flickers. But Aagya was already up. Wrapped in a warm shawl, she stood in front of the mirror, tying her hair into a firm ponytail. Her eyes were alert, steeled... not with arrogance, but with purpose. She got ready quickly, quietly and stepped outside while most of her team still snored.

The studio gate clinked shut behind her. Her Porsche waited, purring low like a beast ready for battle. She slipped into the driver's seat, but didn't start the car just yet. Her hands clutched the wheel. Her jaw clenched. And for a full minute, she just sat there. Breathed in. Breathed out. Then whispered to herself looking at her reflection in the rearview mirror, *"You've faced worse. You can do this. They're just... your parents."*

She took a big gulp and continued, *"Okay, that's a lie. But still. You got this. You're not the little girl anymore. You're not scared. You're the damn director now."*

And with that, she started the engine and went on. After a few minutes she reached her mansion. The mansion stood tall like a

mausoleum of legacy with every edge polished and every curtain in its place.

Aagya parked the car, took one last calming breath... and stepped out. She walked through the gates, up the stairs, and into the house she once called home now felt more like a museum of expectations. She went straight to the bathroom, not saying a word to anyone. The cold water hit her skin like a reset button. Showers were always her nervous ritual... a cleansing of fear, a baptism into calm. Under the stream, she whispered silent mantras. Let her nerves down the drain. Let her heart steady. By the time she came out, towel around her head, her mind was sharper and her pulse quieter.

A WhatsApp ping lit up her phone. It was from *him*:

"Go burn their doubts down. And if you choke up... just remember you've already won."

She smiled. *"God, how did he know exactly what to say?"*

Her confidence soared. She dressed sharply... not cold corporate, but crisp and commanding. She wore sleek trousers and a white crop top. Hair tied back with surgical precision. No makeup, just her signature pendant. The Avaan breakfast table wasn't just furniture, it was a war zone dressed in polished mahogany and bone china. Aagya descended on the long spiral staircase, each click of her heel echoing like a countdown in her head. Her posture was poised, her face calm, but only she knew the battle raging inside her chest. Her parents were already seated upright, elegant, and surrounded by silence. Her father's brows knitted over the day's economic headlines. Her mother was sipping unsweetened green tea with the precision of a ballet dancer. Neither of them looked up when she reached the table.

Her father's eyes flicked up, *"So. The prodigal daughter graces us early. Have you come to discuss the film... or to defy us again?"*

Aagya swallowed, *"I'm here to pitch my story. I'd like your review."*

They exchanged glances. Then her mother pushed her plate aside and folded her arms. Only after she sat down, spine straight and hands folded in her lap, did her father speak, *"Where's the script?"*

Aagya replied, *"Still evolving. But I have the story. I'm here to pitch it."*

Her mother placed the teacup down and spoke coldly, *"We thought you were finished stalling."*

Aagya didn't flinch and replied, *"I'm not stalling. I'm building. And I need your attention, not judgment."*

A beat of silence. Her father raised an eyebrow and leaned back slightly.

"Then let's not waste time.", said her mother.

"Talk. We're listening.", said her father.

She took a breath. Then dove in. Aagya told them the story of a little girl who once ran barefoot in golden fields, filled with innocence and wonder. Her world was warm and carefree... until duty arrived too early. Her older brother, a kind yet fierce warrior-in-training, was assigned to turn her into a soldier. Childhood faded as her days became filled with bruises, battles, and expectations. She trained, fought, bled, and rose becoming a feared warrior princess. Yet, no matter how strong she became, she was never enough for the throne. So she volunteered for war, desperate to prove her worth. But when she was ambushed and left to die in battle, her brother arrived, fought fiercely to protect her, and gave his life in her arms. That night, everything changed. But from that pain, she rose harder, colder and stronger. And when darkness returned to threaten the realm, she faced the demon king alone... and slayed it. Reclaiming not just her place in the kingdom, but her identity. She stopped there.

She didn't fumble. Didn't pause. Her voice remained steady as she described the plot... from a warrior princess hiding a forbidden truth, to the knight who saves her not just from monsters, but from herself.

"It's about reclaiming identity. About grief that doesn't beg for rescue. It demands understanding.", she concluded.

By the time she reached the fight with the demon king, her parents were still. Listening. Processing. Her parents exchanged a glance. Then her father leaned back, *"And the climax?"*

Aagya's voice faltered, only for a second, *"Still in development."*

"That's reckless.", her father exploded.

"Art isn't improvised emotion. It's discipline. Precision.", her mother added with disgust.

But Aagya stood tall. Her mother spoke furiously, *"So you want full-scale funding for an incomplete script?"*

Her father added sharply, *"You think we greenlight half-built bridges?"*

She stood her ground and spoke, *"Some of the greatest films in history weren't born fully formed. They evolved. Adapted."*

"Like what?", her father questioned.

And then she began ticking them off... voice calm, but growing in quiet power:

1. **"Casablanca** – The ending wasn't decided till the final weeks of shooting."
2. **"Apocalypse Now** – Constant rewrites and changes during production."
3. **"The Shining** – Kubrick discarded large parts of the script midway."
4. **"Titanic** – Scenes were restructured on set."
5. **"Jaws** – The mechanical shark malfunctioned; Spielberg improvised the entire approach."
6. **"Slumdog Millionaire** – Key dialogues and scenes were discovered on the fly."
7. **"Iron Man** – Mostly improvised; the script evolved on camera."

Her parents looked... stunned. Not entirely convinced, but impressed, despite themselves.

"You've done your homework, huh?", her mother said.

"Fine. You'll get full backing. Equipment. Crew. Studio access.", her father added after a long pause.

Aagya's heart leapt, but she didn't show it. She nodded once, professionally.

"But listen carefully, Aagya...", her father added, stepping closer.

He lowered his voice and continued, *"You're not just chasing a festival win. You're representing a legacy. My legacy. Our legacy. Remember! You're not just Aagya. You're an Avaan. You mess this up... you don't just lose a film. You lose your name. Your legacy. Your right to carry this empire. You don't just carry your name. You carry the legacy. If you fail... you won't just ruin your career. You'll burn everything we built. If you embarrass this name..."*

He leaned even closer, voice cold as steel, *"The consequences won't just be cinematic. They'll be personal."*

Her breath caught in her throat. Her mother stepped in and added, *"You've been acting like a rebel long enough. We've indulged your whims. No more. Stay within your limits. Or you'll lose much more than this project. You're an Avaan. You wear that name like a crown. If you fall, make sure you don't drag it down with you."*

Aagya nodded tightly.

"Now go. Do your work. Resources will be sent to the studio.", her father concluded.

He turned to leave. But her mother glanced back once more and spoke, *"Eat. You're already looking weak. If your mind fails, it better not be because your body did first."*

They turned and left. She sank into the chair. Still. Shell-shocked. Shaken. But... victorious.

A high-protein meal arrived in front of her, carefully crafted by their chef. She wasn't hungry. But she ate. Because fuel was fuel and she needed it.

.....

The clink of cutlery had faded after a while. The heavy footsteps of her parents had vanished behind the ornate doors and silence returned to the Avaan mansion... not peaceful, but haunting. Aagya sat alone at the massive dining table. A half-eaten high-protein breakfast lay untouched before her. Her hands were in her lap, but her mind was racing... part shaken and part victorious. She slowly pulled out her phone and dialed a number that had, in the last few weeks, become a strange kind of anchor. One ring. Two. Three and he picked up.

"Aagya?", he said.

"Hey...", she exhaled. Just listening to his voice calmed her down more than she expected.

He asked with instant alertness, "*You okay?*"

She replied, trying to stay calm, "*Yeah. Yeah, I just... had the meeting.*"

"And?", he asked.

She smiled faintly. It was the first real smile since her father's threat. And she spoke, "*They approved it. The pitch. The structure. The whole pre-production timeline. They gave me the green light.*"

There was a pause. Then a deep, genuine sigh from his end, "*That's the spirit.*"

She felt her cheeks flush. She hated how easily he made her feel seen and how he was happier than her at her achievement.

"It wasn't easy. They hated the idea of starting without a climax. But I hit back with a list of films that pulled it off... Casablanca, Iron Man, Titanic, The Shining, etc...", she replied half-smiling.

Rudra mock gasped, *"You used cinema history against two legendary producers? You really are a monster."*

Aagya replied, teasing him, *"I learned from the best."*

There was a beat of shared silence full of pride, relief, and the beginning of celebration.

Rudra spoke more seriously now, *"I'm proud of you, Aagya."*

She closed her eyes blushing but hiding it, *"Thanks Rudra. You were right. About the team, the vision... about doing it for myself. You've been more of a guide to me in the last two weeks than most people have been in years."*

Rudra replied quietly, *"You don't owe me anything. I was just a mirror. You were the one who chose to look."*

She looked down at her lap, where her fingers were still lightly trembling and murmured. *"You still say the most annoyingly profound things, you know that?"*

Rudra replied with a playful smug, *"Wait till you see my next sketch. It's titled "Queen Avaan Returns: The Reckoning."*

She chuckled, and it felt like something unclenched inside her chest.

"Hey... I'll be back at the studio soon. But first, I've got something for you.", she spoke with a grin.

Rudra asked with curiosity, *"What?"*

She replied counting on her fingers, *"Umm... Let's see... Your weapons. Your laptop. Your sketchbook. Your battle gear. You said to send someone, but... I'm coming myself."*

There was a pause and then a low, amused chuckle from his side, *"You already have a lot on your plate Aagya."*

Aagya replied gently, *"This is my way of saying thank you. And no, you don't get to argue."*

Rudra smiled, *"Wasn't going to. But... Aagya?"*

"Yeah?", she replied.

Rudra lowered his voice, *"You're not just reclaiming your legacy. You're rewriting it. And I'm honored to be a part of that."*

Her fingers tightened slightly around the phone, *"Then stand by me when the fire comes. Promise?"*

Rudra spoke firmly, *"I'll stand between you and it if I have to."*

They stayed quiet for a moment. Just breathing. Just feeling.

"Okay. I'll see you soon.", she said.

"I'll be waiting.", he replied.

She ended the call. But this time... the silence felt like strength. And the war felt winnable.

.....

She drove to the studio after finishing her meal. Inside, the team was waking up, yawning and stretching. Some stretched over mugs of coffee, others still blinked sleep from their eyes, scrolling through work notes and shot breakdowns. The resting area was alive with yawns, tangled blankets, and sleepy updates. And then, the studio door slid open with a *click*. In walked Aagya. But she looked... different. Not cold. Not commanding. Just... calm. Alive. Electric.

Simran spoke as soon as she spotted her, *"Whoa. Someone looks like they just walked out of a fashion shoot and into a war council."*

Ayush added, half-awake, *"She's glowing. I swear she's glowing."*

Megha grinned, *"Maybe because she's carrying victory on her face."*

Ravi raised an eyebrow, *"Okay, someone spill. What happened?"*

Aagya stopped in the middle of the room. Took a deep breath. Looked around at every single face that had become her family and spoke, *"We're cleared. The pitch was a success. Full approval. Full budget. We begin pre-production today."*

Silence. One beat. Then chaos. Cheers exploded. Simran dropped her lens cloth. Saadhna fist-pumped the air. Ramesh whistled. Geeta clapped so hard her laptop screen wobbled.

Shyam spoke to Seeta, *"I knew it. I told you she'd pull it off."*

Seeta replied, pretending to tear up, *"Our Queen Avaan hath slain the dragons of parental doom."*

Aman added wide-eyed, *"This is huge! This is the moment! We're going to war... and this time, we're funded!"*

Geeta laughed, *"Ravi, go design a gold-plated thank you note!"*

Ravi chuckled, *"Forget the note. I'm designing her a crown."*

Laughter echoed across the studio. Aagya couldn't help it. She laughed too.

"Alright, alright. Let the celebrations pause for a second. Because I'm assigning the first task of the day.", she said, raising her voice gently.

Ayush spoke yawning, *"Aagya, we just woke up –"*

Aagya cut him off with a smirk, *"You'll want to hear this one. Because it's a delivery."*

Simran replied in confusion, *"Delivery?"*

Aagya replied playfully, *"Yeah. I'm off to return something very important."*

Megha squinted her eyes, *"Return what?"*

Aagya grinned, *"A warrior's weapons."*

Ramesh spoke instantly, *"Wait – you mean Rudra?"*

Aagya gave a knowing smile.

Geeta spoke, pretending to swoon, *"Awww. That's so poetic."*

Simran added, teasing her, *"You're taking his stuff to him?"*

Aagya replied, *"He said to send someone. But I want to be the one to deliver it."*

There was a collective chorus of "ooooohhh."

Megha raised her hand like a schoolgirl, *"I'm coming with you."*

Aagya replied instantly, *"No, you're not. I'm going alone. The rest of you will carry on with the work."*

Megha crossed arms, *"Yes. I am. They can stay. But I am coming with you."*

Aagya mock glared at her, *"Megha – "*

Megha grinned, *"You either let me come... or I tell everyone what I overheard last night."*

Aagya blinked.

"What did you overhear?", asked Simran.

Megha spoke with dramatic flair, *"Just a midnight call. With a certain Ghost."*

Saadhna gasped, *"NO....."*

Aagya sighed, defeated, shook her head with a smile, *"Fine. Come. But no commentary."*

Megha shouldered her bag, *"I will carry your silence with the grace of a thousand memes."*

"Give him a hug from me!", said Aman.

"Give him pants. I bet the hospital ones are ugly.", added Ravi.

Geeta called out, *"Give him hell. Or heaven. Whichever he deserves."*

Simran smirked, *"And bring back stories. We're starving."*

Aagya replied to them walking toward the door, *"Calm down, you drama freaks. We're not getting married. I'm just going to deliver his sketchbook."*

Ayush replied playfully, *"Yeah, and I'm just a sound guy. Not a therapist."*

They all laughed again. And as Aagya and Megha stepped out, the door sliding shut behind them, the energy in the room lingered like glitter in sunlight. This wasn't just a team anymore. This was a tribe. And their queen had just earned their hearts... not through power, but presence.

.....

Aagya's matte black Porsche Phantom slowly turned into a narrow, crumbling lane of the chawl, where wires hung like tired vines and buildings leaned against each other like old friends trying not to fall. The car didn't belong here. It looked like royalty had accidentally taken a wrong turn into the kingdom of the forgotten.

Megha peered out the window, eyes wide, *"This is where he lives?"*

Aagya replied with a hint of pride, *"Yes. And he made magic from here."*

The car came to a halt. Aagya stepped out with Megha. Immediately, it was as if the entire neighborhood hit pause. Children froze mid-step. Old men stopped their cards mid-game. Housewives leaned out of their balconies, clutching clothespins and curiosity. And then came the whispers:

"That's Rudra's girlfriend. Haye, look at her!", an aunty spoke from the second floor.

"She came in a Rolls! Is this a film shoot?", asked her husband who was standing next to her.

Aagya glanced around, unfazed. Megha, however, was blinking in amusement.

Megha leant closer, *"You're causing quite the star. Want me to get you sunglasses and a fan?"*

"Shut up Megha!", said Aagya.

Suddenly, a pink blur rushed out of nowhere and jumped straight into Aagya's arms.

"Didi! You came!", Latika squealed.

"Told you I would, didn't I?", said Aagya, hugging her tightly.

Latika turned to Megha and beamed, *"You must be Megha Didi. The one who keeps everyone from losing their minds?"*

Megha grinned, offering a hand, *"Assistant secretary-slash-team therapist. Pleasure."*

Latika replied, *"I'm Latika. Rudra bhaiya's officially not-real sister. Unofficially... his everything"*

They all laughed. Latika added, *"Come! I'll take you upstairs."*

But first, they stopped by the landlady's home to collect Rudra's room key. The landlady opened the door, gasped, and practically swooned, *"Ohhh! So you're the beauty who stole our boy Rudra's heart!"*

Aagya stammered, *"Ma'am, no – we're just friends –"*

The landlady smirked, *"Right. I also said the same thing to everyone before marrying my husband."*

Megha chuckled, *"Oh, she's good."*

The landlady took Aagya's hand, *"Child, take care of him. He's been alone for a long time. No one's ever seen him smile the way he has since you entered his life."*

Aagya's heart twisted. Latika added, *"He doesn't show it... but he breaks easily. He needs someone strong. Someone like you."*

Aagya simply nodded, a little choked up. With the key now in hand, the three of them climbed the narrow stairwell to Rudra's room. The hallway smelled of old incense, home-cooked meals, and a bit of history. Latika opened the door. And Megha's jaw dropped, *"Holy shit... this place is a temple."*

It was small, yes. But every inch of the walls was covered in sketches, frames, splashes of color. It looked like grief and glory had gotten into a fight and turned into art. And there, on the easel, stood the centerpiece... the divine goddess sketch. Aagya. Hair wild. Eyes soft. Hand raised to give blessings. Storm behind her. Power dripped from her skin. Megha asked stunned, *"He painted this for you?"*

Aagya didn't speak. She just walked slowly toward it. Her fingertips grazed the edge of the canvas. And she remembered. That moment on Marine Drive. The rain. The silence. The almost-kiss. The forehead touch. The words he'd whispered:

"I'll burn this world if it ever tries to hurt you."

She blinked away the memory and turned back, *"Let's pack. He needs these."*

She pulled out the list and read it, *"Laptop. Sketchbook. Paintbrushes. Charcoal. Power bank. Notepad. Graphite pencils. Eraser. One photo frame..."*

She paused as she picked it up. It was Rudra's parents. His father looked ancient. His mother, young. Too young. Megha spoke over Aagya's shoulder, looking at it, *"That's his parents? Whoa... there seems to be a huge age gap."*

Aagya called Latika, *"Latika? Tell me about them?"*

Latika replied slyly, *"Oh? Already digging up future in-laws' info?"*

Aagya groaned, *"Latikaaa..."*

Megha smirked, *"Come on, spill it."*

Latika finally spoke after jumping and settling on the bed, *"Well.... his papa is a film director and his mom's a senior section engineer in railways. But Rudra hates his papa. Deeply."*

Aagya and Megha were utterly shocked to find out that Rudra also belongs to a filmy background.

"But why?", asked Megha.

Latika replied gently, *"He was never there. Only came to fight. I've seen Rudra bhaiya cry into my lap like a child. He loves hard... but he's been hurt worse. Worse than anyone could ever imagine."*

A silence followed. Not heavy. Just... real. Latika continued, *"Aunty often comes to visit him. Uncle rarely does. But whenever he comes, he brings chaos along with him which leaves bhaiya deeply scarred."*

They couldn't believe what they were hearing. Now they were starting to understand why Rudra was so silent and distant all the time. Aagya spoke, getting a hold of herself, *"Let's pack and go. He needs these."*

They both nodded and started packing.

Aagya whispered to herself, *"He needs me and I won't let him down."*

18. The Ghost's Past

The hospital doors slid open with a faint mechanical sigh as Aagya stepped inside, her heels clicking softly against the pristine tiles. She wasn't alone. Megha walked beside her, calm and confident in her faded jeans and messy bun, but even she could feel the shift in Aagya's aura. Usually, Aagya strode like she ruled the world, head high, spine straight, the kind of girl who walked into rooms like she was the storm they'd been warned about. But today, there was a softness to her. Not weakness. Something gentler. Quieter. A warmth in her eyes that flickered like candlelight, just enough to melt away the frost she usually wore as armor.

In her hands, Aagya carried a black leather backpack worn at the edges, heavy with meaning. Inside, neatly arranged with meticulous care, were the things Rudra needed most: his laptop, sketchbook, charcoal pencils with paint still clinging to their wooden skin, his old wristwatch, the charging cable she'd lovingly coiled and secured, and a faded photograph tucked safely in a zipped compartment. A photo of the parents he rarely spoke of but carried like a scar beneath his silence.

They walked in silence through the hallway. IV stands wheeled by. Monitors beeped in distant rooms. The air smelled of sanitizer and stories that hadn't ended well. As they reached his ward, Megha glanced sideways and murmured, *"Think he's sleeping?"*

Aagya replied half-smiling, *"Not if he sensed I'm nearby."*

She pushed the door open gently. And there he was. Rudra sat up the moment he heard the handle click, like some radar inside him had gone off. His hair was messy, his eyes slightly sunken, but

the moment they landed on her... something changed. He blinked. As if to confirm that she was really there.

Rudra spoke genuinely surprised, *"You came? And you actually brought it yourself?"*

Aagya lifted the bag a little with a quiet smirk, *"Mission accomplished, Tiger."*

He opened his mouth to say something, to protest, maybe. But he couldn't. His throat caught, *"I told you to send someone. You didn't have to..."*

Aagya replied, *"I wanted to. Okay? It's the least I could do after everything you've helped me reclaim."*

She moved to the chair beside his bed and set the bag down with care, like placing something sacred. Rudra stared at her, and in his eyes was a cocktail of disbelief and something softer. Something tender. Something reverent.

Megha teased her with a grin, *"Okay, lovebirds... I'll get coffee while you two exchange longing glances and repressed feelings."*

Aagya rolled her eyes, blushing faintly, *"Megha!"*

Rudra chuckled, the first real sound of joy that had left his mouth in days. A laugh not just heard, but felt, *"Thank you. Really. No one's ever... done all this for me before."*

Aagya looked at him. Not the Ghost. Not the Rebel. Just the boy. And something in her chest ached beautifully, *"Get used to it. This might just be the beginning."*

She pulled out a folded piece of paper from the bag, *"Your checklist. Everything is here. I even wrapped the charger because God knows, your bag looks like a war zone."*

Rudra replied offended, *"Hey. That's not a mess. That's creative chaos."*

Aagya grinned, *"Well, now it's an organized battlefield."*

He looked at her again. A little too long. A little too raw. And spoke, *"You sure you're not applying to be my manager?"*

Aagya shrugged, *"No. Just your... comrade."*

Their eyes locked. And at that moment, it didn't matter where they were. There was something blooming. It was quiet, powerful, and fragile. A pause. Then Megha walked in again with two coffee cups and teased them, *"The romantic tension is melting the IV stand."*

Rudra burst into laughter and grinned, *"I missed this."*

Aagya replied, tipping her cup toward his, *"You won't have to anymore. We've got work to do."*

She tilted her head and spoke in a commanding tone with a smirk, *"Now get back to work, comrade. I can't have my biggest rival lagging behind in this war."*

Rudra gave her the rarest thing he owned: his smile. The real one. And saluted, *"Yes, Commander. But between you and me... You're not the only one with surprises."*

Megha added, *"Okay wait... was that flirting or a battle cry? I'm honestly losing track."*

Rudra leaned back against the pillow, letting out a sigh that felt like it came from his bones, *"It's both. That's kind of our thing."*

Aagya placed her hand over his, fingers curling gently, *"Rest up. Heal fast. We need all our warriors on the front lines. Including the Ghost."*

Rudra looked at her, the words sitting heavy and holy in the space between them, *"Copy that... Lioness."*

Their hands didn't let go. Their eyes didn't blink. And somewhere in that sterile white room filled with old pain and new beginnings... Hope bloomed.

.....

The hospital room had quieted again. The faint sound of the IV drip ticking beside Rudra's bed returned as the only consistent rhythm in the space like a slow heartbeat reminding them that life was still moving forward, even if just barely. Megha had stepped outside to answer a call. The coffee cups now sat empty on the side table.

Rudra leaned back against the pillow, the color slowly returning to his face... not from medication, but from her presence. Aagya remained seated beside him, still holding something in her lap. It was a small, neatly wrapped brown-paper parcel. She turned it over once in her hands, as if trying to gather the right moment to speak. Then, quietly, she rose. Without a word, she walked to his side and placed the package gently on the nightstand beside him. Her fingers lingered there... not hesitant, but reverent. Rudra turned his head toward it and stilled. His expression shifted. From confusion... to realization... to something heavier. Something ancient.

Aagya spoke softly, *"Latika gave it to me. You asked for it, remember?"*

She didn't expect him to speak. And he didn't. Not for a long time. He just stared at the package. His fingers moved toward it slowly, untying the little string... the one with tiny white stars printed across it. Latika's touch. Beneath the wrapping lay a wooden photo frame. Inside it was a picture of a man and a woman. The woman had soft features, tired eyes, and a strength in her half-smile that felt almost defiant. The man looked older. Much older. His hair grayed unevenly, eyes unfocused, with the air of

someone constantly dreaming but never quite arriving. Rudra blinked once. Twice. Then he looked away.

Aagya added, *"She told me a little. About your mom. That she works for Indian Railways. That she's the one who's always held everything together. And that... you don't talk much about your father."*

She stopped there..... not because she ran out of things to say, but because the weight in the room demanded stillness. Rudra didn't respond. His hands clenched lightly in the sheets. His jaw tightened. Then he let out a dry laugh.. Not one of amusement. It sounded like a cough made of memory and iron, *"You know... My mom built me. My father... broke me."*

Aagya frowned. Something about the sentence hit her chest like cold water.

"Rudra – ", she spoke but couldn't even complete her sentence.

He turned to look at her. And for the first time, something in his eyes didn't look tired or guarded. It looked... fragile. Unreadable. Ancient.

Aagya asked after gathering a lot of courage, *"Rudra... will you tell me about them? Your parents. Your story."*

Rudra looked at her. His walls were still up, but there was something in Aagya's eyes that disarmed him. Something that made it impossible to say no. He hesitated, then nodded slightly. But before he could say anything, Megha was back. He looked at her. Without words, just a slight glance he signaled that he wanted privacy. Aagya caught it instantly.

Aagya spoke to Megha, *"Megha, would you mind giving us a moment?"*

Megha looked at Rudra, then back at Aagya, and nodded with quiet understanding, *"I'll be outside. Take your time."*

She left, closing the door gently behind her. Now it was just the two of them. Rudra looked down, then back at Aagya, *"Are you sure you want to know, Aagya? The real story?"*

Aagya replied without hesitation, *"Yes, Rudra. Every word."*

Rudra's eyes darkened a little, *"Then I must warn you. After this... you might hate me."*

Aagya chuckled softly, trying to lighten the moment, *"I already hate you. So nothing new."*

For a second, a rare second, Rudra smiled. But the smile faded almost immediately, *"I'm not joking."*

Aagya's breath caught for a moment. The gravity in his voice sent a chill through her spine. But she swallowed her fear and nodded, *"Tell me."*

There was a silence after that, but not an empty one. It was the kind of silence that settles between two people before one of them steps into the fire of memory. Rudra's lips parted, but no sound came out at first. Then, finally as if pulling the voice from somewhere deeply buried beneath years of bruises and silences, he spoke, *"My mother... she's always been the breadwinner. The warrior. The protector. She worked, cooked, fought, and survived. All by herself. Day and night. Without ever taking a break. And my father? He just slept. Talked big. And did nothing. He was a dreamer, they said. But his dreams were weapons. Weapons he used against me."*

His voice didn't rise. It didn't break. It simply... existed. Like a storm whose thunder had long since passed but whose rain still hadn't stopped. Aagya didn't interrupt. She just reached out, her fingers resting lightly on his wrist. She didn't pull. Didn't hold. Just... touched.

Rudra continued, *"He's an FTII graduate. He studied film direction at one of the best film institutes in the world. And yet... he did nothing with it. Nothing but telling stories to strangers, giving free lectures to*

people at events he was invited to and never got paid even a penny for it. He always blamed my birth for ruining his career and life."

Aagya's eyes didn't leave him. Not for a second. She was startled at this revelation as she knew the importance of FTII since her family had connections there.

Rudra added, "My mother is twenty-five years younger than him. Can you believe it? 25 fucking years? She had so many great rishtas coming her way, yet she chose him. Voluntarily. People warned her. Her own family did. But she was in love. She fought everyone for him. She thought she was marrying an artist. Instead, she married a man who forgot what it meant to be one."

He laughed again. But this one sounded like a tear that took the wrong exit and spoke, *"She said he used to be extremely handsome and popular back then. I don't know what she saw in him. I don't know how she didn't see what he really was. I bet he manipulated her into loving him. After all, he was almost fifty when they got married."*

Aagya's chest tightened. She felt like someone was slowly pressing down on her ribs, one finger at a time.

Rudra spoke again but with a bitter laugh escaping, *"She always loved literature. Always. But life – " (he exhaled sharply) " – life pushed her into engineering, because that's what Indian parents do, right? If you can't pursue your passion, just settle, just marry. And he knew it. He knew everything about her. Her weaknesses. Her dreams. He used them to lure her in. Hindi literature was his weapon. After all, he had a postgraduate degree in it. He quoted poets like a saint when in reality he was a goddamn sinner."*

He looked away, jaw tight, voice low, like venom, *"And they were neighbors. Of course it was easy for him. He was the star of the colony – the guy every girl wanted. A bloody playboy back in his day. And when they dated, she literally paid for everything. Every damn thing. He wouldn't even spend a single rupee without acting like it would kill him. Because he was a goddamn coward. A miser. A – "*

He stopped himself, lips trembling, fists clenched and finally exploded, *"A fucking impotent excuse of a man."*

Aagya took a step closer, voice soft but firm, *"Rudra..."*

He didn't look at her. His breath was shaky now, *"You know what hurts the most?"* (his voice cracked.) *"He called me the devil. A mistake. He blamed me every time he didn't get a job, or a grant, or an award. He mocked me when I cried. Laughed when I failed. I stopped expecting love from him very early. But I kept hoping for respect. Just once. Just... once."*

He stopped. And Aagya saw it. That flicker in his eye. The weight in his jaw. The fight to keep his voice steady. And she understood. This wasn't just a story. This was an exorcism.

Aagya replied in a soft, yet piercing tone, *"You know what I think? Your mother didn't fall for him because he was perfect. She fell for him because she was tired. Tired of fighting for her dreams alone. And maybe... maybe he made her believe he could fill that void."*

She swallows hard, eyes burning, *"I've seen women like her. Hell, I've felt like her. When you love books more than anything, but life doesn't let you read. When your choices shrink until the only thing left is marriage, you start mistaking manipulation for love. I'm not saying it was right. I'm saying –"*

She stepped closer, her hand brushed against his, *" – it wasn't her fault. And it sure as hell isn't yours."*

Her words healed a part of him he never knew existed. Rudra's grip on the frame loosened slightly, but his eyes still rested on the photo, but he wasn't really seeing it anymore. He was seeing something far older. Far smaller. A school corridor. A pair of too-tight shoes. And a younger version of himself, standing alone in a crowd of uniforms that never quite made space for him.

"I was bullied, Aagya. Not the casual name-calling kind. I mean... the brutal, soul-crushing kind. Where every day felt like war, and the worst

part wasn't the boys. It was going home knowing I couldn't tell anyone.", he said.

Aagya leaned in just a little, her posture softened like paper in rain.

Rudra continued, *"I'd come back with torn notebooks, bruised arms, sometimes even a limp. And when I told my father... he looked at me like I was pathetic. He said, 'You must've done something.', 'You always do.', 'You're a little devil anyway.'"*

He paused. That sentence lingered in the air like smoke that wouldn't clear.

Rudra added, *"That line stayed with me Aagya. It became the chorus of my childhood. Not once did he say 'I'm proud of you.' Not once 'That must've hurt.' Not even 'I'll talk to the school.'"*

His hand, still resting on the wooden frame, trembled once. Aagya reached out and placed her palm gently over his. No words. Just warmth.

Rudra continued, *"My mom tried. God, she tried. But she was always working. By the time she came home, she was a shell. All I ever wanted was to sit next to her and say nothing. But there was no space left in her silence for mine."*

He looked down at their joined hands. Then up at her. And suddenly, his voice dropped even lower. As if he was finally saying something he'd never dared to, *"You know. She's the reason why I'm still here. Over the years, she has been my mom, tutor, partner in crime, support, financier, advisor, caretaker, bodyguard, and what not. She is everything my father failed to be. She became a man my father could never be even if he tried for a thousand lifetimes."*

Aagya felt a prickling in her throat. She swallowed hard trying to push it down.

Rudra continued, *"One night, I asked him... 'Can you teach me football?' He used to brag that he was the college champ. That he still*

had the legs for it. And he looked me dead in the eye and said, 'You're not worth the effort.'"

Silence. A raw, terrible silence. Then, Aagya moved without thinking, without planning... just pure instinct. She slid closer and wrapped her arms around him. She didn't speak. Didn't whisper *'It'll be okay.'* Didn't say *'I'm sorry.'* She just held him. Because sometimes, presence speaks louder than any apology. And Rudra? He broke. Not with drama. Not with screams. He just leaned into her shoulder and let go. His chest shook. His breath came in short, quiet gasps. And his arms wrapped around her like she was the only thing in the world that hadn't turned to ash.

Rudra spoke in a hoarse voice, *"I never had any friends Aagya. Didn't have teachers who cared. I was that weird kid in the corner whom everyone despised and treated like an untouchable and an outcast."*

Aagya tightened her arms around him, one hand now resting protectively on the back of his head stroking his hair gently.

He continued, *"And still... I loved him, you know? My dad. Despite everything. Because that's what kids do. They love. Blindly. Desperately."*

He pulled back just enough to look into her eyes. His own were red-rimmed, lashes wet, voice brittle, *"When he started his film... I was proud. Genuinely proud. I thought... 'This is it. This is the moment everything changes.'"*

He sniffled once, rubbed his face against his sleeve. Aagya didn't move. She stayed, eyes locked on his, giving him permission to go on. And he did, *"I told everyone at school. Bragged about it. But it backfired. I helped on set. I worked for so many hours on an empty stomach. Did everything from managing lights to holding cue cards. Never got even the slightest appreciation from him, all I ever got was insults in front of the cast and crew."*

He let out a shaky exhale and continued further, *"And when the film was done... And the trailer and poster launched... And the stage was lit... He went up there... And he thanked everyone. My mom. The crew. The chai guy. Everyone. Except me."*

He paused for a second and spoke, *"Even my mom whom I shared everything with was so consumed by the attention and claps that she forgot all the pain her boy had endured over the years. The nights he cried. The moments he bled. The sufferings he endured for the man she married. The fake smile he wore every day to hide all his wounds coz he knew that his father never gave a fuck about them."*

Aagya's hands froze. Not from shock. From rage. From heartbreak. From all the weight of a boy who gave his soul and still remained invisible.

Rudra spoke, *"I sat in the front row. Clapping like a fool. I waited for my name thinking of some miracle to happen. But it never came."*

His voice cracked finally and a single tear fell from the corner of his left eye, *"Later... a crew member asked him, 'Why didn't you thank your son?' You know what he said?..... 'What did he even do?'"*

The silence after that was brutal. So brutal it made Aagya's heart ache in places she didn't know existed. She reached up gently cupping his cheek, wiping the tear before it could fall any further and whispered, *"You did everything, Rudra. You did more than anyone ever should've had to. And he didn't deserve an ounce of it."*

He looked at her. A long, searching look. Then rested his forehead against hers, *"I wanted him to see me. Just once. Not as a burden. Not as a mistake. But as his son."*

The rain outside had mellowed to a light drizzle. The silence in the room was comforting, broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves brushing the windows. Rudra, lying with his head resting on Aagya's lap now, felt something stir within him... a storm of memories he had buried for too long. He glanced up at her face...

calm, warm, patient. For the first time, someone wasn't rushing him, fixing him, or dismissing his pain. And that made it impossible to hold anything back anymore.

Rudra spoke in a soft, almost trembling voice, *"You know... a few days after that whole conversation, my father asked me to help him put the film's trailer online. He didn't really understand how any of that stuff worked, so I called in a YouTuber friend of mine to set up the channel."*

Aagya looked at him with gentle curiosity, waiting as Rudra's voice carried the story forward. And he did, *"We thought things were finally falling into place. But no. After setting everything up, my father still went to a random networking guy, who screwed things up later on, and gave him the trailer."*

He paused, bitterness seeping through his words. He continued gritting his teeth, *"That genius uploaded it from his own damn account. My foolish father didn't even check. The trailer blew up, got lakhs of views. But the revenue? All of it went into his account. Ours saw nothing."*

Aagya asked wide-eyed, *"Oh my God... how did you find out?"*

Rudra replied, *"The night before the film's release... we suddenly got a notification that a South Indian movie was uploaded to our channel. That's when it hit me....that bastard used his account, and now he was using ours to post pirated content."*

Aagya's mouth dropped in disbelief, *"Wait, he used your father's official film channel to upload a random film?"*

Rudra nodded, *"And when my dad confronted him, guess what he said? 'It's to increase the reach of the channel.' Can you imagine? I was fuming. I told him we had to meet that guy and deal with him seriously."*

He laughed bitterly, *"But when we finally met him... instead of demanding answers, he started acting like they were long-lost childhood*

friends. Asked him about his family, offered chai-samosa... like we were the ones guilty. I was burning inside, Aagya."

Aagya shook her head and muttered, "He just... let it slide?"

Rudra nodded, *"Every single time I expressed my anger, he silenced me. Like I was the problem. That day, something snapped inside me. I looked at that man and realized... he would never protect me or my mom. Never stand up for us. Never be a real man. I ended everything with him that night."*

His voice cracked, *"He became a spineless shadow to me. His rage was only limited to me and mumma since we're the only ones he can abuse, demean and hit and get away with it."*

He paused, wiped a few of his tears and continued, *"You know till this day he watches the trailer of his cursed film for like a thousand times with no aim while eating on his wife's money. And you know what? I've hated my mother ever since."*

Aagya's eyes softened. She leaned in a little, *"Why... your mom?"*

Rudra replied with a bitter smile, *"Because she had one job. Just one. To marry a decent man. But no. She picked this joker over thousands of good proposals. She was doing well, had a career, class, grace and she married the laziest, most pathetic impotent alive. A man who was a burden to his own parents."*

There was silence. His fists were clenched now, *"Everyone warned her. Everyone. But she fought them all... for him. They say love makes you blind, right? In her case, it made her stupid."*

Aagya placed her hand over his, her thumb brushing his knuckles slowly.

He added, *"It's almost a curse in our family. Every woman who married for love ended up choosing the worst possible man. The ones who listened to their parents? Found gems.... My dad? He's the reason I've grown up alone. The reason I've never felt wanted. Like... like I was just an accident."*

He turned his face into her lap, a tsunami of tears finally spilling out. Aagya held him, heart breaking as she whispered nothing... just letting him cry, *"No one ever held me like this when I cried. No one ever said, 'It's going to be okay, Rudra. I'm here.' Not even her. You're the first."*

Aagya's hand moved to his hair, stroking it gently. She didn't try to stop his tears. She just let him breathe and break.

Rudra spoke sobbing, *"Sometimes I feel jealous of my own father..."*

Aagya blinked, caught completely off guard. Of all things, **jealousy** hadn't been the word she expected.

Aagya asked in confusion, *"Jealous? Of him?"*

Rudra nodded slowly, eyes distant, *"Yeah. Not because he was a good man. He wasn't. He hurt people. Hurt us. But sometimes... when I see how much my mom still loves him, even after everything... I start wondering that maybe I will never get to experience even an ounce of love like that ever. Maybe I'm not built for it. Maybe I don't deserve it."*

He paused, eyes flicking up to hers... vulnerable, broken.

Rudra spoke with a bitter laugh, *"And besides, girls don't fall for guys like me anyway. They only want the toxic ones... the ones who use them, break them, and make them chase. Not the guy who loves too much or feels too deep. That guy just gets... left behind. My parents are a great example for this."*

Aagya stared at him for a long, heavy second. Then, without breaking eye contact, she knelt closer both her hands cupping his face gently, as if grounding him, *"Rudra... listen to me. You're not your father. You are nothing like him. And if your mom still loves him, it says more about her heart than his worth."*

Her thumbs brushed the dried tears at the edge of his cheek as she continued, *"And don't you dare believe that bullshit about girls only wanting toxic boys. Not every girl wants chaos, Rudra. Some of us*

are just... too scared to believe someone good could stay. But that doesn't mean we don't want them. It just means we're still healing too."

She leaned in, forehead almost resting against his and whispered, *"You are not too much. You're not too intense. You're not 'hard to love.' You're just honest. And strong. And real. And those things? They're rare."*

Rudra's breath caught. Like her words had reached a place even his nightmares hadn't touched.

Aagya added with a small, almost trembling smile, *"So stop thinking you were born to be alone. Because if love was a war, Rudra... You've already survived it. Now it's time someone loved you like you fought for them."*

He couldn't speak. Just closed his eyes, a silent tear escaping again. But this time, it didn't sting. This time, it healed. The silence that followed her words was thick, humming with an unspoken ache. The faint hum of the hospital machines filled the gaps between their breaths.

Rudra's eyes, heavy with exhaustion, regret, and a century of uncried tears, lifted again. His voice was barely above a whisper, *"Then tell me, Aagya... why is it that the most toxic men, the ones who manipulate, lie, and hurt their women mentally, physically and emotionally, are the ones who get loved the most? Why do girls give everything to men who destroy them, while the ones who would rather die than see their woman cry... never get chosen at all? Or even somehow if they do get chosen never even get the bare minimum efforts at all while they go beyond the world for their girls?"*

His gaze stayed fixed on her desperate, raw, almost childlike. The question wasn't just rhetorical. It was a wound. One that had never healed.

Aagya inhaled deeply, her eyes softening as she tried to hold his pain without letting it drown her too. She didn't look away.

Instead, she moved closer sitting right beside him now, their shoulders almost brushing, *"Because love, Rudra... doesn't always go where it should. It goes where it recognizes something familiar. And sometimes, what's familiar... is pain."*

Rudra blinked, as if trying to absorb that.

She continued, her voice steady but filled with something heartbreakingly real, *"When a girl grows up being hurt emotionally, mentally, even by the people she trusted, she starts to believe love is supposed to hurt too. So, when a man comes along who breaks her, manipulates her, somewhere deep down... it feels normal. It feels like home. Because that's the version of 'love' she's known all her life."*

She looked down for a moment, fiddling with the hem of her sleeve. Then she added, voice trembling, almost as if she was speaking for herself too, *"And when she meets someone kind... Someone who respects her, listens to her, who loves her without asking for anything in return... she doesn't know how to receive it. It feels foreign. Unsafe, even. Because kindness demands vulnerability. And for someone who's spent their whole life protecting their wounds... vulnerability feels like standing naked in a battlefield."*

Rudra's jaw tightened slightly. He wanted to argue. To say, it wasn't fair. But he couldn't. Because every word she said made too much sense.

Aagya looked back at him, eyes glistening, but strong, *"It's not that girls want toxic men, Rudra. It's that their broken parts find comfort in people who mirror their damage. They think they can fix them. Maybe because no one ever tried to fix them. They think, 'If I can love him enough, maybe he'll finally love me right.' But the truth is... the ones who heal us scare us the most. Because they show us what we actually deserve. And that's a kind of love most people don't feel worthy of."*

She paused and looked dead serious into Rudra's eyes and then added, *"Also Rudra... women who fall for toxic men aren't loyal to*

them. They're loyal to the hope that the man they first met, the one who smiled differently, spoke gently, touched their soul for a fleeting moment, still exists somewhere inside him. They keep trying to save that ghost... not realizing he's long gone."

She looked down, her voice trembling slightly, "And the reason they stay... is because pain can be addictive when it's wrapped in love. When someone breaks you and then kisses the cracks, it creates this illusion of depth. You start believing no one else could ever make you feel that much. Even if it's mostly hurt."

She looked into Rudra's eyes now... steady and sincere, "But the ones like you, Rudra? The ones who love too purely? They make love safe. And for someone who's been through chaos, safety feels unfamiliar. Even wrong. They mistake peace for boredom. They mistake kindness for weakness. Because their hearts have been trained to chase storms, not shelter."

She smiled faintly, eyes glistening, "It's not fair. It's not right. But it's human. Some of us... we keep confusing comfort with complacency. We crave intensity, not realizing that real love isn't fire... it's warmth. It doesn't burn. It heals."

She took a soft breath, her voice low but certain, "And someday... when they're done being burnt alive by chaos, they'll crave what you offer. A love that doesn't hurt, doesn't demand, doesn't prove. Just is. By then, maybe it'll be too late. Or maybe, just maybe... you'll still be there. Not waiting, but existing... as the man who always loved right, even when the world didn't know what to do with that kind of love."

She leaned back slightly, letting her words settle between them like ash after a fire.

Rudra's voice cracked as he whispered, "So what does that mean for someone like me? Someone who never wanted to hurt anyone... but always ends up being the one left behind?"

Aagya smiled faintly, the kind that carried more ache than comfort. Her tone softened to tender, maternal almost, but laced

with deep emotion, *"It means, Rudra... that you love the right way, in the wrong world. You love with sincerity, in a generation that mistakes detachment for strength. But that doesn't make you weak. It makes you rare. And rare things aren't always understood, they're just... found by the right eyes, at the right time."*

She paused, her hand brushing his gently... a small gesture, but it sent a quiet current through both of them, *"One day, someone will look at you... and she won't be afraid of how deeply you love. She won't flinch from it. She'll fall into it. And she'll thank the stars that you never stopped believing in real love, even when the world made you feel foolish for it."*

Rudra stared at her speechlessly. His throat tightened, his eyes burning. He wanted to tell her something... anything... but no words came out. But somehow, he spoke, *"Like the way you do?"*

Her breath hitched. It was like cupid had pierced his arrow through their hearts at the same time. She tilted her head slightly, her tone turning light again trying to break the heaviness and teased him with a faint smile hiding her blushing, *"Maybe... And if you're still wondering why girls fall for toxic men, it's probably because they haven't met you yet."*

That made him let out a shaky laugh. The kind that sounded halfway between disbelief and gratitude. Their eyes met again. And for the first time in his life, Rudra didn't feel invisible. He felt seen.

Rudra spoke, *"You know... I used to curse her... my mom. Because all she had to do was pick better. But she failed. And because of that, I've had to live this... broken version of a life. One I never asked for. But now after listening to you, I think I understand her now."*

She was pleased to hear this. But somehow his sobs deepened, raw, pure, shaking his shoulders. Aagya couldn't hold hers back either. Her tears streamed silently as she held the broken boy who had worn too many masks for too long. She was seeing a version

of Rudra no one else ever had. The shattered, real and undone one. And even though she didn't say it aloud, she knew something had shifted inside her. Something irreversible. She was falling for him. Not the way most girls fall. Not for the confidence, or charm, or dreams... but for the scars. For the boy who still stood tall despite being knocked down by the very people who were supposed to protect him.

Rudra continued in a voice barely a whisper, *"But you know... recently my elder mausi told me something. That she had warned my mom years ago. She said my dad was too old... might never be able to father a child."*

He laughed. But it wasn't humor. It was hurt dressed like bitterness.

He continued, *"So my mom decided to 'prove her wrong' and had me within a year. Just to win some damn argument. I wasn't born out of love, Aagya... I was just an abomination born out of a freaking challenge. A way to shut people up."*

His voice cracked now, deeper... more fractured, *"After that day, I feel like I was never wanted. Never needed. Just... a result of one night's ego. Maybe that's why she never took my side when he put me down and shamed me just to feel big. She always said, 'He's your father. He's older. I can't say anything.' And somehow... I always became everything wrong with this family? She blamed me just to avoid drama and maintain the peace."*

His breath hitched and she covered her mouth in disbelief, *"Trust me Aagya! I love my mom more than anything in the world. But her one mistake made my whole life a hell I'll never be able to escape. Just because of her poor taste in men, I endured years of pain and sufferings which were always dismissed as excuses. And whenever I asked her why she married him? She always replied, 'She wanted me'. It always felt more like an insult than a compliment because being his son is nothing but a curse for me. I'm an accident which was never meant to happen."*

And then, he shattered. His chest caved. His body curled into Aagya's lap like a boy lost inside a nightmare he couldn't wake from. Sobs tore through him... not loud, but deep. Like every breath hurt. Like grief had claws. Aagya's arms wrapped around him. Tight. Protective. Silent. She didn't whisper false hope. Didn't say *'it'll be okay.'* She just held him like the truth. Like maybe if she held him tight enough, he wouldn't come undone again. Because this wasn't a boy crying for attention. This was a soul finally being **seen**. And for Aagya... It was devastating. Not because he was weak. But because he had survived so much, all alone.

She stroked his hair slowly, her own tears falling into the collar of his cloth. And after a long time when his cries had turned into quiet breaths, when the war inside him softened to embers, she finally spoke, *"You're not an accident, Rudra. You're not a product of pride or spite. You're here. And that alone... makes you a miracle."*

He didn't move. But she knew he heard her, *"And I know you blame your mom. And I get it. I do. But her failure doesn't define your worth. You define it. And I swear to you on every scene we ever created together, you were never meant to live in shame. Or silence."*

She leaned down, her forehead gently pressing against the side of his, *"And I don't care who couldn't see it. I see you. All of you. The rage. The ache. The heart. And if anyone ever made you feel like you were hard to love..."*

She paused and spoke, swallowing her own tears, *"...then they didn't deserve to love you in the first place."*

Rudra closed his eyes. And for the first time in years... He felt held. Not as a burden. Not as a mistake. But as **someone worthy**. The light outside the curtain flickered soft and golden. And in that quiet, sacred moment... The broken boy and the girl who refused to look away from his ruin just breathed. Together.

Rudra spoke, *"You know... the night the film was released? We only got one show for a span of a week... 6:30 pm."*

Aagya replied in an encouraging tone, *"Yeah?"*

He let out a dry chuckle, shaking his head, *"It was supposed to be the happiest day of his life, you know? Finally, after all that hell he had a film in a theatre. Even if just one show for a week. But what does he do?"*

He turns slightly toward her, eyes sharp, voice thick with restrained disbelief, *"The first day was houseful but from the next day he starts spending the entire evening running around, buying tickets with his own money, and giving them away to random people."*

Aagya blinked, *"Wait – what?"*

Rudra nodded, *"Yep. Every other person who walked into that hall? He paid for most of them. It was pure, blind desperation. But the only good thing he did was make some strategic invites which included a few sponsors, some press contacts and many reputed professors and writers of Hindi literature."*

Aagya exclaimed, *"Oh my god..."*

Rudra laughed bitterly, *"I kept asking him why – why are you doing this? And you know what he said? 'People need to see it. What if no one turns up?' As if that would somehow change the world's opinion about him."*

"That's...", said Aagya.

"Pathetic? Yeah. I know.", said Rudra, cutting her in.

There's a pause. He leant back in the chair, exhaling deeply, *"For a whole week after that, he kept buying more tickets. Distributing them to every known person. It was like watching a man drown while throwing away his own lifebuoy."*

Aagya spoke softly, *"That must've been hard to watch."*

Rudra nodded, clenching his jaw, *"It was infuriating. Every time I spoke up and tried to get him to stop, he just shut me down. Like I was the villain. Like I didn't want his film to succeed. He even snatched my ticket and gave it to one of his friends."*

Aagya put her hand on his shoulder, *"You did, though. You always did."*

He turned to her, his voice quieter now, *"Of course I did. I wanted it more than him. But I also wanted him to grow up. To act like a man. Just once."*

He looked down at his hands for a moment, rubbing his thumb across his palm, *"You know what's worse? Not even the money. It's that he thought he was doing something noble. And when I pointed out the stupidity of it all, he just said, 'You'll understand when you're older.'"*

Aagya exclaimed with a soft sarcasm, *"Classic!"*

Rudra nodded, *"Classic bullshit."*

She watched him for a moment. There was pain in his face... but also clarity, *"And yet... you were there. That night."*

Rudra glanced at her, *"Of course I was. I even helped him with everything."*

Aagya smiles faintly, heart quietly breaking.

Rudra leant forward placing his elbows on his knees, *"I just didn't know back then... that it wasn't his failure I was witnessing. It was mine. I kept thinking maybe if the film did well, he'd finally see me. Or just... thank me. But instead, he was too busy playing the hero in his own delusion. I should've seen it coming Aagya. Despite all this I always helped him, but he was too deaf and blind to ever notice anything except his own ego."*

She gently placed her hand over his head, fingers threading through his hairs, *"You weren't a failure. You were the only one who showed up with your eyes open."*

He blinked, caught off-guard by her words. Then quietly, almost to himself, *"The only good thing was that he made a good movie, and everyone loved it. After marrying my mom, that's the biggest achievement of his goddamn pathetic life."*

They both laugh softly. But under the humor, something lingered... something heavier, older and deeper. And maybe... something starting to heal. They both smiled into the silence.

Aagya whispered, *"I don't think so, Rudra."*

Rudra looked up at her, his voice soft and raw, eyes still glistening from tears, *"No?"*

Aagya replied, shaking her head gently, *"No. Because his greatest achievement... is you."*

Rudra blinked, unsure what to say. His jaw tightened.

But Aagya wasn't done, *"I don't think you realise it, Rudra. You walk into chaos and make it safer just by being in it. You hold people together with those broken hands of yours, even when you're falling apart inside."*

She reached forward, her fingers gently tracing his knuckles... the scarred ones, *"You say you're not worth much. But you gave Latika a childhood again. You gave our team hope. You saved my life... more than once. And somewhere in between all of that –"*

She swallowed, emotions rising like a tide, *"You saved me. From myself."*

Rudra lowered his eyes, her words landed like quiet thunder. He tried to speak, but he couldn't.

Aagya smiled gently, *"You've made me feel... seen. Heard. Understood. Not as a crown. Not as a boss. Not as Queen Avaan."*

She took his hand, held it to her heart, *"You looked at me, and saw me. Just... Aagya."*

A pause. Then her voice broke just a little, *"And that... that is the rarest kind of love in this world. The kind that doesn't want to fix you. Just stand by you. To hold you... while you heal yourself."*

Rudra's lip trembled. His head dipped. But she lifted his chin gently with her fingers and whispered, *"You're not just important to me, Rudra. You're irreplaceable. You're the home I didn't know I was aching for. You're the peace I didn't know I was allowed to feel."*

A long, still silence. And then Rudra leant forward gently and slowly, not out of desire, but reverence. He rested his forehead against hers, both of them breathing as one. No words. Just breath. And healing.

Rudra asked hesitantly, *"Can I... hug you and just lie down for a while? I... I don't want to be alone right now."*

Aagya paused, then teased him gently, *"Hmm... as long as you don't steal all the blanket or snore in my ear."*

Rudra replied with a faint smile, *"No promises."*

Aagya slowly lay down next to Rudra back turned, leaving just enough space between them to remind him they aren't *that* close yet. But close enough for him to feel her perfume. Something sweet. Like vanilla mixed with a hint of rebellion. Rudra blinked slowly, watching the curve of her back under the blanket. A few seconds passed before Rudra whispered, his voice barely audible, *"This feels... unreal. Like I'm not supposed to have this kind of peace."*

Aagya stroked his arms around her, *"Maybe you weren't... until now."*

Rudra let out a quiet exhale, *"I'm sorry for breaking down like this."*

Aagya spoke immediately, *"Don't be. You didn't break down... you opened up. There's a difference."*

Rudra pressed his forehead against her shoulder gently and whispered, *"Thank you for not letting me feel like a burden."*

Aagya replied in the same tone, *"You never were. You're just... someone who's been carrying too much alone."*

She pressed a kiss on his hand and added, *"And I see your pain, Rudra. Not your power."*

A beat of silence. Hearts spoke without words. That small gesture of love gave him goosebumps and butterflies at the same time. He had never felt so loved and seen in his entire life.

Rudra murmured, *"If this is a dream... I don't want to wake up."*

Aagya replied softly, *"Then don't. Just stay. Right here."*

He pulled her slightly closer, burying his face near her collarbone and let out a whisper lost in her skin, *"You feel like home."*

Aagya's arms tightened, her eyes closed now too, holding this moment before the world crept back in. She let him pull her a little closer, her back now snug against his chest. His breath brushed against her hairline.

Rudra spoke in a playful voice, *"By the way... you smell edible."*

Aagya smirked with her eyes still closed, *"You try anything funny and I swear I'll elbow your broken rib."*

Rudra grinned, *"Worth the risk."*

They both fell silent, smiles dancing on their faces and hearts strangely at peace. After a beat, Rudra spoke again, this time more softly. More real, *"Can we stay like this? Just for tonight?"*

Aagya replied softly, sincerely, *"Only if you stop talking."*

"Deal.", he replied.

She squeezed his fingers once, and in that silence the distance between brokenness and belonging begins to blur. Rudra pulled

her a little closer, his arm tentatively resting around her waist. Their bodies now fitted like puzzle pieces. Silence lingers, soft and safe.

Then, in a whisper she asked, *"By the way... you never told me the name of your film."*

Rudra spoke in a half-asleep voice, *"Huh?"*

Aagya turned her head slightly but still not facing him, *"The film your dad directed. The one you said got one show... just 6:30 PM? What's it called?"*

Rudra smiled softly in the dark, proud but still hurting, *"It's called Suspended. It's available on Airtel Xstream Play, Hungama Play... and now even on Eros Now."*

Aagya mock gasped, *"Oh ho! Big star energy! Eros Now as well? Next stop, Netflix?"*

Rudra smirked, *"Please... give them ideas."*

Aagya teased, *"So what, should I start calling you 'Rudra Kapoor'? Or maybe... 'Suspended Boy'?"*

Rudra laughed softly, *"I swear to God... if you call me that in public..."*

Aagya finally turned around to face him, now eye to eye, *"Wait... be serious for one sec. Were you actually in it?"*

Rudra nodded, *"Yeah. First 5 minutes. There's this shot where a kid is sitting on a tree that's been cut down across the road waiting for his school auto to arrive and he waters a small sapling growing out of that tree... That was me."*

Aagya's eyes widened in aww, *"Noooo. Shut up. You? In an extremely symbolic scene as a cutie?"*

Rudra groaned, covering his face, *"Please stop. That scene haunts me."*

Aagya grinned ignoring him, *"Awwww. I can totally imagine your chubby cheeks, messed-up hair, oversized uniform..."*

Rudra asked in regret, *"I'm gonna regret telling you this, aren't I?"*

Aagya replied innocently, *"Why? You just gave me infinite blackmail content."*

Rudra smiled despite himself, *"Remind me again... why did I let you into my bed?"*

Aagya poked his chest softly, *"Because I'm warm, sweet, and I don't snore."*

They both laughed quietly. But there was a moment in her eyes which had warmth, adoration, maybe something more.

Aagya spoke more softly now, *"I'd like to watch that movie. With you."*

Rudra exclaimed in disgust, *"Please don't!"*

Aagya grinned, *"Nope. You've sealed your fate."*

Rudra mockingly groaned, *"What have I done...?"*

She leant into his shoulder, resting her head gently there, *"You've made me want to watch the most tragic, chaotic, ticket-subsidized cinematic disaster of all time."*

Rudra smirked, *"Wow. I'm flattered."*

She looked up at him with a sparkle in her eye, *"I'll bring popcorn. You bring your baby pictures."*

Rudra asked gently, *"Are you sure you can survive the cringe?"*

Aagya whispered, *"With you Rudra? I'll survive anything."*

Rudra's heart tightened a little. Not with pain, but something softer. Something new. He didn't say anything. He just tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and rested his forehead against

hers. And for the first time in a long, long while, he felt seen. Sleep didn't take long after that.

Rudra smiled weakly, his eyes still glassy. They lay beside each other, arms wrapped loosely, hearts slowly syncing to a rhythm that felt like safety. For the first time in his life, Rudra felt like he wasn't alone. And as the night wrapped them in its quiet embrace, they unknowingly drifted off to sleep in each other's arms.

19. Between Oaths and Attachments

The first sliver of morning light crept through the curtains, casting a soft golden hue across the room. Rudra stirred slowly, his head still resting against the now-warm-but-empty pillow where Aagya had been. For a moment, confusion flickered into his eyes. He reached out instinctively to where her hand had been nestled into his chest just a few hours ago, but there was only silence now. No warmth. No heartbeat near his own. And then, disappointment. It was subtle but sharp, like the dull ache left behind by a healing wound. He blinked away the sting in his eyes, trying not to overthink it. But just as he was about to let that familiar feeling of abandonment creep in again, he noticed his phone glowing softly on the table plugged in. Something about that small act hit him like a wave. She had charged his phone. Not out of obligation. Not because he asked. But simply... because she cared. With trembling fingers, he picked up the phone. One unread message awaited him. From Aagya:

"Hey... I didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful... like you hadn't slept this calmly in years. I hope that's true. I've never seen someone carry so much weight in their soul, Rudra. I didn't say much last night because I didn't want to interrupt what you needed to let out. But just know this... You are not a mistake. You were not born out of some challenge. You were meant to exist. The world tried to bury you under pain, but you're still here. Still breathing. Still fighting. And I'm proud of you. Thank you for trusting me with your truth. I'll protect it with my life. I'm here... whenever you need me. Always. ♥️"

Rudra read the message once. Then twice. Then again, holding the phone tighter each time. A single tear rolled down his cheek... not from pain this time, but from something new. Something gentler. Something called... hope. That day, for the first time in what felt like forever, he didn't feel like a burden. Or an afterthought. Or someone whose life was just an unfortunate accident. He felt seen. He felt human. And for a fleeting moment... he felt loved.

The world outside moved at its usual chaotic pace. Inside Room 407, however, time had slowed. The beeping machines, the muted blue walls and the filtered sunlight struggling through drawn curtains all felt like limbo. Rudra sat upright, bandaged ribs taut beneath his loose grey hospital tee. Sweat clung to his temple, more from *tension* than pain. His wounds had started to knit, but his instincts? They hadn't slept since that night.

Across the side table lay the photo frame of his parents, frozen in time, smiling with an innocence life had long since carved out of him. His fingers traced the glass surface once. Then again. And something clicked. Literally. A faint mechanical tick under the bottom ridge. His eyes narrowed. He pressed again, this time with deliberate force. Click. Slide. A hidden slot popped out from beneath the wooden frame. Inside, nestled like a secret, was a gunmetal grey drive. No markings. No wires. Just engraved initials on one side:

E-17 | Saffron Tier | Eyes Only

His breath caught. This was it. The drive that Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh had asked for. Rudra pulled his laptop closer, wincing slightly as pain lanced through his stitched side. He plugged in the drive. A moment's delay. Then a flash of light on the screen.

**VERIFICATION: Captain Rudra S. | Biometrics confirmed.
Secure Files Unlocked.**

Dozens of folders unfurled.

 AVAAN EMPIRE – EMPLOYEE ACCESS LOGS

 PAYROLL CHANNEL MAPPINGS

 FOREIGN LIAISON – BLACKBOOK

 OFFSHORE ENTITY NETWORKS

 UNREPORTED FUND FLOWS

He began scanning. Page after page. Spreadsheet after spreadsheet. Everything seemed... normal. Too normal. Which meant it was fake. Dressed to pass even an audit. But then, a line blinked. A subfolder tucked deep into *Payroll Channel Mappings*:

 /Tier-II/Export_Ledgers/Processed_Q4/

It was password protected. Rudra paused. His mind flashed back to Latika's birthday. He typed it in.

ACCESS GRANTED.

Inside were 42 transactions. Each small. Each was legal on the surface. But each funneling money in broken streams of ₹3.2 lakhs, ₹5.1 lakhs, ₹7.7 lakhs, etc. to the same recipient:

Al-Hind Strategic Exports Pvt. Ltd.

Registered in: Nagaland.

Purpose: "*Rare Earths Logistics Consultation.*"

GST Filed: 0 returns.

Physical Office: Empty land plot.

Rudra's jaw tightened. They were using mineral export codes as camouflage. He kept digging. The money was re-looping from Avaan Studios to Al-Hind, then again through two middlemen firms in Dubai and Kathmandu, before finally reaching:

Jamaat-e-Tahreek Holdings – Lahore Branch.

[A known Lashkar-e-Qayamat proxy.]

"So this is how they breathe through Indian soil," Rudra whispered, voice like gravel.

His heart thudded. He reached under the bed pulling out a black duffel the nurse thought contained only clothes. From a side zipper, he retrieved the secure satellite phone. The one Lt. General had slipped into his palm without a word during his hospital visit. He turned it on. It blinked red. Then green. One contact. No number. Just a codename:

IRON WOLF

He pressed the call. Three rings. Then a click, *"Shadow Line. Verify."*

Rudra replied grimly, *"Echo-17. Alive. I have the rabbit."*

"Confirm: Tier-Saffron protocol engaged", said Pratap Singh's voice from the other side.

Rudra replied, *"Yes. They're here. Inside Awaan. Using a shell named Al-Hind Strategic Exports. It's dirtier than we thought. They're siphoning via export channels through Northeast India. Backflow hits Lahore."*

Silence. Then they asked, *"Location compromised?"*

Rudra replied with confidence, *"Not yet. But the trail's fresh. Sir... whoever's running this... isn't doing it from the shadows. They're wearing suits and walking around our studios."*

Another pause.

"You're not leaving that bed. Orders stand. I'll come to you.", said Pratap Singh.

Rudra exhaled in relief, *"Sir... bring encryption tools. We'll need more than eyes to see this clearly."*

"Already packed. Be ready, Captain. We're bringing the war indoors now.", Pratap Singh replied.

The call ended. Rudra sat back, chest heaving. He stared at the name on his screen:

Al-Hind Strategic Exports Pvt. Ltd.

He didn't know yet who wore the mask behind it. But he knew one thing for sure: **The next face he unmasked... might be someone he trusted.**

.....

The soft whirl of machines was the only sound inside Room 407 until the hospital door clicked open once more. Rudra sat upright, his side aching under tightly wrapped bandages, as Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh stepped in silently this time dressed in civilian khakis and a faded shawl. Behind him entered Brigadier Rajeev Kapoor and Major General Ayaan Bakshi, both in plain jackets, eyes alert and lips tight. Rudra saluted instinctively.

Pratap returned the salute, *"At ease. You look stronger."*

Rudra replied calmly, *"Enough to walk. Not enough to run. Yet."*

Ayaan spoke, *"Good. Let's get to the bottom of this."*

The door shut behind them, triple locked. A small Faraday device was placed near the window to block any wireless signals. Then Pratap Singh pulled out a portable encrypted console, attached a high-speed wire to Rudra's laptop, and began decrypting the contents of the drive Rudra had discovered. The screen flickered. Documents streamed. Names. Financial flows. Border crossing footage. Metadata trails. Everything the Ayaan Empire had buried under layers of legal jargon and polished audits laid bare.

20 crore rupees. Split into 100 transactions. Four shell companies. All linked to the same Dubai-based holding. An arms route traced from the Siliguri corridor to Nagaland, disguised as 'camera

equipment.' And a list of five employees from Avaan Studios with Level-4 financial access.

But the initiator of these transactions? Still missing. No login trail. No user ID. No biometric key. Only the system tag:

ACCESS GRANTED BY: MASTER OVERRIDE - ALPHA ROOT.

Major General Ayaan leaned forward, jaw clenched, *"This is internal sabotage. Whoever's doing this... they're in the highest tier. Root level."*

Brigadier Rajeev added, *"A mole. Possibly protected by Avaan's own board. Or worse... someone we've overlooked."*

Rudra stared at the screen. His voice was low, *"I can't trace them. Not from outside. Their digital fingerprint ends inside the Mansion."*

Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh turned toward him slowly. His eyes held both weight and decision, *"Then it's time we sent someone inside."*

A heavy silence. Pratap leaned closer, *"You'll infiltrate the Mansion. As soon as your body allows it. But you won't go as a soldier. You'll go back as... her man."*

Rudra's throat tightened. He didn't answer.

Pratap Singh added voice sharper now, *"She trusts you. She'll let you in. Your connection gives us the perfect entry point. She's our key."*

Rudra's breath shortened, *"She's not a part of this."*

Pratap Singh replied, voice stern, tone rising, *"You don't know that. You want to believe she's innocent, but every man blinds himself before he bleeds. Love can be a weapon, Rudra. Don't let it be used against you."*

Rudra looked away, jaw clenched.

Pratap took a step forward, standing over him now, *"I'm not saying she's guilty. I'm saying she's a variable. And you've sworn*

loyalty to something far greater than a woman. Your nation. You don't get to choose what feelings you keep. Only what truths you serve."

Rudra replied firmly, staring ahead, *"You think I'd compromise the country for her?"*

Pratap Singh replied, *"I think you're already compromised."*

The room went still. Something flickered in Rudra's eyes. A fire. A crack, *"She's not a tool. Or a threat. She's the only reason I'm still breathing. You want to use her? I won't let you."*

That shook the room. Brigadier Rajeev's eyebrows rose. Ayaan looked up sharply. They had never seen Rudra defy an order. Not like this.

Pratap's gaze narrowed. Cold. Testing, *"You dare raise your voice in front of your commanding officer... for a girl?"*

Rudra replied without flinching, *"No, sir. I raised my voice for the truth. Because if you doubt her without proof, you insult the very discipline you taught me to live by."*

A beat of silence. Thick. Charged. Then, Pratap exhaled. A faint smile crept onto his face. Not of amusement. But of confirmation. He took a step back, *"Good."*

All three officers stared.

Pratap Singh stared, *"For a moment... I thought we'd lost your humanity to your uniform. But there it is."*

He paused and continued, *"Hold onto that spine. But sharpen it. Because if she is innocent, Rudra... then she's in more danger than you can imagine."*

Rudra didn't respond. His breathing was heavy. His fists clenched.

Rudra replied with controlled fury, *"Don't say that again, sir."*

The room tensed as Rudra continued firmly, *"She pulled me out of the dark when no one else did. When I was bleeding alone in that playground... she came back. When I broke down... she held me, not because of orders, not out of duty... but because she saw me."*

The silence was absolute.

Rudra added with his voice trembling now, *"I won't accuse her just because a spreadsheet says something's wrong. She's not a data point. She's human."*

Even Rajeev looked stunned. Ayaan opened his mouth, then closed it again. It was Pratap who finally stepped closer, his eyes fierce, but softer than before, *"This is the first time I've seen you speak like this."*

Rudra replied with a bitter smile, *"Maybe that's because this is the first time I have something to lose."*

Pratap exhaled slowly. Then placed a hand on Rudra's shoulder, *"You'll go to her. But not as her lover. Not as her saviour. You'll go as a soldier with eyes open. And if it turns out she's the one we've been hunting –"*

He leaned in, voice barely above a whisper, *"Then you do what needs to be done."*

Rudra looked away. His voice cracked, *"I don't know if I can."*

Pratap Singh replied, *"Then you shouldn't have worn the badge."*

Silence.

Pratap concluded, *"Alright, soldier. Love her. Protect her. But never forget what you swore to protect first."*

A long, painful beat. Then Rudra finally nodded. A single, slow, tortured nod. The war was no longer just out there. It had followed him home. As they left, the soft lock-click of the hospital room door echoed louder than any gunshot Rudra had ever heard. They were gone, but the silence they left behind was

deafening. He sat motionless, eyes still on the spot where Lt. General Pratap Singh had stood just moments ago. His hand trembled slightly, not from pain, but from something far worse. Doubt. Not about his duty. But about her.

He leaned back slowly against the pillow, wincing as the bandages pulled against his ribs. His eyes drifted to the small tiffin by the bedside. It was the same one in which Aagya had brought the egg biryani for him when she visited last time. He stared at it. Too long.

"She might be the one behind this all.", Pratap Singh's voice echoed like a curse in his mind.

His fists clenched around the blanket.

"No. No, it couldn't be her.", he spoke to himself.

He remembered her hand tracing the scar on his chest with trembling fingers. Her voice whispered, *"I see your pain, Rudra. Not your power."*

He remembered the way she held his face after the hospital surgery, the way her tears had soaked into his shirt. She couldn't fake that. Could she? His heartbeat thudded louder now, as if trying to drown out the possibilities his brain was beginning to form. He reached for the secure phone Pratap had given him. Checked for any new instructions. Nothing yet. But his inbox pinged once. A message from Aagya:

"I know you're recovering and probably not in the mood for texts..."

*But the mangoes outside my window bloomed today.
Bhaiya always said they only flower when something good is
about to happen.
So I hope something good is happening to you too..."*

Rudra blinked. A pit opened in his stomach. Her messages always felt like warmth. But now... they felt like a trap. Or worse...

like a test. He threw the phone aside. Ran both his hands down his and whispered to himself, *"What if they're wrong? What if she's just... what if she's just Aagya? My Aagya."*

He stood up shakily from the bed, tugging at his IV line, the pain biting into his side. He limped to the window. Outside, Mumbai was still. Quiet. Unaware. The world didn't know there was a man standing in a hospital gown, torn between the woman he loved and the nation he swore to protect.

Rudra spoke to himself again, *"You promised her truth. You promised your country loyalty. And now you're standing between both... with a blade pressed to your own throat."*

He looked down at the healing wound near his ribs. The place where the blade had gone in. Where duty had almost taken his life. And now... Love might take the rest. A soft breeze slipped through the half-open window. It rustled the edge of Aagya's tiffin. Rudra turned to look at it again. This time, he couldn't smile. He only whispered, *"If you're part of this... I swear to God, Aagya... I'll never forgive you. But if you're innocent... Then may God forgive me... for what I'm gonna do next."*

He turned away from the window, walked slowly back to the bed and lay down. But this time, he didn't pull the blanket over his chest. Because tonight... He couldn't protect his heart. Not from his fate. Not from his *feelings*. And definitely not from the war that had already begun within him.

20. Frame by Frame, We Rose

The studio brimmed with quiet anticipation, the kind that crackled beneath calm waters. Even the scent of coffee carried something electric. The chairs were deserted. Lights hung overhead like waiting stars. Aagya entered first, feet barely touching the polished floor. She wore black linen pants and a bottle-green kurta, hair loosely tied, a hint of fatigue lingering on her features. But beneath that weariness lay something stronger, something unbroken. It was the presence of someone who had faced unspeakable loss and refused to let it define her. Megha followed closely, tablet in hand yet unused. Her usual vigilant gaze was fixed on Aagya. For once, the world of inboxes and call sheets had been eclipsed by this moment, by her leader's return.

Inside, the studio's pulse quieted. Conversations shifted and equipments paused like a symphony taking a breath before the crescendo. Then, a clean voice pierced that hush:

"Well, look who's back. Did your knight in a white hospital gown surrender without a fight? Or did you heroically hand him his sword back?", said Geeta with a playful smirk.

A few soft laughs followed, lighting the space.

Simran grinned while adjusting a lens, *"Please say you left him a clapperboard and a send-off kiss, so at least he had proper direction to survive the emotional battlefield."*

Saadhna added leafing through color swatches, *"I'm betting she whispered 'action' before going. Girl's got habits, you know."*

Aadarsh further added peeking from the ceiling grids, *"Or maybe she just dimmed the lights herself and said 'middle of gloom, now bloom.'"*

Even Ayush added, *"Bet his heartbeat's got a perfect reverb now."*

Another wave of laughter. It rang not with mockery, but with warm affection. From the makeup station, Mishika nudged Ravi with a sparkle in her eyes, *"Do you think we should send a fresh roll of bandage or a handwritten love note wrapped in gauze?"*

Ravi just shook his head with a smile. Shyam and Seeta, always to flair as the twin edit duo, hopped out of the cutting room.

"Did he say 'cut' or 'stay for the sequel, please'?", said Shyam.

"Coz I'd edit my entire pain just to stay in her story.", added Seeta.

For a moment, the room held its breath watching Aagya, waiting for the director's trademark sharp joke. But instead... She laughed. Not a polished laugh, but a real one: warm, surprised, a crack in her usual armor that revealed softness beneath.

"Queued for a sitcom audition, are we? Or is someone missing the coffee... narrative?", said Aagya folding her arms.

Geeta teased with affection in her voice, *"Neither. We're just glad you've brought back your... spark, boss."*

Aagya paused, looked around gently and said, *"Not today. Don't call me boss."*

Silence filled the room... not oppressive, but reverent. Then she walked to the center of the studio and the lights shifted to softly welcome her. She let her arms fall to her sides, *"Today... I'm not your director. I'm Aagya. Just one of you. Not the voice up top, but in the flow."*

Her words hovered. People shuffled. Nods passed like ripples as she continued, *"This film... is more than a story. It's a mirror. A*

reflection of pain, resilience, and reclamation. I don't want to tell it alone. I want us... frame, line and emotion... together."

She gazed at Ramesh, the still-photographer scanning faces, *"Take the shots. Not just of angles, but of souls. Of what's in the eyes when time stills."*

She turned to Aadarsh and Ayush carefully, *"Let lighting and sound behave like emotion. Let grief shake floors. Let hope feel like a sunrise, delicate but unstoppable."*

Then she faced Simran, *"No perfection. No filters. No symmetry. Only raw, ragged, honest truth."*

Simran looked back with resolute, *"Only that."*

With that, they turned and moved. The studio came alive... not under Aagya's command, but around her guidance. Conversations sparked. Debates softened into collaboration. Every slight shift, every adjustment fueled by trust and unity. Aagya moved among them. She did not perch above, but within the flow. She laughed along with them. Suggested gentle changes like softer shadows, quieter cuts, more space in dialogues, etc. She cracked jokes to ease tension. She asked about meals. She checked in on spirits. No voice commanding. Just quiet leadership... a lantern lighting a path, never a whip bribing speed.

Somewhere else, in the hush of night, Rudra's hospital room glowed. His laptop screen flickered faintly, casting shadows of a world inside his hands. Animation played: gods of fire locking in cosmic struggle with phantom fears. It was raw, no polish. Only pulse. He lay back, IV-lined arm still aching. Bruises mapped grief beneath his pillow. Yet his eyes for the first time in a long while carried a spark.

His phone buzzed. It was an incoming call from Aagya. His chest tightened. He answered with a tease, *"Speak quickly. Emotional trauma's off-limits after midnight."*

Aagya replied playfully, *"I'm not your therapist tonight. I'm your partner in creation."*

Rudra replied quietly curious, *"Let's begin then."*

Aagya asked, *"I've decided to carry on with your idea of blending animation and live-action together. I say we let them marry. Let them bleed into one another."*

Rudra replied, *"Hmm... So when trauma fractures reality, we dissolve into animated memory? Then snap back into flesh?"*

Aagya replied with a smile, *"Yes. Mr. Miyazaki. Where the soul seeps into skin, and memory cracks the lens."*

A hush. Then... he whispered, *"Miyazaki huh?... I'm truly honored to be compared to him, Aagya."*

She replied blushing a bit, *"You'll be a much bigger name than him one day for sure, Rudra."*

Rudra replied, caught off-guard by this statement of hers, *"You really think so?"*

Aagya replied with confidence, *"I believe so."*

Their breaths were synchronized. And for the first time, they started believing in themselves and in each other.

.....

Sunlight filtered through blinds. Coffee and toast remained unfinished. Tablets hummed quietly. But the real electricity lay in their eyes as Rudra's Zoom window glowed large. His frame: bed, blanket, pallor and purpose. Made stronger. Aagya sat cross-legged at the head of the table with stylus in hand and heartbeat in her posture. Around her, were her team members who looked tired, but their eyes flickered with life.

"Good morning. How do you feel?", asked Aagya.

"Spent. But I'm awake. I've missed a lot of nights like tonight, with this team.", replied Rudra in a low voice.

Simran commented, "Must be the IV drip... or the ghosts."

Rudra gave a small smile, "Neither. Just clarity."

Aagya spoke, "Listen guys! I've been thinking about the ruby."

Geeta leant in, "I thought it was a curse. Now... maybe it's a memory she never laid down."

Rudra added, "I think it's not a weapon. It's grief wearing a duty's face."

Silence. Then Saadhna commented, "So her victory... is releasing the ruby?"

Ravi further added, "She stops fighting outside. She fights within. And she wins by letting go."

Aagya added quietly, "She chooses herself. Not a sword. Not the throne."

Simran commented, "Pure magic, more than any sword fight."

Geeta added, "We rewrite the final sequence. Strip the soundtrack to breath."

Saadhna added, "She picks up the crown. Looks at it. Then decides not to wear it."

Rudra spoke firmly, "No music. Just the crown falling."

Shyam added, "And breaking into shards of memory."

Aadarsh spoke, "One beam. Her, alone. The ruby's path is illuminated."

Ravi concluded, "That's her emancipation."

Silence held them there like clay before shaping.

Aagya added with a tremor in her voice, *"This isn't just cinema. It's redemption."*

Geeta spoke to Aagya, *"And you? You have to play her."*

Eyes flicked to Aagya.

"No actress can hold that weight. You already do.", said Rudra.

Simran added, *"You are her."*

Aagya replied softly, *"Are you guys serious?"*

Geeta replied to her, *"You've lived this."*

Rudra added solemnly, *"Her armor died when she let herself love. She was reborn then. Don't act in pain. Live it."*

A beat. Aagya picked up the ruby prop; its glass held light like memory. She closed fingers around it, held it like a fragile truth with one hand and her real one with another feeling everything related to it and spoke like a quiet vow, *"Let's rewrite the ending."*

She went near the projector and switched it on. The screen flickered with the frozen duel between the princess and the demon king. It was late. Warm lights glowed low. The team huddled in a circle around cushions and laptops, cups and calm.

"Does she kill him? Or is it deeper?", asked Simran.

"She doesn't kill. She sees. And understands he's a mirror of her own fear.", replied Aagya.

Gasps and silence followed.

Aagya added, *"She lifts the sword... then drops it."*

Geeta commented, *"The climax is not blood. It's the release."*

Rudra added, *"She fights her memory, not a monster."*

Seeta further added, *"No fanfare. Silence. Leaves rustle. She walks beyond the battlefield."*

Ravi commented, *"Freedom bleeding from the wound."*

Simran added, *"And she becomes whole in that silence."*

Projector dims. Eyes remain.

Aagya spoke with quiet fire, *"We make this for her... the girl who said goodbye only to find herself."*

No applause was needed. Their hearts spoke. Ayush tapped the record. Simran typed storyboards. Saadhna sketched color swatches. Shyam queued the next frame. Aagya simply breathed... no longer a commander, but a witness to her own rebirth.

.....

The next morning, the golden hour light poured in through the blinds, slicing across the long oak table where the core team had gathered, still a little breathless from the morning's breakthrough rewrite. Aagya stood by the window, phone in hand, staring out at the horizon as it burned into orange. Then she turned, lifted the phone to her ear, and spoke with a calm that concealed urgency, *"Sir, I need you. Today. We're finally ready... and I won't trust this with anyone else."*

A beat of silence. Then a voice came from the other side gravelly, amused, *"That's a dangerous compliment, Aagya. You do realize I almost retire every time someone says that."*

Aagya replied, smiling faintly, *"Then let this be your last miracle before retirement."*

A few hours later, the atmosphere, once buzzing with edits and frame notes, now held a rare stillness. Everyone had gathered all seated in anticipation.

Geeta glanced at her watch, eyebrows slightly raised, *"He's late."*

Simran grinned, *"Legends walk in after the clock, not with it."*

And as if on cue, the glass doors clicked open. In stepped a tall man in an ink-blue Nehru jacket over a white shirt, polished but lived-in shoes, and a slow, confident gait. Salt-and-pepper hair, neatly trimmed beard, and eyes that didn't just see people, but measured them. It was Viraj Sethi, the legendary casting director of Bollywood.

Aagya stood instantly and walked over, *"Sir. Thank you... for coming on such short notice."*

Viraj smiled warmly, *"You said it was urgent. When Avaan Studios says 'urgent,' I come. What's the emergency?"*

She turned, gesturing to her team seated across the room like a makeshift jury of artists and warriors, *"Everyone! Meet Mr. Viraj Sethi. The man behind some of the finest faces in Indian cinema. He doesn't cast roles. He reads souls."*

The team greeted him with respectful nods, some with awe, others with nervous admiration.

Viraj raised his hand politely, *"Please. Don't look at me like I'm a legend. I'm just a man who's seen too many auditions and too few truths. Let's hear your story."*

Aagya led him to the center of the room, where a projector lit up. A muted visual of rough scenes of animation merging into live-action, a crimson ruby glowing against battle-worn skin, a girl-child turning into a warrior, a silent soldier holding a mirror instead of a sword... began playing. As it ended, silence wrapped the room.

Viraj leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, contemplative, *"She's not just a character. She's a scar that kept bleeding until it learned to become art."*

Aagya exhaled, *"That's exactly what she is."*

She walked to the front, voice steady, *"We have exactly 15 days to shoot, edit, and submit this film. That's not a deadline. That's a war clock. And I need soldiers who don't just act, but bleed with truth."*

Viraj smiled, being impressed, *"Now that's how you ask for help."*

He stood, *"All right. I need a script breakdown. Character briefs. Casting needs. And one thing..."*

He turned to the team, *"...your trust. If I'm stepping in, I do it my way. No spoon-fed showreels. No fallback names. We dig deep."*

Geeta grinned, *"He's officially terrifying. I love it."*

Simran added. *"Same."*

Aagya replied to Viraj, *"You'll get everything in the next hour. Let's begin immediately."*

The team exploded into motion... files being opened, character mood boards pulled up, timeline projections flying across the screen. Ravi and Saadhna began uploading costume profiles, while Seeta prepped facial archetypes for key roles. Aman synced camera test links. Ayush queued previous screen recordings of mock battles. Within minutes, the studio had turned into a casting command center.

The Avaan studio conference room was dimly lit now... not by accident, but intention. A soft pool of golden light glowed over the round table. On the wall behind Aagya, a large screen displayed the frozen visual of a crimson ruby caught in a warrior's gloved hand. Every member of the team sat quietly not with phones, not with notes... but with presence. And at the head of the table sat Viraj Sethi, posture sharp, but eyes softer than expected. His palm rested on a leather notebook. Untouched.

Aagya stood in front of the screen, hands folded, *"Before we cast anyone... before we light the frames or record a single breath... there's something I need to say."*

Everyone paused and looked at Aagya now.

Aagya added, *"This story... it didn't come to me. I didn't write it. I remembered it. Like a buried scar that found its voice."*

She tapped a button on the remote. The screen changed to an illustration. A small girl with windswept hair running barefoot through a golden field.

"She was a princess. Not by power, but by love. A girl born with wonder in her eyes... and a brother who made the world safe. He wasn't just her sibling, he was her shield.", said Aagya.

The slide changed again. A boy, tall and kind-eyed, holding a wooden sword.

Aagya added, *"But childhood is short. Especially in kingdoms... and in broken homes."*

Then came an image of a girl older, armored, bruised, staring into the mirror with hollow defiance.

Aagya further added, *"They trained her. Shaped her. Broke her. She bled, fought, won... but never felt enough."*

The screen flicked again with a battlefield in ruin, her face splashed in ash and sweat. Behind her was the body of her brother. Gasps filled the room. Some already knew it. Some didn't.

Aagya spoke with a heavy heart, *"He died saving her. Smiling. Calling her a lioness... before vanishing forever."*

A beat. Everyone sat still.

Then Viraj spoke, not interrupting, but adding, *"And from that day forward... she never became queen. She became a weapon."*

Simran pressed a hand to her lips. Ayush blinked back emotion.

Aagya nodded, eyes flicking toward Viraj with silent gratitude, *"Her parents handed her a ruby. A symbol of honor, they said. But it burned. Because she knew... it wasn't a blessing. It was a warning."*

The slide changed to the ruby, glowing like blood.

Aagya added, *"She built armies. Won wars. But never found peace. Until one day... a soldier appeared. Silent. Strange. Familiar."*

A pencil sketch loaded next to the rooftop scene. A girl in armor. A boy in the shadows. No swords. Just stillness, *"He didn't fight her. He saw her. And that... terrified her more than any blade ever did."*

Then, Viraj stood up. Calm. Poised, *"Because she had built her identity out of pain. And pain hates mirrors. It fears being seen. She wasn't falling in love. She was... crumbling."*

He looked around at the team, *"This is the kind of role where an actor doesn't perform. They remember. And if they can't remember, they'll never be enough."*

Silence again. No one even took notes. They were inside the story now. Aagya clicked again. The great war. The demon king. The climax.

"She reaches the final gate. The sword in her hand. The enemy before her. But in his eyes... she sees herself. And she realizes that the real enemy... wasn't him.", she said.

Viraj turned slowly, walking past the team like a teacher speaking truth, not instruction, *"Her rage was never hers. It was inherited. Gifted. By guilt. By silence. By expectation."*

A final image appeared of the girl, the sword lowered. Tears in her eyes. Light behind her.

Aagya spoke, *"After winning the war, she lets go of the sword. Walks away. Alone. But lighter. For the first time... she is happy after winning a battle, the greatest battle of the century. She chooses to live."*

Viraj stopped beside Aagya. She looked at him. He looked at the team, *"This is the story. Not of a princess. Not of a warrior. But of every girl... who was told to be perfect or be forgotten."*

A moment of breath. Then Aagya closed the laptop. The screen went black. The light shifted back to warm yellow.

Geeta whispered, *"...Damn."*

Simran looked stunned. Aman had stopped chewing his gum halfway through.

Ayush finally spoke, quietly, *"How do we cast someone who's not even fictional anymore?"*

Viraj Sethi replied, *"We don't. We find fragments of her. In faces. In silences. In those who've been broken... and built themselves back."*

Aagya sat down now, looking at her team like a general who had finally shown them the battlefield, *"Viraj Sir will take over from here. Trust him. Trust each other. We don't have time to question. Just time to become."*

Viraj picked up his leather notebook finally and said, *"Day one begins tomorrow. My process is brutal. I'll break your assumptions. Your cast will change faces a dozen times. But by the end of it..."*

He paused, eyes scanning the room, *"...you'll not just find the right actors. You'll find the right wounds."*

Everyone nodded slowly, still absorbing the weight of what just unfolded. But the story had landed. And it had chosen its tribe.

A while later, as the team dove deeper into roles and archetypes, Aagya stepped aside, walking over to the glass-paneled corridor where Viraj stood alone, observing the chaos like a general watching his army prepare for battle.

She stopped beside him, silent for a beat. Then spoke, *"Sir... I need to speak with you. Privately."*

He nodded, motioning toward a quiet corner near the storyboarding room. Once alone, she exhaled, *"I want to play the lead."*

Viraj didn't react immediately. He just studied her... not like a man, not even like a casting director... but like someone peeling back the final layer of armor.

"You sure this isn't emotion talking", he asked.

Aagya replied, *"It is. But that doesn't mean it's wrong."*

"Why now?", asked Viraj.

Aagya replied, *"Because... this isn't just her story. It's mine. I've carried her. I've buried her. And now, I need to free her."*

He looked at her for a long moment. Then walked forward, slowly, until they stood face-to-face, *"There are three kinds of actors, Aagya: One, who pretend to feel. Two, who dig into past pain. And three, who bleed truth without performance. You're the third. But bleeding the truth... comes at a cost."*

Aagya paused and then spoke with utmost confidence, *"And I'm willing to pay for it."*

Viraj smiled, *"Then don't just act. Live her. Don't hit your marks. Miss them. Don't chase the camera. Let it find you. Forget the technique. Remember the soul."*

He paused and then added, *"And if you fall apart in the middle of a scene... don't stop rolling. That's where the cinema begins."*

Her eyes watered slightly, but her voice didn't falter, *"Thank you, sir."*

Viraj grinned, *"Don't thank me yet. I'm about to make your next few days a living hell."*

She laughed a raw, honest sound, *"I've been living in hell, sir. This is just... the final battle."*

Viraj gave a short, approving nod, *"Then let's build your army. And give that girl the ending she never thought she'd get."*

He extended a hand. She shook it. The deal was sealed.

Outside, the team was already building a list of shortlisted talents. But none of them knew that the soul of the film had already been cast. And the storm had already found its voice.

21. The Day the Frames Breathed

A week had passed since Rudra was last in the studio, and though time ticked forward like any other, something about this particular morning in Avaan Studios carried weight. The kind of silent anticipation that made the air buzz a pulse just beneath the surface. The studio floor looked normal. Technically. But the people didn't. Simran and Aman kept pretending to calibrate a perfectly aligned camera rig for the third time. Ayush was caught in a loop between two ambient music tracks that were almost identical. Saadhna had a color palette open on her screen, but her stylus hadn't moved in minutes. Even Geeta, the team's famously no-nonsense scheduler, was glancing at the wall clock like a teenager waiting for a crush to text back. Something was about to happen. And they all knew it. Only it wasn't on any storyboard.

Studio Room 4 was dimly lit intentionally. Soft golden LED strips ran along the walls, giving the entire hallway a warm, dreamy glow. Inside, every inch had been prepared with stealth and love. Poppers hidden behind the couch, a cake concealed under blue satin, streamers tucked under the table like coiled confetti bombs waiting for their cue. Megha was standing near the elevator, phone in hand.

The moment the clock hit 12 p.m., the elevator doors parted slowly and there he was... Rudra. Moving forward with a walking stick now, not pushed but self-propelled, steady and calm... like a soldier returning from a battlefield. He wore his usual layered hoodie and black t-shirt, but there was a spark in his eyes that hadn't been there before. Not of exhaustion, but of curiosity,

warmth and life. His gaze scanned the hallway and then he saw Megha, *"Did we switch to moody hotel lighting while I was gone?"*

Megha replied with a smirk, *"New policy. Helps with 'creative recovery'. You'll like it."*

They stopped outside Studio Room 4. Rudra reached for the door, but Megha gently placed her hand on it instead, *"Let me. You don't get to ruin the big entrance."*

She slowly twisted the handle... And pushed it open.

POP! POP! POP!

The room erupted with a trio of party poppers, launching clouds of glittery confetti around Rudra like spark-bursts in slow motion. Aadarsh, Aman, and Ayush leapt out from behind dividers, shouting in chorus:

"WELCOME BACK, LEGEND!"

Rudra jerked slightly, surprised and then froze. The studio broke into applause, whistles, and cheers.

Shyam screamed, ***"OUR MAIN CHARACTER HAS RETURNED!"***

Seeta grinned, *"Roll credits? Nah, start the sequel!"*

Even Ravi and Mishika appeared from the makeup room. Ravi held a tiny bouquet of marigolds. Mishika threw glitter in the air like confetti was currency. Rudra blinked. Once. Twice. His mouth parted. No sound came. Then, Click. Ramesh took a candid photo. And that's when Rudra smiled. Not a polite or rehearsed one, but a quiet, broken and awestruck smile... like someone watching light fall on water for the first time in years.

Rudra raised both hands, mock-defensive, *"If anyone makes me cry today, I'm wiping my tears on Aadarsh's light filters."*

The room broke into loud laughter. Aagya, who had been standing silently by the door all this while, stepped forward now.

Her expression was unreadable, but her presence was commanding. She didn't speak. She didn't need to. Rudra turned towards her and their eyes met... not as leader and teammate, not even as almost lovers, but as two people who had been burned to ash and chose to rise anyway. There was history in that gaze. There was forgiveness. And something even rawer... a kind of mutual rebuilding.

The cheers were still ringing in Rudra's ears when two soft wheels rolled into the room. From the side hallway, Simran and Saadhna appeared moving slowly and reverently as if carrying treasure. Between them rolled a sleek table draped in sheer, cascading blue fabric and laced with fairy lights twinkling like constellations. On top stood the centerpiece. It was a **three-tier cake**, each level wrapped in dark galaxy blue fondant, scattered with tiny white sugar stars. The middle tier bore a stylized frame of silver icing that read:

"To the Fire That Never Went Out."

At the very top sat a fondant sculpture of a miniature Rudra, holding a stylus like a katana, standing atop a cracked storyboard frame. A flame glowed behind him... not from candles, but from a single flickering LED tucked into the design. As soon as it entered the room, a hush fell. The laughter quieted. Whistles softened. Because now, the moment was sacred. A soft gasp escaped Rudra's lips before he could stop it.

Shyam whispered dramatically, *"It's the final boss cake."*

Seeta added gently, *"No, idiot. It's a resurrection."*

Simran parked the table near Rudra, who stared at it in disbelief as if his life had somehow been translated into icing.

Rudra asked, dazed by the sight, *"You guys made this?"*

Mishika grinned, *"Well... the bakery made it. But we made it mean something."*

Ayush added straight-faced, *"I helped by eating the test cake."*

Aadarsh joked, *"And I tested three fondants. For science."*

Aagya hadn't spoken yet. She was still standing by the door, letting it all unfold. But when everyone began pushing him to cut it, she stepped forward slowly and silently. As if she didn't want to steal the moment. But she was the moment.

Ramesh quickly clicked another candid of Rudra looking up at her, knife in hand, surrounded by lights and love. The chant began again... not chaotic this time, but rhythmic, expectant. Everyone stood a little straighter and quieter. Watching him watch the cake. Rudra blinked. Slowly. Once. Twice. Then, without warning, Ramesh clicked a photo. It was a perfect candid: Rudra frozen, jaw slightly slack, eyes misting.

Rudra stammered, *"I... what..."*

He couldn't finish. Megha leaned closer to whisper, *"You thought we'd let you come back like it's just another Monday?"*

Before Rudra could respond, a chant began rising like a wave rhythmically, *"Speech! Speech! Speech!"*

Rudra raised both hands in mock surrender, *"Fine, fine! You guys won't let me sit down without embarrassing me first, huh?"*

Laughter rippled across the room. Then, Rudra's expression softened. He glanced around, taking in every face and every person who had worked late nights, argued over edits, laughed with him, and cried with him. And finally, his eyes landed on Aagya. She stood at the back, arms crossed, watching him with that same quiet intensity that unnerved him and grounded him at the same time.

Rudra took a deep breath and spoke earnestly, *"These past few weeks... they weren't easy. Lying in that hospital bed, I kept wondering if this –"*

He gestured around the room, at the sketches on the walls, the half-finished storyboards and continued, *" – would still be here when I came back. If I would still be here. But you guys... you didn't just hold the fort. You made it stronger. Better. And for that... I'm grateful."*

He paused, his throat suddenly tight. His next words came softer, almost hesitant, but he didn't look away from Aagya, *"And Aagya... you. You stitched me back together when I was falling apart. You turned this mess into a team, this team into a family. Honestly? You turned my silence into something I could live with."*

A hush fell over the room. Aagya felt the words hit her chest like a punch. Her cheeks warmed, but she didn't look away. She just raised an eyebrow like always, and Rudra smirked at that, grateful for her steady presence.

There was a beat of silence before Aagya stepped forward, *"He's right. He didn't just fight through hell to come back. He's the reason we're all still standing. He's the glue that held us together even when he was falling apart himself."*

She turned to the others and spoke with quiet conviction, *"He turned scattered sketches into a story, strangers into a family. Without him... none of this would have been possible."*

The team erupted into nods, murmurs of agreement, and a few claps. Megha let out a low whistle, *"Wow. High praise coming from Her Highness."*

Simran handed Rudra a silver cake knife wrapped in blue ribbon. He stood still for a beat, eyes on the cake. Then finally, he stepped forward, slow but steady, and sliced through the top tier. A clean, confident cut.

POP!

Confetti again, but delayed this time, exploded from the final set of rigged poppers. The room burst into fresh applause. Rudra

turned, holding the first bite. And without hesitation, he looked at Aagya. Time slowed.

Ravi mock-gasped, *"OHHO! Plot twist!"*

Mishika teased, *"First bite goes to the boss-lady?!"*

Simran spoke with drama, *"Somebody cue romantic BGM!"*

Ayush added dryly, *"May the stylus bless this sacred union."*

Aagya tried to suppress a smile but failed and spoke in a half-threatening tone, *"Say one more word and you're all fired."*

The teasing grew louder. Rudra, calm as ever, extended the fork toward her. She raised a brow but leaned forward anyway and took the bite. The team went into a theatrical meltdown.

Aadarsh spoke, clutching imaginary pearls, *"I can't – the softness! The chemistry! Ufffff."*

Shyam spoke to the ceiling, *"I feel single in 8K!"*

But then, without a word, Aagya picked another fork, scooped a fresh bite, and fed Rudra right back. No teasing now. No sound effects. Just two people, feeding each other cake in front of a room full of people who suddenly felt like they weren't watching a party, but something personal. Sacred, even. Rudra chewed and laughed. Not out of shyness or politeness, but with his whole heart. A laugh full of relief. Of release. The team broke into claps again.

Geeta spoke pretending to sob, *"Somebody stop this emotional rom-com or I'm gonna cry in high-res!"*

As Rudra put the fork down, he scanned every single face. One by one. His voice cracked slightly, *"I... I don't think anyone's ever thought so much like this for me before."*

Silence. Not awkward. But reverent. Like everyone knew not to dilute the moment. The last of the cake crumbs still lingered in

the air like sugar-sweet memories. Suddenly someone from the back shouted, *"So, Rudra... how was the Taj date, huh?"*

A chorus of oohs followed. Rudra groaned, hiding his face in his hands as more voices joined in, playfully teasing him about every little detail Aagya had apparently revealed during his absence.

Rudra replied muffled and mock-scandalized, *"Aagya! You told them everything?!"*

Aagya smirked, clearly unfazed, and then spoke in a commanding tone, clapping her hands, *"Alright, enough! Everyone back to work. We have a war to win, remember?"*

Groans and laughter filled the studio as everyone scattered back to their desks still giggling, still whispering. Rudra shook his head, a smile tugging at his lips despite himself. And for the first time since the hospital and maybe for the first time in years, he felt truly at home.

Rudra wiped a small smudge of blue frosting from his thumb, still trying to process the flood of affection he'd just been caught in. His chair was now parked beside the long studio window, the light casting soft stripes across his face, he looked up and found Megha beside him. She hadn't said much during the party letting the noise and warmth swirl around like confetti. But now, as the team dispersed briefly to prepare for lunch, she stood silently, hands behind her back, a small smile tucked in her cheeks.

"...You knew about this?", he asked Megha.

Megha smiled wider, then slowly crouched beside him, closer and gentler, *"Of course I did."*

She paused and added with a smirk, *"But it wasn't my plan."*

Rudra tilted his head and gave a puzzled look, *"Then whose was it?"*

Megha didn't answer immediately. She simply looked toward the far corner of the room where Aagya stood, arms folded, seemingly scanning something on a clipboard but clearly stealing glances his way.

"All of this... every bit. The cake. The confetti. The lighting. The food that's coming... it was all Aagya.", Megha answered with pride.

Rudra blinked. Once. Twice. Then, he looked back at Aagya. She was now giving someone quiet instructions, brows furrowed in her usual **"don't-mess-it-up"** style. Nothing dramatic. Nothing showy. Just... her. He smiled. Something slow. Something deep. And somewhere inside him, something softened. Ayush's speaker, set on low, played a soft lo-fi tune with light ambient keys. Almost like a soundtrack that knew its place.

Mishika walked up and handed Rudra a sketchbook wrapped in brown paper, *"For when your hands are ready again."*

Ravi followed, giving a folded black scarf, *"In case it gets cold. Creatively or otherwise."*

Shyam tossed a packet of mints at him, *"Just in case you kiss anyone during this emotional arc."*

Aagya spoke without missing a beat, *"He'll kiss unemployment if he doesn't finish his frames."*

Laughter again. But through it all, Rudra just stood still... eyes wet, heart full. He had never imagined this day. This feeling. Not the applause. Not even the cake. But the people. The warmth. The reminder that he wasn't just a creator or a machine or a walking pain metaphor. He was a part of that family now. Not because he was pitied, but because he was seen.

Moments later, the smell came first. Not like the usual waft of coffee and warm varnish that hugged Avaan Studios. No, this was different. It was layered. Rich. Aromatic. Spicy. Sweet. Warm. Comforting. A biryani-like scent dancing with smoky

tandoori and fresh coriander floated through the corridors like a secret waiting to be discovered.

Rudra, still by the cake table, tilted his head like a dog catching a familiar scent, *"...Is that... biryani?"*

On the other hand, Saadhna suddenly froze mid-palette and sniffed the air, *"No... no way. That smells like... paneer butter masala."*

Aadarsh dramatically sniffed, *"Wait. WAIT. Is that – is that Seekh Rolls?! Don't play with my emotions."*

Before anyone could react further, two studio assistants rolled in two massive buffet trolleys draped in elegant cotton cloths, each glistening with silver containers, insulated foil wraps, and cutlery trays.

Geeta literally jumped from her chair, *"Okay WHAT in the five-star catering is going on here?!"*

Simran pulled out her DSLR in reflex, *"If this is a prank, I swear I'm filming a murder today."*

Ayush, usually too chill to blink at chaos, stood up slowly, eyes locked on the towering biryani handi being placed on the food table, *"It's real."*

Mishika added, *"I see rasmalai. I'm going to cry. Don't stop me."*

Everyone gathered now, like moths to divine flame staring at the spread. On the left were trays of mutton seekh rolls, veg kebabs, laccha parathas, and salads fresh enough to shoot an ad. In the center were buckets of dum biryani, chicken korma, dal makhani, and paneer butter masala gleamed under soft studio lights. And on the right were rasmalai, gulab jamuns, and mini kulfis stood like little trophies on a dessert altar.

And right then, Aagya walked in. Casual. No grand entry. She just picked up a stack of plates, handed one to Ayush... and looked at them, *"Lunch is here."*

Everyone blinked. And then...

Ravi exploded, "WAIT-WAIT-WAIT. *THIS IS YOU?!*"

Geeta added, "*You mean this isn't some producer's PR stunt?!*"

Mishika further added, genuinely stunned, "*You ordered all this for us?!*"

Aagya shrugged like it was no big deal, "*I figured we've been surviving on chips, chai, and last-minute edits. We deserved to feel like a team, not a tired crew. Plus, today's the day our Miyazaki has returned. So yeah... this is for all of us.*"

Rudra blushed hard in his heart but didn't let it show up on his face.

Shyam spoke softly, "*You didn't even tell us...*"

Aagya replied, "*It was supposed to be a surprise. And...*" (smiling faintly) "*I think your faces say it worked.*"

Rudra stared at her, not with disbelief, but with that quiet admiration he was slowly learning to wear on his sleeve, "*She's insane. And amazing.*"

Plates started piling. People got back in line after forgetting spoons. Chutneys were fought over. Aadarsh and Aman almost wrestled over the last kebab until Aagya glared at them to share. Simran put her camera aside and picked up a heavy plate like it was sacred cargo. Ayush found a quiet corner and began arranging his food like it was a photoshoot.

Mishika just attacked dessert first. "*Life is short,*" she said.

Everyone sat around. Some on the floor, some on beanbags and some clustered around makeshift tables. Aagya didn't sit immediately. She helped distribute plates first, made sure napkins were within reach, even passed water bottles to those who forgot. And only when everyone else had started... did she

take a plate. Simple. Roti. Dal. Onions. One seekh roll. Two leg pieces. That's it.

She sat near the window, alone at first, until Rudra rolled over beside her and parked his chair and asked, *"Is this your idea of bribery or guilt-tripping us into working after lunch?"*

Aagya chewed slowly, *"No. This is... my way of saying thank you."*

Rudra replied softer now, *"You really didn't have to."*

She looked at him calm, unsentimental and yet something in her eyes glimmered, *"I wanted to."*

Their hearts raced.

On the other side, Geeta chewed slowly, *"This is... surreal. Like... no client yelling. No hard drives crashing. Just good food and good people."*

Simran added, *"And no 'Zoom mic is off.' today. Amen."*

Ayush murmured, *"I could live in this moment forever."*

Shyam raised his hand, *"Raise your hand if this food healed a childhood wound."*

Everyone raised their hands in unison. Even Aagya and Rudra.

Seeta commented, *"I feel like we're in the last act of a feel-good movie where everyone hugs and cries."*

Mishika spoke dramatically, *"I will cry. Let someone stop me."*

Aman added, *"Bro. This is the most expensive lunch I've had since my cousin's wedding. And I didn't even like her."*

Ravi asked Aagya, *"Okay but real question – why now? Aagya, what changed?"*

Everyone turned to her. She didn't look nervous. Just... thoughtful.

"I think I've always been too busy trying to make perfect frames. But... Rudra reminded me that stories don't need to be perfect. They need to be felt. And this, today, is a part of our story. So, I wanted us to live it. Together.", she said.

Geeta replied in a half-sarcastic and half-sweet tone, *"Who gave you permission to be this poetic?"*

Aagya grinned slightly, *"Rudra infected me. Blame him."*

Rudra replied deadpan, *"I am not liable for emotional damage caused by feelings."*

They laughed again. It wasn't loud. It was... warm. Like soup on a cold day.

Simran spoke softly, *"You know... I always thought work would be just... work. But I'm starting to think we're building something bigger here."*

Megha nodded, *"We're building a place people will want to come back to."*

Shyam joked, *"Even if there's no biryani?"*

Seeta replied to him, *"Speak for yourself. I'm here for the rasmalai."*

Everyone chuckled.

Rudra smiled gently, *"I've worked with a lot of teams before. Brilliant people. Technically flawless. But... I've never felt safe in a room like this."*

The air grew quiet again. Not heavy. Just still. Listening.

Aagya gazed at the group, *"That was the goal. Not awards. Not fame. Just... a place where we could create without fear. And maybe even... heal."*

Plates were now half-empty. Some licking fingers, others pouring water over the last rice grains. Mishika was now drawing characters on her paper plate. Aman balancing a seekh roll on his

spoon again. Simran took a few candid shots of people laughing, plates in hand.

Geeta pulled out a tissue to wipe her misty eyes, *"Not crying, just onion damage,"* she claimed.

Rudra sat quietly again, watching all of them. Watching her. Aagya met his gaze once, tilted her head slightly and smiled. No words. But he smiled back. And somehow, the whole room felt like a living heart pulsing with food, friendship, and fragile, real connection.

Ravi raised a plastic cup, *"To the best lunch we never saw coming."*

Everyone spoke, *"To Aagya!"*

Aagya replied with a mock stern, *"Okay enough of this. One hour. Back to work. If anyone naps, I'll assign storyboard corrections!"*

Geeta groaned, *"Can we work while digesting emotionally?"*

Rudra grinned, *"I might stay here just five more minutes."*

Aagya dropped a cold-water bottle beside him, *"Then hydrate. You're back now."*

And just like that, they all slowly got up. Stretching. Smiling. Carrying full bellies and fuller hearts. No one said it out loud. But each one knew that this wasn't just lunch. It was a turning point.

.....

A while later, the sound of laughter had softened. Forks had stopped clinking. The feast was over, but no one seemed in a hurry to let go of its warmth. The long tables that once overflowed with biryani, korma, rasmalai, kebabs, and laughter now stood half-empty with only crumpled tissues, used paper cups, and traces of gravy marking their memory. A faint aroma of roasted spices and fried onions still lingered in the air, hanging gently

between the scattered chatter and the occasional clatter of someone pushing back a chair.

Rudra sat quietly, his plate finished long ago, but his eyes absorbed every detail of the room... the people, their laughter, the comfort of belonging. He wasn't just present; he was anchored. On the far side, Mishika licked some cream off her finger and giggled as Ravi tried to flick a rogue grain of rice off his shirt. Simran leaned back on her chair with her DSLR beside her biryani plate, arms crossed, a soft smirk on her face as if she were watching a coming-of-age film unfold in real-time. Geeta, who had declared she wouldn't lift a finger until dessert ended, had now sneakily pulled out her tablet again and was already reorganizing the schedule. Saadhna was sketching on the back of a paper plate with a chutney-stained pen. Shyam and Seeta had started a memory card game where whoever forgot what they ate last would pay for coffee the next day. Ayush, always somewhere between this world and another, sat with one earphone in, nodding to some track he was already building in his head, a spoon still in his other hand.

The team was wild, weird, and warm. They were all glowing. Rudra watched them all, like someone watching a dream unfold they never dared to hope for. He sat there, overwhelmed in the quietest of ways. Near the entrance, Aagya stood still eating slowly, calmly, from her plate. Unlike others, she hadn't joined the chaos or cracked a joke. She just watched silently and lovingly. From his corner, Rudra caught her gaze across the room. She didn't smile. But he did. And somehow, that was enough.

Moments later, Aadarsh leaned back in his chair dramatically, patting his stomach with an exaggerated sigh, *"If anyone asks me for another lighting cue today, I will become one with the spotlight."*

Shyam pointed to a leftover gulab jamun on a foil tray, *"That's not dessert. That's enlightenment."*

Mishika giggled and tossed a napkin toward him, *"That's also mine, back off!"*

The table burst into fresh laughter. Aagya finally stood. Her chair made a soft scrape against the floor as she clapped her hands twice to get everyone's attention. The room quieted gradually, everyone turning toward her, *"Alright, no more food comas. We work in one hour. Get your stomachs and your souls moving."*

Groans echoed like a classroom post-lunch. They all slowly began rising from their seats not hurriedly, not reluctantly, but like children after a beautiful recess, aware that fun wasn't over... it was simply shifting form. As the room began its gentle retreat back to work, some were wiping hands, some were stacking plates and some were already walking back to workstations. Rudra still hadn't moved. He sat still, watching the scene with a strange reverence like he wanted to etch this moment somewhere permanent. That's when Aagya walked over. She didn't say anything at first. She simply placed a cold-water bottle beside him on the table and crouched just slightly, brushing her hands clean on a napkin.

"This is just the beginning.", she said.

Rudra looked up at her, his eyes holding a thousand unsaid things, *"I know."*

A beat passed. Not awkward. Not dramatic. Just... still. And then she walked off... her footsteps light, shoulders relaxed, no longer burdened by leadership but elevated by it. Rudra hadn't moved. Still at the edge of the room, sitting with an empty cup in hand, watching. But this time, he wasn't watching her. He was watching his team. The people who had once been moving parts in a bigger machine, were now alive and together.

Megha came out of the blue and spoke, *"Careful, if you keep staring like that, someone might write a love story instead of a film."*

Rudra didn't blink. He didn't even turn, *"Maybe that's the real story."*

Megha raised an eyebrow at him but didn't push further. She simply smiled and walked on with her own eyes a little softer than before. And just then, Aagya stepped beside him. No words. She crouched to plug a wire into the monitor, her fingers brushing past his, *"You ready to get back to it?"*

Rudra smiled, *"I never left it."*

She looked at him, for real, and this time, the silence wasn't thick with tension or awkwardness. It was full, *"I meant what I said. This is just the beginning."*

Rudra nodded, *"I know."*

Aagya replied with a quiet smile, *"We've got a film to finish. Two weeks. Every frame matters."*

Rudra grinned, *"Then let's make every one count."*

She stood up. He wheeled beside her. They didn't say much after that. But as they passed through the studio, side by side, something shifted. It wasn't just leadership. Or chemistry. It was rhythm, balance and respect.

On the far side of the room, Ayush opened a new sound project titled:

"Pulse of the Protagonist - Phase II"

Saadhna labelled a fresh storyboard file:
"Scene 11: Where Fire Rises Again"

Simran changed the memory card on her camera and smiled to herself. The twins clicked **"Render Preview"** on the new transition. And above it all from a quiet corner, Aagya watched them. Not like a director. Not like a boss. But like someone who had planted something, waited for it to grow... and now saw it blooming. Not just a film. But a family. Not just a scene. But a

legacy. And maybe, someday... a picture from this very day would hang framed in the Avaan Studios hallway. Candid. Unfiltered. Honest. And below it, carved simply: **"Where the War Ended... and the Story Began."**

22. Showtime

The Avaan Studios floor was deserted. The echoes of laughter, the rustling of chairs, the clatter of cutlery... all had faded into memory, like a festival retreating into silence. Moonlight spilled through the tall glass panels, casting streaks of silver across the space. Dust floated in its path like tiny ghosts. The cake was gone. Confetti swept aside. All that remained was the low hum of distant traffic... and a tension that hadn't yet settled between two people who hadn't really spoken. Not alone. Not like this. The studio was quiet. But not peaceful. It was hollow. The kind of silence that lingers after music is too beautiful to last.

It was almost 3 a.m. The party had collapsed into a slumber. The plates were cleared and the fairy lights were unplugged. Even the laughter, once bouncing off the walls like joy, had quieted into a breathless hush. Most of the team had crashed inside the nap pods. Some snoring. Some curled into fetal positions. Some still clutching their phones mid-scroll.

Rudra stood near the window, half in shadow, arms folded across his chest. The moonlight etched his features in sharp relief. His jaw was clenched, cheekbones were prominent, and the tense line of his throat was visible. His hoodie lay draped over a chair. Only his black t-shirt remained, forearms veined and flexed, fingers twitching with restraint. He looked like a man forged between war and poetry.

Behind him, Aagya walked barefoot. In her hands were two mugs of black coffee, steam curling upward like unsaid things. He didn't turn. Didn't need to. He knew it was her. She entered like a secret still deciding if it wanted to be told. No makeup. No

armor. Just sweatpants, an oversized hoodie, and bare feet. Quiet on the floor, loud in his chest. She stopped a few feet behind him and asked, *"Couldn't sleep?"*

Rudra replied, still looking out, *"Didn't try."*

She stepped forward, enough to stand beneath the same moonlight and enough to feel the charge. She placed one mug next to him on the table. She didn't speak. Neither did he. For a long moment, there was just breathing. And silence. And heat. The kind of heat that made the air feel electric.

Aagya finally spoke, *"You always look like you're about to leave."*

Rudra replied, turning slightly, *"And you always look like you're hoping I don't."*

Their eyes met. Silence bloomed. But this time, it wasn't empty. It was dense. Breathless. Charged. Aagya swallowed hard. He noticed. She noticed him noticing.

Rudra turned a little more, his voice deep and grainy, *"Moonlight suits you."*

Aagya replied without looking, *"Compliments are cheap. Try silence. It's more honest."*

A smirk tugged his lips. The scar on his brow caught the light like a blade, *"Careful. You keep talking like that, someone might think you're scared of honesty."*

She looked up directly and sharply, *"I'm not scared of honesty. I'm scared of believing in it."*

Her voice cracked just enough. The silence between them tightened. It was not awkward, but it was dangerous. The kind that could turn into something irreversible.

"Do you feel it too?", asked Rudra in a deep voice.

Aagya replied softly in the same way, *"What?"*

Rudra replied, *"This..."*

He turned fully now, his eyes dark, intense and continued, *"This pull. This gravity. Like I was made to crash into you... just to see if I survived."*

Her breath hitched. One second of hesitation and her eyes gave her away. She felt it. Worse, she wanted it. He took a slow step closer. Voice lower. A tone that belonged to dreams, not rooms, *"Do you even know what you do to me when you walk into a room?"*

She held her breath. Another step. He was close enough now for her to smell the cedarwood in his collar.

Aagya whispered, *"Don't start this..."*

Rudra replied, *"I didn't."*

He paused and then added, *"You did!"*

Her spine arched. But she didn't step back. Her hands clenched. He saw.

"This can't happen.", she spoke in a shaky voice.

Rudra replied, smirking slightly, *"Says who?"*

Aagya replied, *"Says every part of me that remembers what it's like when people leave."*

Silence. He stepped back. Just enough to see her face, *"I'm not one of them."*

Aagya replied in a hoarse voice, *"No. You're worse. Because you make me forget they ever existed."*

That line struck him. Hard. And he didn't deserve that grace. Not really. But still, he stepped forward again. Close enough that she could feel the heat of him, but not his touch.

"You think I don't want to touch you right now?", he asked in a much deeper voice.

She said nothing. He stepped closer. Just a breath apart, *"I could kiss you till you forget your own name. Strip you down, word by word, until there's nothing left but the truth between us."*

Her fists trembled. But she didn't move. He could see the war in her eyes... control versus ache.

Aagya replied with her voice cracking, *"This isn't smart."*

Rudra replied, *"I don't do smart, Aagya. I do real."*

Then, even softer, *"You think I haven't dreamt about this? About you... in the middle of the night... tangled in my sheets, calling my name like it's the only word you remember?"*

She closed her eyes. And that was her mistake. Because now, she could feel everything even louder. The heat. The pull.

"Then why don't you just do it?", she asked.

A long pause followed. He leaned in just enough for his breath to graze her jaw. But still... no contact, *"Because if I touch you now... I won't stop until I destroy you."*

Her body trembled. He hovered... not kissing, not touching, just letting her feel every ounce of restraint, *"And I don't know if I'm here to heal you... or destroy you."*

Aagya replied, *"Then don't touch me."*

She took a step back. Then another. Creating space. Air, *"I don't let people in, Rudra. Not because I can't... but because they always leave."*

Rudra replied gently, *"Then maybe I'm not here to leave."*

She turned, walking away halfway and then paused and spoke without looking back, *"Whatever this is... don't bring it into the storyboard room. I don't want distractions."*

Rudra replied flatly, *"Good. Because I don't make mistakes when it comes to you."*

Their eyes met. One last time. And then, she was gone. He remained. The moonlight flooded the empty floor where they'd stood. And above, in the quiet security room... the silent cameras blinked. Capturing nothing. And everything.

.....

The first ray of dawn sliced through the glass walls of Avaan Studios like a silent blade. The world was still half-asleep. But inside the private quarters of the core team, something had already begun to stir. Aagya was the first to rise. No alarm. No hesitation. Her body was a clock sharpened by years of discipline and buried wounds. She slipped out of bed, tied her hair into a loose knot, and stepped into the hallway barefoot. Her anklet barely made a sound. She moved from one room to another, knocking softly, calling names with her voice calm but commanding, *"Simran, up. Saadhna, I want you in the design room in twenty. Ayush, if you don't wake up now, I'll pour coffee down your boxers."*

A groan came from the second door.

"Why is she like this?", said Ayush.

Simran added from inside, *"She's our blessing and our curse. Get up."*

Across the hallway, Aman cursed under his breath as he stubbed his toe on a tripod leg, while Mishika yawned her way into the bathroom with a satin robe sliding off one shoulder. Within fifteen minutes, the energy had shifted. Steam hissed from showers. Doors opened and slammed. Laughter, complaints, last-minute panic, makeup kits spilled onto beds, shoelaces were tied in mid-air, jackets snatched from hooks, etc. Someone accidentally sprayed perfume into their eyes. Another tripped over a tangled charging wire while juggling a banana and a script. It was chaos. Glorious, cinematic chaos.

But one man stood in the center of it all, unmoved. Rudra. Half-awake, leaning against the railing of the upper floor, hoodie sleeves pushed up, hair tousled, eyes narrowed. The silence in him clashed violently with the noise around him. He hadn't slept much. Not after what happened last night between him and Aagya. The tension was still coiled in his muscles. It was dangerous and unfinished. He watched them all. Moving like pieces on a game board he wasn't trained to play. Until Megha passed by him, adjusting the mic on her headset, looking very much like a woman who hadn't slept but didn't need to. Rudra caught her wrist. Not hard. Just enough, *"Where is everyone going? What's with the rush?"*

Megha turned, eyebrows raised. Then she smiled. A little too knowingly, *"It's the Day One of the shoot. It starts now. Didn't Aagya tell you?"*

His heartbeat stuttered, *"Shoot? Today?"*

Megha replied, teasing him, *"Of course. Better get ready, Mr. Silent. Or you'll miss all the drama."*

She walked off before he could respond, her laughter fading into the hallway. Rudra straightened slowly, the fog in his mind clearing. A new tension bled into his chest. But this time, it wasn't lust or longing. It was purpose. Today wasn't just the start of a show. It was the start of a hunt. And he was right in the wolf's den now where masks were about to slip, secrets were about to surface... and maybe, just maybe, the real traitor would make a mistake.

He ran a hand through his hair, exhaled slowly, *"Showtime."*

He got ready and moved to the set. The moment he stepped into the set, Rudra froze. The Avaan Studios had transformed overnight. What was once polished wood and LED rigs had become something ancient... sacred. Tall arches carved from faux

sandstone reached up like temple pillars. Silken drapes in vermillion and gold danced in the breeze of hidden fans. An ornate throne rested in the center. It was wide, majestic and unforgiving. The floor beneath was tiled in traditional Maratha patterns, and beside it... lay a war zone. Dust. Fake blood. Broken spears.

Rudra's eyes moved like a silent camera absorbing every line, every shadow, every scent of sweat and sandalwood. He'd stepped into another era. Another world. And in that world, she entered. He didn't hear her heels. He didn't need to. His body knew. Before his mind caught up, his chest tightened involuntarily. The air thinned. Aagya came. And this time... not in hoodies or sneakers or oversized glasses. No. She was a vision pulled from Rudra's most dangerous daydreams. She was clad in full costume now and Rudra could swear he'd never seen anything more devastatingly beautiful. She was a vision torn out of folklore... a Maratha warrior princess, all fire and silence. Her paithani saree was deep maroon with rust-orange undertones, plated with leather armor at the shoulders and chest. Her waist carried a sheathed dagger, and her nose-ring curved like a silver crescent moon. A long, tightly braided plait flowed down her back woven with brass rings and crimson thread. Her kohl-lined eyes were sharp. Her ruby pendant sat against her collarbone like a sealed secret. A crescent moon-shaped tilak in the middle of her forehead. Her eyes were kohl-lined. Her lips, bare. And she walked like she knew how kingdoms fell when she blinked.

Rudra forgot to breathe. Forgot why he was here. Forgot the mission, the mole, his boss Pratap Singh, everything. She hadn't seen him yet. She was walking toward the throne, giving instructions to the crew. But Rudra? He wasn't watching her. He was remembering her. Like she'd always lived in some shadowy corner of his soul. Like every poem he'd never written suddenly had her face in it.

Behind him came footsteps. Megha came and started teasing him with a clipboard in her hand, *"First time seeing a queen in armor?"*

Rudra snapped out of it, blinking, *"She's actually playing the lead?"*

Megha grinned, *"Who else can? She wrote the story. Who else could carry the fire she imagined?"*

Rudra replied, still watching Aagya, *"She's not playing the warrior princess. She is her."*

Before Megha could respond, Aagya turned and spotted him. For a second, something shifted in her expression. Only slightly. Only if you knew how to read the way her eyes flinched. Then she walked toward him steady and purposefully. The world shrunk again.

Aagya replied, smiling gently, *"Rudra. You made it just in time."*

Rudra replied, *"I wouldn't miss it even if the world was ending."*

She blushed a bit and then gestured beside him. A tall, broad-shouldered man stood at her side now,

"This is Viraj. Our casting director.", she said.

Viraj was in his mid-30s and had a charming smirk and a confident stance. Dressed in a muted beige kurta with tailored pants and a black Nehru jacket. His hair gelled back, his smile lazy. He extended his hand, *"Heard a lot about you. From the team."*

Rudra shook his hand. His grip was firm. Too firm. But Viraj's eyes... lingered. Not on Rudra. But on Aagya. And Aagya smiled back politely, warm, and familiar. Rudra wanted to shatter something. Something like Viraj's jaw.

Aagya spoke, *"Viraj Sir has finalized the cast. Come, I'll introduce you."*

She turned, and Rudra followed, jaw clenched so tight it hurt. They walked past the battlefield set, toward the group of actors

in costume. The set was a world of its own. Rudra walked beside Aagya, his boots echoing softly against the polished stone floor of the indoor palace set. But his eyes weren't on the architecture, they were on her. She walked with the grace of royalty and the danger of someone who'd earned it. Rudra slowed for a second breath hitching. He didn't see Aagya. He saw the version of her he'd imagined in his midnight dreams. A warrior. A queen. A storm in silk and steel. He looked away, suddenly overwhelmed by how badly he wanted to **touch** her. Not in lust. In reverence.

She turned slightly and caught him staring, *"Stay focused, Miyazaki. This is your battlefield now."*

Rudra replied, recovering from his thoughts, *"Hard not to get distracted when the queen herself leads the charge."*

She chuckled, low and wicked, and then motioned forward. A group of actors stood ahead all in costume. Regal. Dust-swept. Swords at their sides.

"This is my team," Aagya said, turning to Rudra. *"Let me introduce you."*

1. The Queen: A poised woman in her 50s stepped forward first, dressed in a dark green silk saree with golden embroidery. Her hair was tied into a traditional bun with jasmine, and a long gold chain ran across her forehead to the ear.

Aagya gestured, *"This is Mrs. Manasi Rao. She plays the Queen. The one whose expectations broke our warrior."*

Rudra joined his hands to say 'Namaste' and Manasi offered a graceful nod, her gaze sharp and regal.

2. The King: Next to her stood a tall, slightly pot-bellied man in his late 50s, but with an authoritative presence. A white dhoti-kurta with saffron angavastram draped over his shoulder. A heavy crown rested on his brow.

Aagya said, *"Mr. Yug Sen plays the King. He's gentle but bound by rules."*

Rudra said namaste to him as well, his mind already noting subtle details of the crown's design, the ring on Yug's finger and the way he kept glancing at the cameras being set up.

3. The Young Warrior Princess (childhood version): A 7-year-old girl with bright, defiant eyes stood fidgeting with her wooden sword. Her costume was a miniature version of Aagya's. She had an armored vest, a dusty blue drape, a tiny bindi, and even a stitched scar above her brow for authenticity. It was Latika.

Rudra's breath caught at the sight of her. Aagya had planned this surprise. She smiled fondly and bent down, brushing Latika's curls back gently.

Aagya beamed, *"This little storm plays the younger version of me. Before the wars, before the ice."*

Rudra blinked, stunned. He knelt down so he was at Latika's eye level, *"You didn't tell me you were going to be a warrior, Latika."*

Latika giggled and twirled her tiny sword, *"I told you I wanted to be like Didi. Now I am Didi."*

Aagya smirked to Rudra, *"She's got more attitude than I ever did at that age."*

Latika spoke proudly, *"And I don't cry during retakes."*

They all laughed. Even a few background crew members turned at the sound. Rudra looked between them, his heart full, *"Okay, okay, I surrender. I'm clearly the least brave person here."*

Latika walked up and gently tapped his forehead with her sword, *"Then you must serve the Princess. Forever."*

Rudra gave a dramatic bow, *"As you command, Your Highness."*

Latika squealed in delight and hid behind Aagya again, giggling into her waist. Aagya gave Rudra a look of part amusement and part something much softer, *"She adores you, you know."*

Rudra looked at both of them, *"I adore her too. Both versions."*

Aagya smiled and ruffled her hair. Rudra gave Latika a tiny wave. She blushed and hid behind her mother. Rudra touched her mother's feet and took her blessings as she blessed both Rudra and Aagya.

4. The Brother – The Shield: Then came a tall, lean actor dressed in black dhoti and chest armor, with war paint streaked across his face. A single feather was tied in his hair.

Aagya spoke, *"This is Saurav Nayak. He plays my elder brother, the one who dies for her."*

Saurav nodded silently, his hands behind his back like a true soldier.

5. The Demon King: A broad-shouldered man with an angular face, dark red robes, and coal-rimmed eyes stepped forward next.

Aagya added, *"Rahul plays the Demon King, the one who tries to kill the warrior princess in the climax."*

He was really a giant in every way. Bigger than any man Rudra had ever seen. He was about 7ft tall, almost as tall as The Great Khali. He bowed mockingly toward Rudra, clearly already in character. Rudra respectfully bowed too which made Aagya laugh.

6. The Love Interest – Samargeet: And then... He appeared. He was 6'3", had a scarred chin, a physique that screamed power. It was not gym-built but earned-from-war built. He wore deep grey armor laced with silver veins, his long kurta tucked beneath a dark warrior vest. A broadsword lay strapped to his back.

Rudra's heart twisted. He felt a sense of familiarity with him. A gut instinct that he couldn't ignore. Like a face from another lifetime. Because when he walked up to Aagya and gave her a soft, familiar smile and she smiled back. A smile Rudra hadn't yet earned.

Aagya spoke with a flicker of emotion, *"And this... is Devraj Handa. He plays Samargeet."*

Devraj offered his hand to Rudra, *"Heard you're our newest shadow. Good to have you, man."*

Rudra shook it, forcing a smirk, *"Thanks. Hope you survive the shoot."*

Devraj raised a brow, but chuckled. But Rudra... was breaking. Inside. Because now he saw what everyone else would see... a story about two warriors meant to fall in love. Devraj looked the part. Worse... he looked at Aagya like he knew her. And Aagya... didn't pull away. Rudra's fists curled behind his back. But none of it showed. Aagya didn't seem to notice the heat in the air between them. Or perhaps she did and chose to ignore it.

Rudra spoke in his thoughts with quiet rage, *"He's too tall. Too perfect. The kind of man directors fall for, actresses kill for and editors cry over. I should've broken his nose when he smiled at her like that. If he lays one finger on her..."*

But nothing showed on his face. He just stood there like an outsider watching the woman he burned for slowly sync into someone else's rhythm. The air grew heavier. And just then Devraj leaned in to whisper something to Aagya. She laughed. Again. A laugh full of old comfort and newer beginnings. Rudra took a step back. Not physically, but emotionally. Because in that moment, surrounded by fairy-tale sets and crown-wearing actors, he realized something dangerous. He wasn't just losing control of the mission, he was losing control of his heart.

"I didn't come here for her. But now... I'd burn every map I made just to keep her safe. Even if she never looks my way. Even if her laughter belongs to someone else. Because love... isn't about being seen. It's about standing guard... even when no one knows you're there.", he spoke in his mind.

But his heart didn't care. Because no matter how tightly he balled his fists... He couldn't stop his eyes from aching for her.

23. Lights! Camera! Action!

A golden field had been recreated in one wing of the studio with CGI panels prepared to animate wind-swept grass later. On another side stood the ruins of a battlefield with broken swords, scattered shields, fake blood staining the sand. In the center was the royal training ground which consisted of wooden dummies, hay targets, and a marble throne with a red cloth draped across its seat. Everything was hand-built. It was Aagya's vision brought to life brick by brick and bruise by bruise. And yet, the only thing Rudra could focus on... was her.

She was standing next to Devraj now who was tall and sculpted like a warrior out of legend with a carved jawline and broad shoulders that could carry kingdoms. His long hair was tied back, a silver band resting on his forehead, and his costume was a sleeveless armored vest and dhoti pants that showed off a battle-scarred torso that looked too perfect to be painted on.

Rudra clenched his jaw as he watched Aagya, his Aagya, talk to Devraj with her eyes lit and a spark in her voice. The vision he had always kept buried in the back of his mind of her as a queen, a lioness, barefoot in command, was now real. And someone else was part of it. Rudra swallowed hard. The knot in his throat was made of envy, regret, and something far more dangerous... longing.

"Camera rolling – Scene 2, Shot 1 – take mark!", the clapperboard echoed across the set.

Rudra stood in a quiet corner, dressed as a crew member, but his eyes moved like a hawk. Observing. Memorizing.

The camera zoomed in on young Princess Ayira, played by Latika, her eyes wide, posture regal despite her childlike innocence. She ran across the recreated golden field barefoot, her laugh echoing as a boy leapt out from behind the trees to tease her. The boy Saurav, cast as the elder brother, looked fierce, yet gentle, perfectly embodying the heir apparent. His training armor shimmered under the sunlight, and when he chased her, there was joy... and a shadow of the destiny that waited.

Rudra watched silently as Aagya stood near the monitor, biting her lip, her focus razor-sharp.

"Cut!", she called. "Reset the run, Saurav, just soften your expression a little when you smile. You're a warrior, but you're still her home."

Saurav nodded. The shot was reset.

Meanwhile, Rudra drifted through the crew, pretending to adjust cables, holding a clipboard. But his eyes rarely left her. The way she spoke with clarity. The way everyone listened. And the way Devraj, playing Samargeet, lingered longer than necessary in every off-camera glance toward her.

Later, the battlefield scene was staged. Aagya stood in the center now, no longer directing, but performing. Her armor was intricated with a deep maroon breastplate over layered dhoti-style pants, leather bracers along her forearms, and a long red cloth flowing behind her like a cape. Her hair was braided tight, a tiny ruby glinting on her forehead. Every step she took echoed authority. Strength. Pain. And Rudra... He forgot to breathe.

"Scene 7 – The Fall of Ayira – take one!", shouted the clapper boy.

Aagya, as Ayira, limped across the battlefield, blood staining her cheek, her eyes red from smoke and tears. Her sword clattered to the ground. Her brother lay still beside her unmoving. She knelt. The silence on the set was pin-drop. Then, a scream tore from her chest. Guttural. Raw, *"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!"*

She cradled Saurav's head. Her body shook with sobs. But her face... was composed. Controlled. Until it cracked. Rudra could feel it, not as an observer, but in his bones. This wasn't just acting. This was grief resurrected. He saw the tremble in her fingers and the moisture in her lashes even after Geeta yelled "*CUT!*" and the camera stopped rolling.

No one dared speak. She turned her face away from the crew. And that's when Rudra moved. Quiet. Sure. He stepped beside her like a shadow that didn't need permission and said, "*Hey... breathe.*"

Aagya didn't look at him. Her shoulders were still shaking, though she pretended they weren't.

Rudra added, "*You buried something real in that scene, didn't you?*"

No reply. He stepped closer, not touching her, but letting his presence fill the silence, "*You don't have to carry it alone.*"

She finally turned, just slightly. Her eyes were rimmed red, but not from glycerine. And Rudra saw the fragility behind the armor and the tremble behind the command.

Aagya replied, voice hoarse now, "*You think if I break now... I'll be able to rebuild later?*"

Rudra replied, "*I think... you've already broken a hundred times. And you've built empires out of your ruins.*"

For a long beat, they stood like that. No camera. No script. Just her breathing and him watching, until Geeta shouted, "*Ready for the next shot!*"

The moment shattered. Aagya blinked away the emotion, tightened her jaw, and stepped away. Back into her fire. Back into her war. As the day progressed, Rudra watched every frame like a chessboard. Every actor. Every crew member. Every side glance and misplaced wire. But his attention always, always returned to

her. To the fire in her eyes. To the weight in her voice. And to the silent war between the woman on camera and the storm off it. He didn't have proof yet. But as the sun dipped and the final scene of the day wrapped, Rudra knew two things:

One — the traitor was somewhere in this crew.

And two — no matter how dangerous this mission became, he wouldn't... **couldn't**... let anyone break her. Not again. Even if that meant burning alongside her.

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The golden light from the overhead beams faded into amber as the crew wrapped up for the day. Laughter echoed faintly, some people grabbed snacks, others posed for BTS shots, and a few retired to their cabins. Rudra stayed behind. Still invisible. But not idle. He had work to do.

Phase One — Observation:

From behind a stack of light stands, Rudra's eyes flickered sharp and calculating. A coiled serpent hidden in plain sight. The set looked relaxed. But his mind ticked like a ticking time bomb, *"The money's leaking from inside. Small transactions. Shell companies. Digital ghost trails. Someone here is feeding Lashkar-e-Qayamat like a parasite under our skin."*

He started with the assistant production manager Karan. Always on his phone. Too many hushed calls. Too many smoke breaks. Rudra noted his exit route, the make of his car, and even the brand of cigarette he smoked... Dunhill Golds. He seemed sketchy.

"What's your story, Karan?", he spoke in his mind.

Then the lighting assistant Harsh. Friendly. A little too friendly. Always offering to **"help"** transport equipment alone. Rudra followed him quietly after pack-up one night. Harsh ducked into

the alley behind the storage unit and took something from a man on a bike. A small envelope. No words were exchanged. Just a nod. Then the man disappeared. So did Harsh.

"Could be cash. Could be something else. But why not use digital transfer?", he thought.

Because someone was smart. Careful. Or scared.

Phase Two – Digital Forensics:

Next day, Rudra "**accidentally**" struck up a conversation with Ritika, the accounts girl. Nerdy. Efficient. Easy to underestimate. While she stepped away to refill her coffee, Rudra leaned over her desk just a little. His eyes scanned the open laptop screen. Ledger files. Payment portals. Reimbursements. He spotted something. A list of vendors under a company called **Vishva Dynamics Pvt. Ltd.** Normal-sounding. But... too many payments under ₹49,000... just below the audit threshold. He memorized the account number with photographic precision.

Later that night, he tapped into a secure comm-link and ran the account through the NIA shell-detection database.

Result: Red Flagged.

Shell company. Registered in Cyprus.

Known for laundering terror money across South Asia.

"Bingo.", he said.

But the big question remained... who initiated the payments? The accounts were clean on the paper. Sign-offs were digital. Password protected. Someone was smart enough to use other people's IDs and then wipe browser histories. But no one was perfect. Rudra just had to wait.

Phase Three — Shadowing and Traps:

Over the next 72 hours, Rudra monitored every team member's activity during break hours. He planted tiny RFID stickers under laptops, slipped magnetic tags into bag zippers, and synced his smartwatch to a frequency jammer he'd built years ago during covert op training.

Who accessed the account?

Who had the timing to slip away unnoticed?

Who had access to the company card?

All these questions remained unanswered.

At 2:42 p.m. on Day 4, he caught it. Karan entered the editing room alone. Ten minutes later, the Vishva Dynamics account registered another transaction of ₹48,700 to a new vendor. But Karan wasn't using his phone. He wasn't even near the laptop. He was using the teleprompter system's backend. A low-profile digital line that wasn't on the security grid.

"Son of a bitch.", Rudra muttered under his breath.

Just when Rudra was about to record proof through the small lens hidden in his pen, a voice whispered beside him:

"You disappear a lot these days. You, okay?", asked Aagya.

Rudra blinked. The pen faltered. She stood there with no makeup, hoodie half-zipped and eyes laced with concern and exhaustion. And he, who had just cracked open a treason trail, couldn't speak. Because her presence yanked him out of the war and dragged him back into the chaos inside his chest.

"Yeah. Just... needed air.", he replied somehow.

Aagya folded her arms, *"You always need air when I walk into the room?"*

Ouch. That hit him. He exhaled and smiled faintly, *"Only when I'm trying not to set it on fire."*

She raised a brow. Eyes still searching his face for answers she couldn't name. But he couldn't give them. Not yet. Because this wasn't just a film anymore. This was her life. Her dream. Her name. And the mole was crawling under her empire. Rudra wouldn't let her know. Not until he had proof. Not until he could burn the traitor in front of her.

By the end of the week, Rudra had mapped out all devices accessing the shell account:

1. Editing Room System

2. Teleprompter Interface

3. Backup Server near the costume trailer

Only a handful of people used all three systems. One of them was **Karan**, the operator. Another, to Rudra's shock, was **Harsh**, the costume designer. But a third name appeared. It was **Devraj**, the man playing Samargeet, a.k.a., Aagya's onscreen soulmate. And now, he was a possible suspect. Rudra's blood ran cold. He stared at the timestamp again. Confirmed the IP. Triple-checked the log. And yet... there it was.

"If he's dirty, and she doesn't know... it'll kill her. If she does know... it'll kill me.", he said in his mind as he shut the laptop gently. His jaw clenched. His heart? Roared. But he said nothing. Because the final move would be made in silence. And the next time someone pressed 'send' on Lashkar-e-Qayamat's blood money... Rudra would be waiting. With loaded proof. And no mercy.

.....

Devraj had a way of walking like he owned every room he entered. Even in silence, his boots struck the studio floors like declarations. His physique carved shadows in the hallway... tall,

broad, shoulders like stone walls. And yet, it wasn't the physical dominance that unsettled Rudra. It was the access. **Unrestricted. Unchecked. Unbothered.**

That night, Devraj didn't go home. Rudra noticed. He stayed behind on the pretext of rehearsing his monologue under the moonlight-filtered atrium. But that wasn't what he was doing. Rudra followed from a distance. Silent steps. Controlled breath. No creaking floors, no sudden turns. Just distance. And darkness. Devraj passed through the costume aisle, his silhouette brushing past racks of royal tunics and weathered cloaks. Then, he disappeared into the far corridor... the one that led to the soundproof back server room, tucked behind the VFX preview chamber. No cameras covered that part. Aagya had called it her "**peace zone.**" But tonight, it was Devraj's trail. Rudra waited. Exactly ten minutes later, Devraj came out again. Empty hands. Calm face. Normal gait. But something was off. **His left wrist.** There was a faint red imprint, barely visible, like a freshly removed watch or fitness band.

Rudra's brain fired like a loaded weapon, *"He's wearing a scrambler device. Hidden. Maybe triggering remote access systems. He's not transferring money through phones... he's walking the firewall himself."*

He slipped into the server room after Devraj left. And froze. There was nothing obviously wrong. Nothing overtly tampered. Until he saw that the hard drive in the slot 3B was slightly loose. Only someone with combat-level awareness would even notice. Rudra pulled on the gloves, removed the drive and slid it into his custom decryptor. It was loaded with metadata logs consisting of software pings, encoding paths and something else. A mirror drive script. One that cloned activity from Aagya's main server. Which meant that Devraj was watching every edit. Every scene breakdown. Every financial approval. He wasn't just an actor. He was embedded. Watching her. Mirroring her.

Devraj sat alone in the cafeteria at 2 a.m. He was still in half costume, the maroon tunic unbuttoned, a silver pendant swinging against his chest as he scrolled through his iPad. Rudra watched from behind the shadows. His jaw clenched. Not just because he saw Devraj scrolling through confidential team documents on a private admin panel. But because Aagya had sent them to him. She trusted him. Confided in him. Let him see the story unfold before it touched anyone else. Rudra's throat dried. His fists curled. His worst fear wasn't that Devraj might be the mole. It was that if he wasn't, and yet Aagya trusted him more than Rudra.

What the hell did that make Rudra? A pawn? A weapon? Or just... invisible? He turned before rage overtook logic. He couldn't lose control. Not now.

Later that night in Rudra's cabin, the decrypted data revealed a stunning truth. The funds weren't just being funneled. They were being timed. Timed with shooting days. Transferred just hours before or after certain scenes were filmed. Especially scenes involving war councils, military strategies, and battle choreography. It was coded communication. The film was being used to transmit signals... data embedded in frame compositions and scene timings to sleeper cells. And the one who had access to this pattern was Devraj. Rudra's blood ran cold. But he needed undeniable proof. Because if he was wrong, he'd lose Aagya. And if he was right? She'd lose everything.

The next morning, Rudra watched Devraj greet Aagya with that easy smile. The kind of smile that made you forget scars and missions and betrayals. She smiled back. Not wide. But soft. And Rudra? He stood in the shadows. Watching. Waiting. Plotting his next move. Because sometimes, love demands distance. And sometimes, duty demands destruction. Even if the enemy wears your lover's trust like a second skin.

Later that day in an abandoned tech park, Rudra crouched behind a crumbling pillar of a half-built tech complex... the kind that had once promised innovation and now only echoed silence. The area was dead after 6 PM. No traffic. No lights. No cameras. Perfect for secrets. Through the scope of his micro lens, he saw Devraj... hood up, dressed in nondescript black, face masked by shadows, walking toward a locked side gate. He wasn't alone. A man awaited him. He was short, pot-bellied, with a face half-covered by a muffler. A cigarette dangled from his lips. His left wrist bore an eagle tattoo... one Rudra recognized instantly:

Lashkar-e-Qayamat. Tier-2 handler. Name: Abdul Karim.

Rudra's breath steadied. This was it. Devraj handed over something small. A pen drive? Or a drive clone? Karim inspected it, nodded, and handed back a slim leather pouch. Cash? No. Encrypted bank cards. Rudra clicked photos in rapid succession. Then activated his spyware drone... silent, humming just above the lamp post. Through its feed, the audio kicked in.

Karim muttered, *"...next drop during Sequence 17. Same binary format. You'll get full payment once the last code's in."*

Devraj replied in a cool and measured tone, *"It'll be there. By the time they scream 'cut,' the data will already be inside the frame."*

Rudra's jaw clenched. He was transmitting something through the film itself. Data as visual patterns. Hidden codes embedded in battle maps, scroll texts and symbols painted on props. It was brilliant and dangerous. He recorded the entire interaction. Then, as Devraj turned to leave, Rudra vanished like a shadow before light. But his rage stayed like venom waiting for a fang.

Meanwhile, Aagya sat on the rooftop, alone. Her laptop lay beside her. The wind tangled her braid. Her eyes were lost in the script she wasn't really reading. Ever since the shoot began, Rudra had changed. He was no longer the silent storm in her

periphery. Now it was just... silence. He barely looked at her. Didn't argue. Didn't hover. Didn't care. Or so it felt. And yet she felt his absence louder than Devraj's presence. She closed her laptop. Looked at the skyline. Then at her reflection in the coffee cup. And whispered to herself, *"Did I lose him the day I let him in?"*

She remembered his voice the other night... *"I don't want to be another scar in your story, Aagya."*

The words stung now more than ever. Because she was beginning to trust him. And maybe... that's why his distance now felt like a blade slipping in, slow and silent.

On the other side, Rudra drove back in silence. The recording chip tucked in his sleeve. His jaw clenched. Eyes bloodshot. Because now, he had proof. And yet... he didn't feel victorious. Because while he'd found the traitor, he hadn't yet figured out how to protect Aagya from what's coming. Or how to protect himself... from her.

24. Something to Lose

The sky was a sheet of dying grey, the Mumbai traffic humming with the indifference of a city too familiar with secrets. Rudra stepped out of the Avaan Studios gate, hoodie zipped up to his neck, his sketchbook tucked under his arm. He walked down the pavement with the same calculated steps he took every day with one earphone in and the other dangling loose. Just a man blending into the crowd. No one would guess that beneath that soft charcoal-stained exterior, lay a weapon honed in for warzones.

As he passed a shuttered antique shop, a white delivery van parked across the road hissed softly and the backdoor cracked open just an inch. Rudra's boots hit a puddle. The splash masked the soft patter of three sets of footsteps behind him. He felt it a second too late. A gloved hand slammed across his mouth. Another wrenched his arm back, twisting his shoulder. A third man drove a taser hard into his side. His body jerked violently. His muscles spasmed. His sketchbook hit the wet pavement, pages fanning out like broken wings. The last thing he saw before the hood dropped over his head was the reflection of his own stunned expression in the antique store's glass. Then, darkness swallowed him.

Inside the van, it was soundproofed silence. Black bags over faces. Metal cuffs cold around his wrists. His breathing was steady, too steady for a civilian. And that unnerved the men watching him. He wasn't panicking. He wasn't thrashing. He was waiting.

One of them whispered, *"He knows."*

Another replied, *"Let him. We've got orders."*

The van swerved off the main road, into an alley, then deeper through private gates into a warehouse that shouldn't have existed. They dragged him out. Feet scraping. Boots echoing. They opened a rusted iron door and threw him in. The concrete floor cracked beneath him. Dust curled in the air like ghosts disturbed from a slumber. He stayed still. Unmoving. Listening. The room smelled of rust, dust, and something older like the ghost of a thousand wars. A single bulb swung from the ceiling, its weak light throwing sharp shadows on the concrete walls. Then, the door locked with a metallic clang and silence returned.

Except now, someone else was breathing in the room. A slow, deep inhale. Followed by a dry chuckle. A shadow stepped forward from the corner. Black combat boots first. Then a long, heavy trench coat with its edges brushing the floor like a predator's tail. Finally, his mask came into view. It was cold, metallic, covering half the man's face, its grill distorting his breath into a mechanical hiss. He had eyes that knew Rudra's scars because they'd put them there. The figure stopped just shy of the light. And then came the voice... deep, steady, and sharp as broken glass, *"Rudra Suvigya... the soldier with ink-stained hands. I must say... it took us longer than I expected to cross paths again."*

Rudra blinked once. Then raised his chin, his jaw clenched, *"Say your name. If you're proud of it."*

The man stepped into the lone shaft of light. Rudra's heartbeat accelerated at light's speed for he was seeing something he never even dreamt of. A ghost from his past. The man had a metal mask that covered the lower half of his face. But his eyes were amber and feral that held enough hate to fill an entire war. The shaft of light caught the edges of his mask, gleaming like a blade. Rudra's pupils dilated. His breathing slowed. For a second, just a second, he wasn't the commander anymore. He was back there. In the dirt. In the smoke. Watching his unit fall. Watching his brother-in-arms burn. And Rudra's eyes widened. Blood drained from his

face. For a second, he was that man on the battlefield again. Alone. Wounded. Chasing a ghost.

The man smiled coldly as he bent on his feet, *"You really thought I'd die that day, huh? You think a little shrapnel and some fire would be enough to erase Zameer Haqqani from the face of this wretched world?"*

The name landed like a blade between them. Rudra's face hardened again, but his knuckles turned white. He didn't speak. He just stood there. Jaw locked. The corner of his mouth twitched, restraint, not fear. Never fear. And Rudra knew. The nightmare had returned. The face behind the bloodbath. The demon in flesh. Zameer. Alive. Then, slowly, with an almost ceremonial grace, he lifted his mask. The hiss of steel against skin filled the room. And then, it was gone. The face underneath was Devraj, the charming, smiling co-star Aagya trusted. He wasn't an actor. He was a monster Rudra had buried in fire and blood long ago. Alive.

Rudra had never seen Zameer without his signature metal mask and now he finally saw his true face. He didn't speak. He simply stared, jaw clenched, the corner of his lips twitching in restraint, not fear. Never fear. Zameer circled him slowly, like a vulture sizing up its prey. The room was dimly lit with a single overhead bulb flickering slightly, its chain swaying with the same rhythm as Zameer's boots. The walls were stained with water, maybe blood, maybe both. A rusted table stood to the side with a tray of surgical tools no director would ever approve for set design. And still... Rudra didn't move.

Zameer spoke in a mocking tone, *"You've been busy, Rudra. Playing the hero. Signing films. Falling in love. Pretending you're anything but what you really are."*

Rudra's eyes finally shifted, locking onto Zameer, *"And what am I, Zameer?"*

Zameer leaned close, his breath almost brushing Rudra's cheek, *"A killer who forgot he was born for the kill."*

Zameer stood up, pulled a chair, sat on it, lit a cigar, inhaled it and then blew the smoke on Rudra's face mocking him subtly, *"You've changed. But not enough. Still silent. Still unreadable. Still thinking you have control."*

Their faces were inches apart now. He added, *"I watched your face burn that night when I slipped through your fingers. That look... stayed with me. So did the scar I gave you."*

He brushed two fingers mockingly across Rudra's cheek on the same path where the scar now lived. Rudra's fist twitched.

Zameer continued, *"Ah. There it is. The rage. The soldier beneath the sketch-artist costume."*

Rudra's voice came like iron, *"You shouldn't be alive."*

Zameer chuckled darkly, stepping back and pulling a chair noisily across the floor, sitting down like a king on a throne he built with corpses, *"Shouldn't be. And yet... here I am. Alive. Thriving. And you? What are you now? A studio intern sketching broken girls and hiding behind cameras?"*

He leaned forward, *"Do they even know what you really are, Rudra? That the man fixing their storyboards once gutted twelve men in a cave in Kashmir with nothing but a rusted bayonet?"*

Rudra said nothing. His silence was louder than any denial. Zameer laughed again, the kind of laugh that felt like it belonged in a funeral more than a room, *"You remember Major Krishna? Your senior. Head blown clean off. Or Neeraj? That boy bled out trying to cover your left flank. What a mess you left behind in that desert."*

He stood again. Walked slowly to the table of tools. Ran his fingers over a scalpel. Picked it up. Held it under the light, *"And yet... it was just you and me in the end. Face to face. Fire to fire. You were good, Rudra. But not good enough."*

Rudra's voice was razor sharp when it came, *"I had you dying at my feet."*

Zameer nodded, *"True. You did. And then you blinked. Just once. That's all it takes."*

He turned to face him again, his face now calm, almost philosophical, *"Your government thinks you killed me. And you... you poor, broken Rudra. You thought you ended it. And yet... here I am. Running an empire. Smuggling power through every screen you work behind."*

He leaned closer again, smiling darkly, *"Avaan Studios. Lashkar-e-Qayamat. It's all connected. The illusions you create on screen? I use them to smuggle real terror."*

A pause. And then he did, *"And you... you walked right into it."*

He dropped the scalpel. Let it clatter on the floor. Rudra looked up, unflinching, *"Why reveal yourself now?"*

Zameer's grin widened. And the air got colder, *"Because now... I don't need to hide."*

He stepped back. Snapped his fingers. A TV screen behind flickered on with security footage being played. The rooftop. The golden hour. Rudra handing Aagya the pendrive.

Zameer watched Rudra's expression change just slightly and spoke with mock sympathy, *"She looks so... trusting. So unaware. Like a lamb sleeping next to a wolf."*

Rudra's fists tightened in his cuffs. Zameer saw it. Fed on it, *"Tell me, Rudra. What happens when she finds out her entire studio, her dream, is all built on blood money? That the man she let into her vision... is a man who secretly paints death for a living?"*

He walked closer again. His voice dropped, *"Do you think she'll still touch your sketches then?"*

No response. Just that steady, lethal glare from Rudra. But something flickered beneath it now. Something wounded. Zameer stood upright, *"You can't save her, Rudra. Not from me. Not from what's coming."*

He turned away. But just as he reached the door, Rudra spoke low and final, *"I should burn you alive and turn your ashes into paint for the sets you think you own. Smile all you want. Touch her even once and I'll send you to hell through your own shadow."*

Zameer paused and smiled without turning, *"Now that... is exactly what I wanted to hear. ABSOLUTE CINEMA!!!"*

The door slammed shut. Darkness again. But this time, Rudra wasn't alone in it. His own fury was enough to set the shadows on fire.

Rudra started having flashbacks of weeks ago when he gave Aagya a pendrive with the animation that brought them close. Moments after that he stepped out of Avaan Studios, walked across the bustling street, and disappeared into the crowd. His phone buzzed. It was Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh. He answered without a word. The voice on the other end was curt but cold, *"Come to Base Seven. Priority Alpha. Decryption confirms: Zameer Haqqani may be on the move."*

Rudra didn't even blink, *"Understood. On my way."*

That night, a black SUV whisked him off into the outskirts of Mumbai, far from city lights, through forested roads that no civilian would ever wander. By midnight, he arrived at Base Seven which was a classified underground military compound. Inside, war maps glowed on walls, terminals blinked with intercepted transmissions, and elite officers moved with purpose. In the war room, the air was electric. Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh stood near a digital board, flanked by top intelligence officials and special ops strategists. He turned the moment Rudra entered, *"Welcome back, Captain Rudra."*

The title, once buried, was now resurrected. Rudra gave a firm salute, *"What's the mission, sir?"*

The General pulled up a photo, blurred CCTV stills. A man in the shadows. Tall. Broad. Wearing a steel face mask.

"Two nights ago, this man led an arms exchange near the Balochistan border. One of ours intercepted the feed. Facial mapping matched 87% with Zameer Haqqani.", he spoke.

Rudra stepped closer. His eyes narrowed, *"So that's him, huh? These roaches never stop coming."*

Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh replied, *"You know what he's capable of, Captain. And that's why we can't let him vanish again."*

He handed Rudra a classified folder. Inside were names, locations, and satellite images. Zameer's trail had resurfaced, and it led to a suspected stronghold in Rajasthan's desert belt.

Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh added, *"You'll lead the Phoenix Unit. Five men. No backup. No noise. Get in. Confirm identity. If possible, bring him back. If not..."*

Rudra closed the file and spoke, *"Terminate."*

The General nodded, *"We leave in 4 hours. Prepare your team. Mission codename: Scorchlight."*

By midnight, they were airborne. A matte-black HAL Cheetah helicopter skimmed low over the desert, flying nap-of-the-earth to avoid radar. No lights. No chatter. Just the thrum of rotors cutting through sand-heavy wind. Inside, no one spoke. Rudra sat strapped in, rifle between his knees, helmet visor down. Across from him were his four men:

- Karan — point man, silent as stone
- Neeraj — sniper, eyes already scanning imaginary angles
- Harsh — breacher, fingers flexing unconsciously

- Vikrant — comms and rear cover

They were all sharp and seasoned Veterans and Professionals. Each was locked into their own silence. They were men who understood that tonight wasn't routine. He was also accompanied by Major Krishna who'd guide them through comms all the way and act as back-up if they needed any.

In their ears, Major Krishna's voice was calm, clipped, *"ISR confirms abandoned processing facility at Grid 7A. Two-storey structure. Thermal signatures are intermittent. Possible decoys. You're going in quiet. Entry, confirm presence, extract."*

No jokes. No bravado. Each had stared death in the eye before. But none had faced a ghost like Zameer. Every man inside knew one thing: Zameer wasn't a target. He was a reckoning. No one said his name. They didn't need to.

As the clock ticked 04:00 hours, the helicopter didn't land. It hover-dropped. Ten feet. Fast ropes. Boots hit sand. The bird pulled away immediately, disappearing into darkness. It was the standard procedure in hostile territory. Rudra raised a fist. The team moved. They advanced toward the silhouette ahead which was an old concrete processing building, half-buried by dunes. Broken windows. Rusted metal stairs. A place that looked dead enough to be forgotten. That's what made it dangerous.

Neeraj took rear overwatch. Harsh stacked near the side entrance. Vikrant handled comms, trying to punch through light interference. Karan moved point with Rudra close behind. They were ten meters from the door when the night screamed:

WHOOM.

An RPG detonated against the building's upper facade. It was not a direct hit, but it was close enough. The blast punched the air out of Rudra's lungs and threw the entire team flat. Concrete

fragments rained down like shrapnel. The shockwave wasn't cinematic... it was brutal, disorienting and violent.

Before anyone could recover...

AMBUSH.

Automatic fire erupted from the windows. Not 360. Not random. Deliberate crossfire.

"CONTACT FRONT!", Karan shouted.

Neeraj rolled to return fire, but was too late. A suppressed round punched through his neck guard. He dropped without a sound.

"NEERAJ DOWN!", Vikrant yelled.

Harsh dragged Rudra behind a concrete slab as rounds chewed through sand and steel.

"Two shooters on the upper floor! PKM left window!", Harsh called.

Rudra leaned out, fired controlled bursts, neutralized one muzzle flash. Another opened up immediately. This wasn't chaos. This was preparation. They breached anyway because that's what soldiers do when retreat means being hunted. Harsh tossed a flash into the entrance. They moved in. Inside was hell. Tight corridors. Dust-choked air. Smoke. Shadows. Harsh went first and took a round center mass. Armor stopped it, but the follow-up didn't. He went down firing, buying seconds that cost him his life.

Vikrant stayed back trying to restore comms, *"Major – jammed – repeat – jammed – "*

A round punched through the wall. Vikrant slumped against it, sliding down slowly. He looked at Rudra once. Nodded. Karan and Rudra pushed deeper. Karan took point at the stairwell. An IED detonated halfway up. When the dust cleared, Karan wasn't moving. Rudra was alone. His left shoulder was burned, but it

was not a clean hit. A grazing round. Arm numb. He switched the rifle to his right without thinking. Footsteps echoed. Slow. Unhurried. And then the voice came mocking him, *"Still standing, huh?"*

Rudra turned at once. There was no one. He then advanced. Slow. Deliberate. That's when the clapping started. Not loud. Mocking. And from the smoke emerged Zameer. He stepped out from behind a pillar wearing a metal mask, kukri in hand, fire reflecting off steel and movements relaxed like this was sparring, not slaughter.

"You're persistent.", Zameer said, amused. *"Persistent men die tired."*

Rudra wiped blood from his mouth, *"As long as I'm breathing, this ends."*

"You walked straight into the lion's den ,soldier.", said Zameer.

Rudra steadied his breathing, *"Let's see who the real lion is."*

They collided. Not pretty. Not cinematic. But ruthlessly and bloody. Knife against rifle stock. Elbows. Knees. Concrete biting into flesh. Zameer was stronger, wilder and brutal in close quarters. His strength was fueled by hate and experience. His kukri slashed, carved and hunted. But Rudra was smarter and deadlier. Rudra countered with precision disarming strikes, broken angles, ruthless efficiency. They crashed into the wreckage. A headbutt. A knee. A disarm attempt. Zameer slashed and caught Rudra across the ribs. Not deep. Enough. Rudra countered and shot Zameer through the thigh at point-blank range. Zameer didn't scream. He laughed. A grin that shouldn't exist.

"Do it." Zameer laughed. *"Kill me."*

Rudra raised his blade.

"I don't kill monsters.", he said coldly. "I erase them."

But Zameer, ever the trickster, moved his hand too fast.

FLASH.

White. Noise. Zameer vanished into smoke as secondary charges detonated across the building. The explosion wasn't dramatic. It was inevitable. Zameer hit a dead-man switch. The building was already rigged and it began to collapse inward. Secondary charges. Fuel stores. Ammo. Rudra ran. The structure imploded behind him. Fire. Dust. Shockwave. When it settled, the desert was quiet again. Rudra emerged from the smoke alone. Burned. Bleeding. A fresh scar carving his cheek.

He keyed emergency comms somehow, *"Base... this is Rudra. Team KIA. Target escaped. Mission... inconclusive."*

Silence answered. But Rudra already knew. His eyes told a different story. Zameer wasn't finished. And neither was he. And the war was not over.

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Back to the present day, Rudra just woke up from his slumber, clenched his jaw and stared at the locked door in front of him. The cold of the bunker was seeping into Rudra's spine. He sat slouched now with arms pulled behind him, wrists chained to a steel chair bolted to the floor. Blood had dried on his temple, a thin trail running into the creases of his jaw. The scar on his cheek, Zameer's gift, throbbed like it remembered everything. And then came the footsteps. Measured. Heavy. Zameer entered the room like a man born of fire and forged in betrayal, *"Sorry to keep you waiting Captain. The soldier who killed all my men... and still couldn't kill me."*

Rudra didn't flinch, *"Shame. I'll correct that today."*

Zameer laughed, a sound that echoed like knives scraping iron, *"You had your chance, remember? You stood over me. I was bleeding, half-dead. But instead of cutting off the head of the snake, you hesitated."*

He walked closer, pulled up a chair, and sat opposite Rudra, *"Tell me... was it mercy? Or were you just afraid I'd haunt you anyway?"*

Rudra smirked, *"I'm not afraid of the dead. Just disappointed when they don't stay that way."*

Zameer chuckled darkly. He pulled out a small tablet and pressed a button. A live feed blinked onto the screen. It was Aagya stepping out of Avaan Studios, holding her phone, talking to someone completely unaware. Rudra's breath hitched. Zameer spoke playfully, *"She has your attention, doesn't she? The girl with steel in her spine and fire in her tongue. A bit like my sister... before she was blown to pieces by your army's drone strike."*

Rudra's eyes locked onto him, jaw clenched, *"She was storing chemical weapons under a school."*

Zameer snarled, *"She was my blood."*

He stood up, towering over Rudra now and continued, *"And now I want yours. But not in bullets. In sacrifice."*

He walked around Rudra, voice lowering like a dagger against flesh. He took a long breath, *"You underestimated me, Captain. Or overestimated yourself. Either way... that was stupid."*

Rudra didn't reply. He was conserving energy. Watching. Waiting.

Zameer approached him slowly, *"I know what you're thinking. That you'll find a way out. That somehow, you'll claw your way to her. The great Captain Rudra, the lone wolf, shadow ops, man of silence. But you see... I don't need to hurt you to win this."*

He paused. Then pulled out a remote and clicked a button. A large screen blinked to life. A live drone feed. Zoomed in on

Aagya's black Porsche pulling out of Avaan Studios' parking lot. She was with Megha.

Zameer added in a deeper voice, *"See that beautiful car? Guess what it's carrying under the hood."*

Rudra's jaw tightened.

"One tap. Just one. And she's a red mist on the freeway.", said Zameer playfully.

He pocketed the remote again and walked closer, *"But I won't press it."*

He leaned in and smirked, *"Because I need you, Rudra. And you need her alive."*

Silence. Then Zameer stood upright again, *"You're going to work for me now. No negotiations. No heroics. You're going to sit, stay, and obey... just like the loyal little dog I need you to be."*

He lets that hang in the air, cold and humiliating. He then smiled faintly, *"And don't worry. I won't give you the mercy of a quick death. I want you to live. Long enough to understand what it feels like to be powerless."*

He stepped closer to the window, staring down at the glittering cityscape like it belongs to him, *"You ever wonder how I got that lead role in her perfect little empire? How Avaan Studios, with all its pride and polish, let me in through the front gates?"*

He chuckled, dark and almost fondly, *"Because it's not hers anymore, Rudra. Not really."*

He turned back, his voice now dipped in quiet triumph, *"She thinks it's her legacy. Her empire. Her sanctuary. But it's mine. I've stripped it bare from within. One signature at a time. One trusted face at a time."*

He paused and then smirked, *"Her parents? They're relics. Gilded names on paper. Mouthpieces reading from my script. And she? She's just the actress who doesn't know she's acting in my production."*

He stepped closer and lowered his voice into a mocking whisper, *"So here's your part, Captain. You'll stay by her side. Like a good, obedient dog. You'll protect her. Obey her. And you'll carry the curse of knowing that every smile she wears, every breath she takes... depends on you following my every word."*

He patted Rudra's cheek once like patting a dog that forgot it was ever wild, *"Be a good boy, Rudra. Or I'll write the next scene... with her screams as the soundtrack and her blood as the ink.."*

Rudra looked up... lips bloodied, teeth gritted. Zameer paused. Looks at Rudra with mock sympathy. Then leaned in closer. His breath ran cold and words colder, *"And one day soon... you'll watch me run my fingers through her hair, trace my lips down her neck and pull her into a dance that was meant for you. You'll see her smile, the same smile you swore you'd protect... but this time, it'll be for me."*

He stepped around Rudra, voice tightening with darkness, *"You won't scream. You won't move. You'll just watch as I romance your soul in her skin. As I turn the woman you love into my stage."*

His tone dropped to a whisper now lethal and personal, *"You'll be standing right there, Rudra. Helpless. Breathing. Broken. A soldier with no war left. A shadow with no light."*

He smiled, cruel and victorious, *"You'll become what I built you to be... a corpse with a heartbeat."*

Rudra rasped, *"You touch one hair on her head –"*

Zameer cut in, *" – and Mumbai loses its future star filmmaker. Think carefully, Captain. This isn't about bravery anymore. It's about survival. Not yours. Hers."*

The screen flickered again. Now showing Aagya walking into her penthouse suite, guarded by two Avaan security agents. Zameer

picked up a sketch from the table, Rudra's sketch. The one of Aagya as the battle-worn warrior, still standing, *"Pathetic! Is this what you call art?"*

He crushed the sketch slowly in one hand. Rudra flinched. Not visibly. But something inside him cracked.

"So what's it going to be, soldier?," asked Zameer, *"Will you let her die? Just like the rest of your squad?"*

Rudra's lips trembled. But not from fear. From rage. And from something else... Love. He looked away, but Zameer caught it.

Zameer smiled devilishly, *"Ah... now I see it. That tightness in your jaw. The way you looked at her name on that screen. You actually love her. I spoke all those things previously just to mock you. But damn, they were all true?"*

He clapped and whistled as he added, *"Way to go Captain Rudra!"*

Rudra remained silent. But his silence... screamed yes.

Zameer grinned wider, *"How poetic. The ghost of the battlefield... Falling for a woman born of royalty and war. Tell me... does she know who you are? Does she know you bleed for her in silence?"*

Still... no answer. Zameer rose and turned away, *"No matter. You'll make your choice soon. Because if you don't... I'll make it for you. Don't worry. She'll live. As long as you kneel."*

For the first time in a long, long time... Rudra was scared. Not for himself. But for her. The only war he didn't know how to fight. The chains were tight, but his chest was tighter. His head was spinning. His arms, still sore from the chains, barely moved. His breath was shallow. And before he could piece together the memory, Zameer pierced a cold sting into his neck. His eyes widened. Too late. The needle was already in.

Rudra slurred, *"Wh...at...???"*

Zameer looked down at him, the faint smile of a man who had already won, *"You're going home, Captain. Your precious little film... needs its tortured genius. And our little warrior? She misses her sketchbook ghost."*

Rudra stumbled, his legs weakened and the shadows around him turned into a blur. Zameer's voice echoed through the tunnel of collapsing consciousness, *"Sleep well, soldier. I'll handle the applause."*

Darkness then swallowed him. Hours later, the sun filtered gently into the common area in the evening. Team members milled around... some working on costumes, some editing on laptops, coffee in hand. And then, the lift doors slid open with a soft chime.

Zameer walked in posing as Devraj, carrying Rudra in his arms. Rudra's face was battered. His hoodie was torn. Blood on his brow. A faint bruise along his jaw. He looked unconscious but was breathing. A collective gasp tore through the studio.

Megha rushed forward, *"Oh my God! What the – Rudra?!"*

Geeta got alarmed, *"What happened to him?!"*

Aagya turned at the voice, and her world collapsed. For a second, she froze. Breath stuck in her chest. Eyes wide. Heart pounding like a drum of war. Her Rudra. Broken. Bleeding. In someone else's arms. Her slippers flew off as she ran. Devraj calmly laid Rudra down on the couch, gently adjusting a folded jacket beneath his head but his eyes, sharp and calculating, scanned *her*.

"I found him near Lokhandwala Bridge. He was half-conscious, collapsed by the divider.", he acted.

Mishika asked, *"Was it a mugging?"*

Devraj shrugged faintly, *"Maybe. Or something worse."*

But Aagya wasn't listening. She was already kneeling beside Rudra, hands shaking. She brushed the hair off his forehead like it was instinct. Her palms cupped his cheeks, her voice low and trembling, *"Rudra... Rudra, can you hear me? Please..."*

His lips parted, but no words. Her eyes filled. That terrifying panic clawed her chest, the kind that said this can't happen. Not him. Not again. And suddenly, the entire team understood. This wasn't a crew crush. This wasn't just an animator. This was someone who mattered.

Megha whispered, *"She's in love with him..."*

Aadarsh nodded, *"And she doesn't even know it yet."*

Behind them, Devraj stood with folded arms, wearing a concerned expression... but his eyes sparkled with cruel amusement. Because today, he'd planted a deeper seed. Today, he saw fear on her face. And nothing pleased him more.

Moments later, the in-house studio doctor arrived, rushing with a kit, *"Everyone clear the area. He needs space."*

They stepped back. But Aagya did not move. She stayed beside him, her hand clutched in his, while the doctor cleaned and bandaged the wounds. Every wince on Rudra's face made her flinch harder than him.

The doctor spoke to Aagya, *"He's lucky. Just external bruises. No internal bleeding. His ribs are sore. But he's strong. He'll recover."*

The team stood back, subdued.

Aagya barely whispered, *"He has to... He's mine. Of course he's lucky."*

Later that evening, Rudra's eyelids fluttered. The scent of antiseptics. The sound of the AC. The warm pressure of a familiar hand on his cheek.

Aagya spoke gently, *"You're safe now."*

He blinked. Groaned. Her face came into focus... eyes puffy, but still beautiful.

Rudra asked in a raspy voice, *"...You always look this worried?"*

Aagya smiled with teary eyes, *"Only when idiots make me feel like I'm about to lose them."*

His vision was blurry. His throat was dry. But his heart? It knew. *"What happened to you?"*, she asked.

Rudra lied with a weak smile, *"I... slipped. I was lucky someone found me."*

She narrowed her eyes, clearly not buying it, *"That's a terrible lie."*

Rudra grinned faintly, *"I've been out of practice."*

She let out a shaky exhale, her voice dropping to a whisper, *"You scared me. I thought I was going to lose you."*

He stared at her. That confession hit deeper than any wound and replied playfully, *"Aww... Are you afraid of losing me, Miss Avaan?"*

She blushed instantly, cheeks turning crimson. But she hid it and rolled her eyes, *"Shut up."*

And without thinking, she slapped his arm.

Rudra groaned, *"Oww! That's the side that hit the sidewalk!"*

Aagya smirked through concern, *"Good. Maybe next time you'll think before getting yourself beaten to a pulp."*

Rudra replied, *"Next time, maybe don't look so pretty. I'd have stayed put."*

She laughed. A real one this time. Tearful, but real. His pupils dilated watching her smile like that. Then he gave her a soft, crooked smile, *"...I'm just glad I made it back to you."*

He grinned as his eyes softened. She looked at him like she didn't know whether to cry or kiss him. In that moment, both of them realised what they meant to each other. They did express their feelings to each other that day, not with words but with their eyes.

Behind them, Devraj still posed as the concerned actor and watched silently from a distance. His lips curled ever so slightly, and he grinned like a man who'd lit the first match in a forest full of fuel. Because while Rudra bled, he gained her trust. And slowly... he was taking over her world. But Rudra? He had earned something far more dangerous... a reason to kill.

25. The Love He Couldn't Touch

The corridor outside the studio medbay was quiet. Muted lighting. A dull buzz from the vending machine. Soft footsteps echoed against the polished floor as Aagya stepped out having checked on Rudra once more. There she saw Devraj standing near the window, arms crossed and gaze distant. She hesitated for a moment, then walked over, *"Umm... Devraj?"*

He turned, face calm. Controlled. Warm, *"Hey! How is he?"*

Aagya replied gently, *"Still resting. But stable. The doctor says he'll recover fully in a few days."*

She paused, her hands clasped together in front of her, something uncharacteristically uncertain in her body language, *"I just... I wanted to say thank you."*

He raised an eyebrow, as if surprised, *"You don't need to thank me. Anyone would've done the same."*

Aagya shook her head, *"No. Not everyone would've stopped for a stranger bleeding by the road. Not everyone would've carried him here. You didn't just save a member of my crew today... you saved someone I care about deeply."*

Devraj's jaw tightened, only slightly. But he masked it with a soft smile, *"I'm just glad I was there. Fate has a funny way of placing us in the right place at the right time."*

Aagya studied him for a moment. The stillness in his eyes, the gentleness in his tone, and something inside her eased. She

exhaled with a faint smile, *"Thank you. Really. For being there when he needed someone. And... when I did too."*

Devraj stepped forward slightly, not close enough to intrude, but just enough to deepen the connection, *"You don't have to go through everything alone, Aagya. Even strong people deserve shoulders to lean on."*

A beat of silence. She gave a small, appreciative nod and walked past him, back into the studio unaware that behind her, Devraj's calm expression twisted into a satisfied smirk. Another brick in the wall had fallen. He was inside now.

.....

The days passed like sand slipping through fingers... gritty, relentless, and impossible to hold onto. Aagya... director, lead actress, visionary... barely slept. Her voice echoed across sets and sound rooms, each syllable carrying both command and exhaustion. Scene by scene, her masterpiece was taking shape. The edits were locking in. The battle montages were near perfect. The background scoring was underway. CGI polish was scheduled. The final kiss scene, though that would be the heart, it was the only thing left to shoot. And she wanted it to be... unforgettable.

While her team marveled at the progress, one man drifted farther and farther away from the celebration. Rudra. Officially, he hadn't been called to animation yet. Technically, he was on medical leave. But emotionally? He was drowning. Rudra hadn't meant to walk in that day. But something had dragged him to the set. He stood at the far end of the rooftop studio behind lighting rigs and scaffolds, where no one noticed the still-raw bruises beneath his hoodie, or the cut knuckles he'd tried to hide. From the shadows, he watched Aagya in her custom battle-suit, with her silver spear propped beside her and her director's headset tossed to a junior AD. She was calm. Focused. A goddess in steel

and silence. And across from her, clad in midnight robes was **Devraj** a.k.a. **Zameer**. Rudra's fingers curled into fists.

The call came from Geeta, *"Scene 41B. Take one. Action!"*

Devraj spoke as Samargeet, *"Even after everything... I'd still choose you. In every lifetime. In every war."*

Aagya replied as Ayira, the Warrior Princess, *"Then kiss me like this is the last sunrise we'll ever see."*

And they kissed. Scripted. Lit beautifully. Perfect. And to Rudra... destroying. His throat tightened. His ribs screamed. His heart? It didn't break, it ruptured. He turned away and fled before anyone could see the way his jaw clenched. Before they could see his soul collapse. He didn't remember walking. Only the cold doorknob. And then, click. He locked himself inside one of the unused VFX prop storage rooms on the third floor. A forgotten corner of the studio. Low ceiling. Dust-covered shelves stacked with dismantled helmets, rubber swords, armor pieces, broken matte boards, dried blood capsules. There were no windows. Only a rusting tube light above, flickering with a faint electric hum. Like it too was on the verge of breaking. And there, in the center of the room, Rudra collapsed to his knees. The air was heavy with the scent of old latex and stale paint. But all he could smell... was her perfume from that morning, when she had brushed past him without noticing.

He clutched his chest. The pain wasn't metaphorical. It was physical. Tangible. A shattering so deep it echoed through his bones. And then, he screamed. A guttural, strangled noise that scraped his throat like barbed wire. No words. No names. Just pain. He grabbed the nearest prop, a shattered shield, and flung it into the corner. He punched the rusting cabinet. Once. Twice. Again. Blood burst from his knuckles, streaked down onto the floor. A shard of broken plastic embedded into his palm. He didn't feel it. The pain in his hands was nothing compared to what

he felt inside. Because all he felt... was loss. Not of her lips. But of the idea... that he was ever worthy of them. He slid down the wall, forehead to knees. He held his chest as if trying to rip something out. Tears streamed down his face. Heavy. Involuntary. Endless. And only one image replayed in his mind. Her lips on someone else's. His love. His reason. His war. Being rewritten without him. Every sob carried her memories. He cried so much that it almost choked him. It killed him. Because now he knew what it felt like to love someone so much, you wanted them even when you knew you shouldn't.

Rudra didn't vanish. But he became something less than human. A shadow that moved. A name on a file. A nod in the hallway. No jokes. No sketches. No sarcasm. Just short answers and empty eyes. Aagya noticed. How could she not? He hadn't looked at her once since that day. Not when she crossed him in the corridor. Not even when she handed him his revised storyboard notes. So, one evening after a late team briefing, she followed him down the back corridor.

"Rudra!", she called him.

He froze. But didn't turn. She walked closer, *"You've been avoiding me."*

He turned slightly. Eyes fixed on the floor.

Rudra replied, *"I've just been resting. Doctor's orders."*

Aagya added angrily, *"You haven't made eye contact in two days."*

He still didn't look at her. She stepped closer, voice sharper now, *"You don't talk. You don't laugh. You don't even sketch anymore. What happened to you?"*

He looked up then, just for a second. And she saw it. The storm. The heartbreak. The screaming silence. He finally spoke, *"If I look at you, Aagya... I might fall apart."*

She blinked. A beat passed, *"Why?"*

He gave a quiet, bitter chuckle, *"Because I saw you kiss him. And it felt like something inside me just... died."*

She froze. Her heart dropped.

Aagya replied gently, *"Rudra... it was just a scene."*

Rudra replied in a cracking voice, *"To you. But to me? It felt like the only thing I've ever cared about... just slipped away. And I couldn't stop it."*

She took a step closer, eyes soft, *"Then why didn't you say something?"*

Rudra swallowed hard, *"Because I'm not supposed to feel this. I'm not the hero of your story, Aagya. I'm just the guy who fixes broken frames in the dark. And that... was your spotlight."*

He looked away again.

"Rudra... your hand...?", Aagya called him, noticing his wounded hands.

He looked down. Realized his bandaged knuckles were showing. He tucked them behind his back, *"It's nothing. Just me... being stupid."*

She reached out, but he took a step back breathing unevenly, *"I don't blame you. This was always a one-sided war."*

And then, he turned away.

"Rudra – ", she called him again.

Rudra replied over his shoulder in a trembling voice, *"I've never had anything worth losing. Until you."*

And he disappeared into the corridor shadows, leaving her standing there shattered in a way she couldn't name.

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The final day of shooting arrived like a sunset you know is coming... beautiful, inevitable and heavy with everything they never said out loud. The last scene wrapped at twilight. Cheers erupted. Champagne popped. Camera assistants posed for BTS shots, some even crying from the weight of what they'd built. Aagya stood just a little apart from them all. Her maroon velvet wrap dress clung to her softly, elegant and restrained, the kind of elegance that doesn't shout. Her hair was tied up, exposing the graceful line of her neck and the single ruby she always wore a signature, a scarlet promise. She smiled. But faintly. Her eyes weren't celebrating. They were scanning. Searching for someone. Who else would they search for but him? He hadn't spoken much these past few days. No sarcastic digs during scene blocking. No sketches slid under her coffee mug. Not even a tired smirk passed during editing calls. Only silence. He had become a ghost in a studio full of fireworks. But now just as a junior assistant handed her a bouquet of white lilies and orchids, he appeared. From the shadows, like always. Dressed in black jeans and a loose white shirt... sleeves rolled up, faint charcoal stains near the elbows. He looked like he hadn't slept. But his eyes... they burned. Like he was memorizing her one last time.

"You did it.", he said.

Aagya replied softly, eyes not leaving his, *"We did it."*

A silence settled between them. Once it felt like a warm shawl. Now, it stung like a cold wind.

Rudra nodded slightly, *"Congratulations, Aagya."*

She smiled, soft but sad, *"You're leaving again... aren't you?"*

He didn't answer immediately. Just lowered his gaze, *"Yeah. Got work to finish."*

Aagya replied quietly, *"You always do."*

That one sentence held too much. He didn't respond. Instead, he reached into his worn canvas sling bag. Pulled out a small, rolled-up scroll tied with black thread. He placed it gently in her hand, *"Open it after the screening."*

She blinked, *"What is – ?"*

But before she could finish, he was already stepping back.

"Take care, Aagya.", he said and then he walked away. Not hurried. Not slow. Just... with the kind of finality that doesn't echo in footsteps, but behind the ribs. She didn't move. Didn't call out. Just watched. The scroll clutched in one hand, her fingernails digging crescents into her palm. He didn't look back. Not once. He was hiding his tears.

The confetti from the wrap party had barely settled. But by morning, the real war had begun. Aagya stepped into Edit Suite A of Avaan Studios like a soldier walking into her command post. No glam. No facade. Just an oversized grey sweatshirt, loose black joggers, a messy bun, and fire in her eyes. In one hand, a steaming mug of cinnamon chai. In the other, a black hard drive, clenched like a dagger.

Shyam looked up from his dual-screen setup half-smiling, *"You didn't even take a day off?"*

Aagya replied, dropping into the seat, *"I'll rest when the credits roll at the festival."*

Seeta slid a fresh mug toward her, *"You'll burn out before that if you don't pace yourself."*

Aagya's eyes never left the screen, and she replied, taking a sip, *"Let me burn. But let this film rise."*

She plugged in the hard drive. The monitors lit up with hundreds of clips, raw footage timelines and uncut moments waiting to become memory. And with that... she got to work. The suite

stayed lit long after the rest of Avaan Studios went dark like a lighthouse but for warriors, not sailors. No small talk. No social media. No vanity. Just the rhythmic clack of keystrokes. The slicing of timelines. The syncing of emotion with the story. Hours blurred into days. Shyam and Seeta took turns napping on the studio couch. Aagya never left her chair, except for caffeine refills and bathroom runs. She looped the same expression twenty times if the beat felt one frame off. She chopped flashbacks like surgical strikes. She stitched pain into a montage. Everyone noticed it. That missing sketch on her coffee lid. The untouched notebook on the corner shelf, the one Rudra used to doodle in. That pause... every time the studio doors creaked. That twitch of her hand toward her phone, only to curl back into a fist.

One evening Seeta asked her, *"Do you want to take a break? Just breathe a little?"*

Aagya replied with eyes on screen, still dragging clips, *"I can't slow down."*

Shyam murmured from behind, *"Classic Aagya."*

She didn't smile. Didn't speak. She didn't have to. Because silence had become its own kind of conversation. By the third day, the final base visual cut was ready. VFX was done. Score done. But no animation yet. Just the story. Brutal. Clean. Honest. She sat back, folded her arms, and watched the full timeline play. Her heart thudded with every line. With every frame, her eyes scanned the shadows. Waiting for the ghost. When the end credits faded to black, she whispered to herself, more prayer than sentence, *"Your turn now, ghost boy."*

She exported the project. Encrypted the build. And labeled the hard drive in bold, handwritten text:

"ANIMATION LAYER – RUDRA ONLY"

Then she picked up her phone. And sent one line.

"It's ready. Burn the world into it now."

She stared at the screen after hitting the send. No reply. No ellipsis. No read receipt. But she didn't need one. Because Rudra never replied with words. He replied with pixels. And somehow... Aagya had always understood his language.

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The animation suite of Avaan Studios wasn't just a workspace. It was a cathedral of creation where pixels turned to poetry, and light bent like brushstrokes. Double glass doors slid open with a whisper, revealing a wide corridor lined with digital art frames looping concept reels, fanart from all over the world, and time-lapse captures of past projects that had shaken the industry.

Inside, the main bay opened like a futuristic sanctum. Vaulted ceilings loomed high above, crisscrossed with ambient light panels that changed tone with the hour... sunrise gold in the morning, moonlit blue by night. The floor was a rich blend of ash-black tiles and maplewood textures, temperature-controlled for both equipment and artist comfort. Every desk was custom-made, with ergonomic consoles, dual 8K curved monitors, and Wacom Cintiq Pro tablets embedded flush into the surfaces. The soundproof walls had satin-black acoustic paneling, but also minimalist murals including hand-drawn warrior glyphs and ancient mythology blended with cyberpunk elements.

One side of the room held a motion-capture stage, fitted with gravity suspension rigs and tracking nodes. The other had a projection dome where 360-degree pre-vis sequences could be viewed in an immersive surround. Along the back wall stood an artist's lounge which consisted of velvet couches in burgundy and cream, a built-in espresso bar, high-protein snack dispensers, and a wall-sized digital storyboard. A single glass partition overlooked the bay from a higher mezzanine, i.e., Aagya's viewing deck. No one stepped there unless invited. From there,

she watched. And in the middle of it all, Rudra sat. In his favorite spot, by the east window, where natural light hit just right in the day... and the stars reflected off the matte black tabletop by night.

Around him: Sketches layered like war maps.

Above him: Glowing data dashboards.

In front of him: Her story waiting to be reborn in fire.

Rudra sat alone. Hunched. Unshaved. Unspoken. His eyes were heavy. Not just from lack of sleep, but from something newer. Something sadder. A kind of heartbreak that doesn't cry out, it just settles into your bones. The door creaked. He didn't turn. He didn't have to. He knew it was her. Aagya entered quietly dressed in all black. No makeup. No smile. Just herself. In her hand, was a matte black hard disk.

She stepped close and placed it beside his keyboard, *"It's ready. Burn the world into it now."*

Rudra stared at the drive. Then at the frozen screen. Then nothing.

Aagya watched him, *"You look like you haven't left this room in days."*

Rudra murmured, *"Maybe the world outside didn't have anything worth going back to."*

That line hit her somewhere deeper than she expected. She walked around, leaning lightly on the edge of his desk, *"Did something happen?"*

He exhaled sharply through his nose, *"Nothing new. Just... watched a scene I wish I hadn't."*

She knew what he meant. That kiss. That cursed, scripted kiss. But she didn't apologize. It was part of the story. Part of her job. Still... she spoke, *"You know it was scripted."*

Rudra replied sharply, *"Yeah. So is pain in most stories. Doesn't make it feel less real."*

A flicker of something shifted in her expression, *"You think I enjoyed that scene?"*

He finally looked at her. Just a glance, *"I think... I forgot it was a film for a second. And I think that mistake cost me more than I expected."*

Silence again. The kind that stretches across wounds. He turned back to the screen, *"But don't worry. The animation won't carry my heartbreak. Just your fire."*

She leaned in, her voice gentler now. *"Don't lie. Your fire's always full of ghosts."*

He didn't deny it and replied, *"Maybe. But this time... I'll draw like she doesn't need saving. Just... honoring."*

Aagya's throat tightened. She nodded. Once. Then, turned to leave. At the door, she hesitated just a moment longer, *"Three days. That's all we have."*

Rudra replied without looking, *"That's all I need."*

She lingered. She wanted to say something more. But didn't. Just whispered, *"Don't disappear on me again."*

Rudra replied a beat later, *"Not until it's done. Afterall... I never back away from my promises."*

She walked out. He stared at the closed door. Then, plugged in the drive and began. Outside, Mumbai's chaos had dimmed to a hush. But inside, Rudra's studio had turned into a temple of obsession. Cold monitors. Coffee cups stacked like ruins. Sketches scattered like soldiers who never made it home. The stylus hovered over the screen like a scalpel. He pressed play. And there she was. Not a director. Not a mogul. Just her. Aagya. He stared. And then, he began. Frame by frame. Layer by layer.

Like a man carving grief into myth. When she knelt by her brother's body, he animated invisible flames rising from her ribs. When she stood alone in the palace ruins, he painted shadows that reached for her ankles like guilt. He stopped eating. Stopped sleeping. His phone? Off. His HealthifyMe app? Abandoned. His pain? Fully awake.

By night two, he hadn't changed his clothes. His jaw was locked. His wrist was burned. But he didn't stop. Because every line he traced was a confession. And then came the scene. The one he avoided. The stable kiss. He clicked play. Torchlight flickered. Wind stirred hay in slow waves. And her dress swayed. Then their lips met. Not his. Never his. He stood. Quietly. And walked to the washroom and looked in the mirror. What stared back... wasn't him. Then, he slammed his fist into the glass. It cracked. Split. Shattered. Blood slid like surrendering down his knuckles. But he didn't flinch. Because that pain? That was easy. It was her silence that he couldn't survive.

Back at the desk, he wrapped his bleeding hand in duct tape. Wiped tears off the monitor with his sleeve and spoke to her image, *"If this is the only way I get to touch you again... then I'll bleed into every fucking frame."*

And he did. By the afternoon of Day 3, the last shot was done. Her character stood on the palace terrace... alone, sword in hand. Wind in her hair. Smoke in the sky. But behind her, was a golden shimmer. Faint. Silent. Like a guardian flame. He named the layer just that:

"Guardian Flame".

He didn't explain it. Didn't need to. He saved. Exported. And when the screen went black, Rudra just sat there. Hand bleeding. Eyes burning. Whispering into nothing, *"If this is goodbye... let it be beautiful."*

He closed his eyes. And let the silence answer.

26. The Infiltration

Rudra stood outside the Avaan estate which loomed ahead like a sleeping titan under the velvet sky. Dressed in his signature muted black hoodie layered under a rugged olive jacket, jeans slightly torn at the knees, and a hard drive tucked safely in his jeans pocket. His palms were bandaged from a past he didn't want to talk about and his eyes bore shadows that hadn't seen rest in days. Two guards at the gate stepped forward, brows furrowing at the unexpected visitor.

"What? What do you want?", asked one guard sternly in Marathi.

Rudra replied in a calm and measured tone, *"Rudra Suvigya. I'm here to meet Aagya Avaan."*

Another guard asked, looking at the clipboard, *"She didn't mention any visitors tonight."*

Rudra replied softly, *"She'll want to see me."*

There was no arrogance in his voice, just something quiet... something certain. The guards exchanged looks. One tapped into his comm device. Moments later, the gate buzzed open. Not fully, just a foot, until a familiar voice sliced through the night like a violin string. There she stood, arms crossed, *"I figured it'd be you."*

She stepped into view barefoot, in a long black kaftan, hair tied up into a loose knot, and a faint sheen of sweat on her brow. It was obvious that she had been overthinking about her project. But her eyes? Alert, curious, and slightly relieved.

Rudra took a breath. Then a step forward, *"I didn't come empty-handed."*

He held up the hard drive.

Aagya raised a brow, *"This is the miracle piece?"*

Rudra replied with a smirk, *"Something like that."*

She nodded once and turned, *"Come in. Mom and Dad are out for work. But don't touch the statues. Some of them are older than both of us combined. No one can know you were here."*

He saluted her, which made her laugh. Then he followed her through the main gate. As they walked towards the mansion, Rudra noticed details most would miss — infrared motion sensors in the garden, subtle glints under the hedges that hinted at hidden cameras, even the polished white lion statues at the entrance had miniature eye-lenses embedded in their pupils. She wasn't just rich. She was fortified.

The doors of the estate opened with a hush, revealing a marble foyer that stretched toward a chandelier made of crystal lotus petals. Every wall was either adorned with modern digital panels or ancient art pieces framed in glass. The whole house was an impossible harmony of tradition and technology. Aagya led him into the central living lounge where soft jazz played from invisible speakers and the lighting was dimmed to a dusk-orange.

"My grandfather built this house after the Partition. Every brick was designed with defiance.", she said.

Rudra replied, observing it all, *"It doesn't feel like a home. It feels like a kingdom."*

She looked at him, something unreadable passing her face, *"That's because I was never raised to find comfort. Just control."*

They walked further through her library, her indoor garden, a moonlit patio with an Italian fountain, and finally into her personal lounge. Here, a large screen displayed frames from the film. Her edit setup remained open scattered with coffee cups,

scribbled notes and headphones tangled near her phone. Aagya poured two glasses of cold water and handed one to him. Rudra didn't sit. He just looked around, absorbing the space. Then he met her eyes again, *"This is your kingdom. But you look tired of ruling it."*

Aagya froze, just a beat. Then she replied, half-joking, *"Then burn it down, Rudra. Replace it with a better one."*

She held out the drive and added, *"Let's burn the world now?"*

He took it slowly. Their fingers brushed again with a flicker of something. A breath passed between them. And then she whispered, *"Come with me, Rudra. I want to show you something."*

Rudra didn't argue. He just followed her deeper into the mansion. Deeper into her world. Deeper into what neither of them could name. Their eyes locked. And for a second, the air shifted. Something passed between them. Not tension. Not attraction. Something older. Recognition. Then Aagya stood and the elevator doors opened into a private upper wing of the mansion. The walls here were bare with a stark contrast from the curated perfection of the rest of the house. No art. No marble. Just pale cement, clean, and undecorated.

"My parents are out for work today so you don't have to worry about being banished.", she teased him as they walked. He laughed.

Aagya led him into a room that looked nothing like royalty. It was dimly lit and quiet. A simple rug. A floor mattress with grey sheets. One large window overlooking the city skyline. The only light came from a tiny lamp in the corner and the moon through gauze curtains. She stepped inside and leaned against the wall, arms crossed and spine tensed, *"This is the only room I've never let the press into. No architectural digest. No interviews. Nothing."*

Rudra stayed at the doorway, watching her like she was a fragile creature pretending to be steel.

Aagya spoke half-smiling, *"Funny, isn't it? I have entire wings named after me... but I sleep here."*

Rudra asked quietly, *"Because it feels real?"*

She looked away. Her voice dropped, *"Because it's the only place I don't have to act."*

Silence wrapped around them for a moment. Then, she exhaled like she was laying down a weapon no one had asked her to carry, *"I'm scared, Rudra."*

He blinked. Didn't move. Just... waited. Aagya continued looking out of the window, *"The festival's in less than 24 hours. This film... it's everything. If it doesn't work... if it doesn't mean something –"*

Her voice cracked. She paused. Looked down at her hands like they weren't hers, *"People think I'm fearless. Untouchable. That I have this perfect grip on everything. But they don't know... they don't know how loud my mind gets when I'm alone."*

She sat down, knees drawn to her chest like a child trying not to break. Rudra finally stepped in. He didn't speak right away. He knelt in front of her, resting his arms on his knees, meeting her eye, *"You made something that changed people before it even released. You bled yourself into every frame. That's not fear. That's fire."*

She smiled, barely, *"You always say the right thing at the wrong time."*

Rudra replied, *"I say it when you need to hear it."*

She didn't respond. Just looked at him. Like maybe, for once, she didn't have to pretend she didn't care, *"Come. Let me show you the rest of the estate. You might as well see the empire you just helped build."*

She led him through a corridor of arched glass windows, past a koi pond lit by underwater LEDs, past her private library filled with old scripts, storyboard frames, and collector's editions. He

followed silently, soaking it all in, memorizing everything. Because Rudra wasn't here just for delivery. He was here to observe. To investigate. And now that the gates were open, he had only one goal left tonight... find whatever the hell Zameer was hiding in this fortress. And not get caught.

Aagya led him into a room lined up with memories. Film posters. Awards. Framed letters. Childhood photos. A glass case with a red ruby necklace, the one from her film. She walked slowly, stopping near a tall French window that overlooked the city, *"Sometimes I come here to remind myself... of how far I've come."*

Rudra watched her quietly. Then she turned, *"I'm really scared, Rudra. Tomorrow... that screening... it's everything I've worked for. What if they don't get it? What if it all falls apart?"*

There was no sarcasm tonight. No fire. Just honesty. And fragility. Rudra took a step closer, *"They will get it. Because it came from the truth. And because... you bled for it."*

She didn't reply. Just looked at him. Eyes glistening, breathing shallow. Then, she laughed bitterly, *"God. I haven't cried in front of someone in years. What the hell are you doing to me?"*

Rudra replied with a soft smirk, *"Maybe just... sketching the cracks."*

She let herself breathe for a moment.

Rudra suddenly asked, *"Can I use your washroom?"*

Aagya smiled and led him through a quieter hallway in the west wing of the mansion. The lighting was warmer here with diffused gold sconces along ivory walls. Oil paintings lined up in the corridor. Every step echoed softly on the Italian marble, pristine enough to mirror. Then she pointed, *"Third door to the left. The guest washroom."*

Rudra replied jokingly, *"Let me guess. Still bigger than my apartment?"*

Aagya replied, half-smiling, but distant, *"Probably."*

She didn't wait for a comeback. Just kept walking down the hall toward her study, his feet clicking like soft punctuation marks. Rudra paused, took a slow breath and walked toward the door she pointed out. Only he didn't enter. Instead, he turned and quietly moved toward the hallway that curved around the inner courtyard. The security here was minimal. The guards were stationed at the gate, and the estate's interior was quiet, resting in late-evening calm. Most of the staff had left for the night. Rudra walked past a large decorative archway and reached a split where one path led to the east-facing balcony and the other down a narrower corridor marked only with a small golden plaque:

"Private Wing — Restricted Access"

He hesitated. Then, slipped into the shadows and took the second route. The air changed instantly. Colder. No music here. No ambient hum. Just the faint mechanical whirr of centralized AC and the distant rustle of curtains. He walked slowly, carefully, his boots silent on the floor. Each door he passed was unmarked, but reinforced. Subtle keypads hidden beneath carved panels. Clearly this part of the house wasn't for guests. He finally reached a room left slightly ajar. A thin sliver of warm light leaked out. He glanced both ways. Then nudged the door open, just enough to peer in. What he saw made his stomach twist. It was a **personal archive room** which was neither digital, nor modern... but old-school. It consisted of wooden cabinets, files, and microfilm cartridges. Two walls lined with temperature-controlled drawers, and a large safe locked into the marble floor. On the center table, scattered across a green velvet cloth, were documents. Some stamped, some printed with high-grade government paper. But one in particular caught his eye. A folded file with the stamp:

"CONFIDENTIAL — India / West Asia — Cultural Export Grant Oversight."

And beneath it: **Avaan Studios** listed under *Recipients for Artistic Development Funds*. But, the account number beside it? It was identical to the ghost account from the Black Spiral loop. He didn't touch anything. Just took a photo from his inside jacket cam silently embedded near the button. Another page caught his eye. A receipt. Small, unassuming. Signed by someone named:

"Z.H. Sultaan – Beirut Chapter"

His blood chilled. Zameer had an alias. And he had been inside this house. Rudra's fingers itched to dig deeper. To open the drawers. The safe. But a sudden shuffle from the corridor froze him in place. Voices. Two of them. Female. One clearly a maid.

"I thought I saw the light on in the archive room. Did Ma'am use it today?", said the maid.

Another voice came, *"No. She hasn't come here since Diwali. Maybe security forgot to turn it off."*

Footsteps started approaching. Rudra backed up. Heart in throat. He reached for the velvet curtain beside the bookshelf, pulled it slightly, and slipped behind it. It didn't fully cover him, but just enough shadow. He slowed his breathing. The door creaked open. A maid stepped in. Mid-30s. Polished bun. Holding a feather duster. She looked around and saw the light. Frowned. Then, turned it off. She didn't enter deeper. Didn't check behind the curtains.

The maid muttered while going back, *"Rich people and their memory. Forget the lights, forget the staff."*

She exited. The door clicked shut. Rudra exhaled, finally. Waited a full 30 seconds. Then stepped out, heart still hammering. He took one final sweep of the table. Locked every image into memory. Adjusted the placement of a paper he had nudged with his elbow. Then left the room as it was. No trace. As he retraced his steps down the corridor, he adjusted his jacket, his breath

finally leveling. At the curve of the hallway, he took a detour, this time toward the actual guest washroom. He washed his face. Splashed cold water over himself. Looked in the mirror. His reflection stared back. It was gaunt, shadow-eyed, but focused.

"He's here. Hiding in plain sight.", he spoke to himself.

He dried his hands, composed his expression and walked calmly toward the main lounge where Aagya waited with a glass of wine in hand, scrolling through her iPad. She looked up as he approached, *"Got lost in there?"*

Rudra replied, *"I had to find towels. Your taste is dramatic. Even your handwash looks like a museum piece."*

She smirked faintly. Then passed him the wine glass, *"Try it. Oldest in the cellar. We don't open it for guests."*

He took it. Sipped. And never once let his mask slip. Aagya then took him to her personal screening room. It was a cavernous black-and-chrome theatre tucked into the east wing of her estate. The air was cool, almost sterile, and carried the faint scent of sandalwood and polish. Above, the ceiling mimicked a constellation. It had star-like LEDs twinkling in the silence. The massive curved screen rested dormant, waiting. Rudra stood at the threshold with the final hard drive in hand. He had completed everything. Frame by frame. Pixel by pixel. His blood, time, and soul had gone into this. Now, it was up to her.

Aagya turned from the console when he entered. Her eyes held that mix of exhaustion and fire, the kind only creatives knew after pushing themselves past the brink and asked, *"Shall we?"*

Rudra held out the drive. It was a simple matte-black device with a red tag labeled:

"Final Render."

Rudra bowed, *"As the queen wishes."*

She grinningly laughed and then walked toward him, took it gently, almost reverently and stared at it for a second, as if it weighed more than its size suggested. Then she looked up. There was silence. Heavy. Unsaid. Then, just above a whisper, she said, *"Let's do it."*

The words echoed, not like an order, but like a vow. A ceremony. The final spark before ignition. Rudra gave the smallest nod. But his eyes were tired. Not from work, but from holding back everything he'd buried inside since that day. Since that scene. Since the kiss. Aagya noticed. Of course she did. But she didn't say anything. Not yet. She turned, inserted the drive into the screening console, and booted up the final cut. Rudra moved to the recliner in the back row, sat, and leaned forward elbows on his knees and hands clasped together tightly, watching her every movement.

Aagya stood alone near the screen, remote in one hand, breathing steadily as she spoke. *"If there's even one frame out of sync, I'll spot it."*

Rudra replied with utmost confidence, *"There won't be."*

Aagya glanced back, *"You sure?"*

He nodded once. Then, a pause. His voice barely above a whisper, *"Would've torn it all down and started again... if it wasn't."*

She held his gaze for a beat longer than necessary. Then, turned back to the screen. The lights dimmed. The film began to play. And Rudra... just watched her. Not the film. Not the colors. Not the edits. Just her. And though neither of them said anything more. Something passed between them in that silence. Something quiet. Unspoken. Something unfinished. The screening room dimmed into shadow and the only light now coming from the screen, where Aagya's film bloomed to life. Scene by scene, layer by layer, her story... their story... unfolded.

The warrior princess marched through ash and smoke. Her eyes were fierce yet glassy. Her pain was dignified but bleeding beneath the surface. The camera caught it all. And Rudra's animation? It gave her soul. Sparks trailed her footsteps. Dust bloomed like a memory. Shadows moved like regrets. Each frame had an echo, a whisper of something deeper. Aagya sat in the front row, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, jaw clenched not with dissatisfaction, but restraint. Emotion. The palace corridor scene appeared. The warrior walked alone, limping. Behind her, Rudra had animated a faint flame, following quietly in the dark. He hadn't told her. He had added it in secret. It wasn't in the storyboard. But it was right.

She paused the film. Turned around. Her eyes found him in the dark lit faintly by the screen's glow and asked, *"What's the flame?"*

Rudra didn't flinch and replied, *"She thinks she's alone. She's not."*

Aagya's throat tightened, but she turned back without a word. The next scene: the stables. The kiss. Rudra looked away. His jaw clenched. His fists curled. Aagya watched and for the first time, saw the subtle texture he had added in that moment. He added golden dust floating in the air and glowing faintly. Like time had paused. Like the universe had hushed to watch her character's heart finally open. The artistry stunned her. But she could feel his discomfort, even from across the room. When the scene ended, she muted the screen. Silence. Then carefully she spoke, *"That scene. You rendered it... perfectly."*

Rudra replied, still not looking at her, *"It deserved to be."*

She turned in her seat again, eyes searching his face in the dim light. And something clicked. His silence... wasn't about tiredness. It wasn't professional. It was personal. Her breath hitched, *"You okay?"*

Rudra didn't respond for a moment. Then he spoke, *"Have you ever seen something so beautiful that it broke you?"*

She didn't answer. She couldn't. Because at that moment, she felt the weight he'd been carrying all this time. Every sketch. Every late-night render. Every second he spent animating her with the care of a man tracing the outline of something sacred. Aagya's voice was low now. Barely audible, *"Why didn't you ever tell me?"*

Rudra looked up finally, his eyes rimmed with sleepless red, *"Because I wasn't sure... if what I felt belonged to me... or to the version of you I brought to life on screen."*

Silence. Crushing, warm, fragile silence. Aagya stood. Took the remote. And without another word, she finished the screening. The credits rolled out. Rudra's name as Animation Director appeared on screen in sharp serif gold. And below it, in smaller text, a line no one else had approved:

"For the girl who made silence feel like a story worth telling."

Aagya turned slowly, her hands trembling now, *"That line..."*

Rudra shrugged faintly, *"Just wanted to leave something behind."*

Aagya replied, *"And what if I don't want you to?"*

He blinked. Then, her phone buzzed. She looked down.

A message from Megha:

"Hey. Need the final drive exported and delivered to the fest servers before 9 a.m. sharp. I hope Rudra is done by now. Everyone's finally home after weeks and they all are resting. Hope you are too."

Aagya exhaled, *"They all went home. First time in weeks. Said they just want to sleep... dream again."*

She looked at the drive in her hand, then at him, *"But I couldn't rest until I gave this to you."*

He blinked, *"You trust me with this?"*

Aagya nodded, *"I trust you with the film. With the flame behind it. With the part of me that couldn't say everything... but always hoped you'd draw it anyway."*

His throat tightened. He looked away, *"And did I?"*

Aagya replied with pride, *"You didn't just draw it. You burned it into life."*

She placed the drive gently on his desk. She looked at it. Then at Rudra. She took a tentative step forward and placed her hand gently over his bandaged one, *"You did it."*

He didn't look at her. Just gave the smallest nod, *"We did."*

Aagya smiled and then asked, *"You okay?"*

He looked up, slowly, *"Yeah. Just didn't think watching it would feel like losing something."*

She didn't expect that answer. She didn't know what to say to it. She replied softly, *"You didn't lose anything, Rudra. You gave."*

He half-smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes, *"Sometimes giving feels more like bleeding."*

Aagya smiled, *"You already did give me everything. Now let me carry it to the world."*

He nodded. Eyes burning. Voice barely there, *"Just... don't forget who burned it into life."*

Aagya replied, *"I can't. Not even if I wanted to."*

The film had ended ten minutes ago. But neither of them had moved. The projector screen still glowed faintly, casting flickering remnants of the final scene across Aagya's drawing room walls. The warrior princess stood still in that last shot, sword lowered, crown fallen, but eyes full of fire. Silence wrapped the room like a velvet. Aagya sat curled up on one end

of the velvet couch with her knees tucked to her chest. Her face was half-lit by the screen's glow, but her eyes were still wet... not from weakness, but from release. She didn't speak. Rudra sat at the other end with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped and head lowered. He had nothing left to say. Because everything he'd ever felt had already been drawn and painted into every frame and breathed into every second of that film. She turned to him slowly. Her voice was soft. Almost afraid of breaking the spell.

Rudra finally stood up. Slid his hoodie back on. Aagya rose too. Followed him quietly to the main door. The mansion felt larger than ever. Each footstep echoed like a clock ticking toward separation. At the door, Rudra paused. Turned to her one last time, *"If anything happens on the day of screening... stay near the exit row. Third aisle from the back."*

Aagya frowned, *"Why?"*

He didn't answer directly. Just offered a small, tired smile... the kind you give when you're carrying too much and saying too little, *"Because I'll be watching from there. Just in case."*

Aagya stared at him, something shifting behind her eyes. Fear? Hope? She opened her mouth, but no words came. So, she did what she could do. She reached up and fixed the crease on his hoodie. Fingers lingering for a second longer than needed, *"Don't disappear again. Not without saying something."*

Rudra looked at her, really looked, like he was memorizing every detail of her face. Then simply whispered, *"I already said everything, Aagya. Just not out loud."*

And with that he walked out into the night. No dramatic turns. No lingering footsteps. Just the sound of the wind. And the warrior queen, alone in her fortress, stood in the quiet after the

storm. Holding onto the only thing he left behind... not the film, but the silence between the frames.

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Rudra reached his apartment just after 9:30 PM. The city had quieted. Even Mumbai had a curfewed rhythm in those dead hours. But inside his room, everything was alive. His mind roared like a storm. His hands, though bandaged and sore, moved fast transferring screenshots, enlarging financial data, and tracing account routes. He plugged in the drive from his spy cam... not for work, not yet... but just to be sure. No malware. No spyware. Clean. She was clean. Or maybe... kept clean. Because the trail he found in her house wasn't fake. It was carefully hidden. Like a buried landmine. He sat cross-legged on his chair, surrounded by sticky notes, photographs, newspaper clippings, and those encrypted account codes from the Haqqani Trust with one word scribbled across all of them:

BLACK SPIRAL.

And that symbol again. A spiral inside a triangle. He remembered where he had seen it last. Not just in some government intelligence files, but that mission. The day everything changed. The day when Rudra almost lost everything. Rudra stared at the spiral symbol now. Saw the pattern. Saw the path. Zameer hadn't left Avaan Studios. He had entered it. Somewhere, behind the masks, behind the polished PR smiles and high-value investments, he was inside. And if Aagya was anywhere near him, if she trusted him, she was in way more danger than she realized. He stood up slowly. Picked up the drive she gave him. And whispered like a prayer, *"I'll protect you, Aagya. But I'll end his story first."*

And with that, he turned to the glowing monitor and began to plan.

27. Scarlet Resolve

The next morning, Mumbai was still waking up. The sky was a muted gray, the kind that hides the sun behind a curtain of smog. A black SUV stopped in front of what looked like an abandoned warehouse in Navi Mumbai with broken windows, faded paint and an old **"Godown for Rent"** sign creaking in the wind. Rudra stepped out. His hoodie was dark, his knuckles were still bandaged, and there was a faint trace of dried blood on his wrist. The night was still on him... not just on his skin, but in his eyes. He approached the door. A hidden camera scanned him, there was a soft mechanical click and the heavy door swung open. Inside, the world changed. Bright white LED panels lit up a space that was alive with screens, satellite feeds, tactical maps, and scrolling code. The air was cool, sterile, buzzing with quiet urgency. At the far end, a briefing table glowed under a single light. Waiting for him was Lt. General Pratap Singh in his starched olive greens, Major General Ayaan Bakshi standing stiff beside him, and two intelligence analysts typing silently.

They turned as Rudra walked in.

"You've been off the grid, officer.", said Pratap Singh, arms folded and unimpressed.

Rudra replied in a calm and steady voice, *"Because I found him."*

The room stilled. Major Ayaan Bakshi stepped forward and asked in a tensed voice, *"Found whom?"*

Rudra's gaze was cold, unblinking, *"Zameer Haqqani. He's alive. And he's here. In Mumbai."*

It was as if someone had dropped a file on the floor... the silence was that loud.

Ayaan's jaw tightened, *"That's not a statement you make without proof."*

Rudra slung his backpack off his shoulder, unzipped it, and spilled its contents on the table. Photos. USB drives. Copies of wire transfers. Stills of CCTV footage. He began arranging them like a detective laying out evidence on a crime board and spoke methodically, *"Hidden accounts routed through the Haqqani Trust, shell companies disguised under arts & culture and fake grants... all funneled through one address."*

He paused and looked up, *"Avaan Studios."*

One of the analysts grabbed a paper, scanning quickly, *"These accounts were scrubbed. Triple-scrubbed."*

Rudra replied, *"Not clean enough."*

He tapped a specific document which was a highlighted transaction, *"₹50 crores. Transferred last month to Atharva Foundation. Which, as we've just discovered, doesn't exist. It's a dummy trust. And it's linked to the Black Spiral."*

The room darkened as Pratap Singh signaled to bring up the insignia on the main screen. It was a triangle with a spiral twisting into its center. Everyone stared at it.

"You're sure it's him?", asked Pratap Singh in a grim voice.

Rudra's jaw clenched, *"He kidnapped me a few days back and tried to torture me. He failed. He's pretending to be Devraj who's playing the love interest of the protagonist of Aagya's film. He's not just alive. He's closer than ever."*

A hush fell over the room, and everyone's heart skipped a beat at this revelation.

"But hiding in plain sight? Under government surveillance?", asked Ayaan Bakshi.

Rudra's lips curled in something that wasn't quite a smile, *"He's always been a performer. A fanatic for theatrics. You put him on a stage, he'll write the play. And we're all just actors."*

A heavy silence followed. Pratap Singh exhaled slowly, turning back to Rudra, *"Start from the top. Everything you saw. Everything he said."*

Rudra's expression hardened. His fingers curled against the table and his knuckles turned white, *"You're going to want to sit down for this, Sir."*

Rudra took a deep breath. And then, for the first time, he told them everything. starting from the day when Aagya's film's shooting started to his infiltration in the Avaan mansion last night and what he found in the archive room.

Pratap Singh stood up, *"Why didn't you alert us immediately about all this? About him?"*

Rudra spoke confidently, *"Sir you taught me the difference between bravery and stupidity. You also taught me when to back down from a fight when the enemy has an upper hand and wait for the right moment to land the final blow."*

The lights dimmed as the analysts began pulling up surveillance data.

"Fair enough captain. Tell me what do you need?", said Pratap Singh.

Rudra stepped forward. The air turned surgical, *"Two strike teams on silent standby. Snipers on the periphery of the festival. No movement... unless I signal."*

Ayaan asked suspiciously, *"You're gambling an entire event on a maybe?"*

Rudra replied firmly, *"I'm betting on a pattern. He won't strike during chaos. He'll strike during the stillness. Applause. Cameras rolling. That's his theatre."*

Pratap Singh stared at him and then gave a slow, grave nod, *"Copy that. You lead this. No room for failure."*

Rudra turned to go, but Pratap Singh stopped him, *"If he's really there... and if this is your second chance... don't just bring him in."*

Rudra paused.

"End it.", Pratap Singh added.

Rudra replied without turning, *"I plan to."*

He walked out. The steel doors slid shut behind him. Lights flickered back to war-map mode. The hunt had begun.

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The first golden light of the sun slid in through the tall arched windows of the Avaan mansion. The silence was sharp. Regal. Almost rehearsed. Inside her room, Aagya stood by the mirror, brushing her hair slowly lost in her own reflection. She was dressed in a plain white satin robe, her face bare. No warpaint today. Not yet. Her hands trembled a little as she picked up her phone. The screen showed a countdown notification:

"2 days to Destiny."

She swallowed hard. This was it. Years of proving. Bleeding. Leading. And yet, something inside her refused to celebrate. She got up, walked out of her room, and padded quietly down the marble hallway toward the prayer room at the far wing. It was a space she rarely visited. There, sitting in front of a golden idol of Lakshmi and Ganesha, were her parents. Her father, in an ivory silk kurta, looked up with unreadable eyes. Her mother barely glanced at her.

"I wanted your blessings. For today.", she said, folding hands behind her waist.

Her father exhaled with more fatigue than fondness, *"We'll see what the critics say after screening. That'll tell us if you deserve them."*

Her mother stayed silent, adjusting a diya wick instead of responding. Aagya's throat tightened. But she smiled, nodded once, and bent down to touch their feet. They didn't stop her. They just didn't move. As she rose and turned to leave, her phone buzzed.

[New Message: Rudra]

"Come with me to the temple near your mansion. You'll understand why later. And wear something traditional. Probably something red."

There was no emoji. No explanation. Just that one line. Aagya stared at it for a moment. She didn't question it. She didn't even hesitate. She went back to her room, opened the wardrobe... paused... then reached for a crimson-red anarkali with intricate gold embroidery. It was the one she hadn't worn in years. It belonged to her grandmother. As she changed and adjusted the sleeves, she caught her own reflection again. Soft eyes. Tensed jaw. But something new shimmered in her gaze today. Not hope. Not peace. Maybe... trust? She picked a simple jhumka set, skipped heels, put on a red bindi and kept her hair open. No makeup. Just real skin. Real nerves. She grabbed her phone and typed:

[To Rudra]

"I'm ready."

Rudra stood near the iron gates, dressed in a clean red kurta with rolled sleeves and a thin silver chain peeking from under the collar. He held no flowers, no offering plate... just a folded red dupatta in one hand. The iron gates of the Avaan Estate creaked

open slowly, and then she appeared. Aagya walked out in her deep crimson-red anarkali, the morning light catching every golden thread woven into its fabric. Her jhumkas swayed gently, her hair flowed with the air. No makeup. Just her raw, natural face, glowing with a softness Rudra had never seen before. Rudra was mid-step when he turned and saw her... And just froze. The breath hitched in his throat. His grip on the dupatta loosened. His boot slipped slightly against the gravel as he staggered, *"Shit – "*

He almost lost his balance but managed to grab the wall just in time, steadying himself with an awkward little jerk. Aagya saw it all. Her lips curled into a slow, devilish smirk. She walked up to him, arms behind her back, tilting her head like a cat who'd caught a canary, *"Did the Earth shift under your feet... or was that just me?"*

Rudra looked down, pretending to check his shoelaces, *"Loose gravel."*

Aagya raised a brow, *"Mhmm. Sure. Gravel. Red suits tend to have that effect, don't they?"*

He didn't respond. He just stepped closer and unfolded a red dupatta slowly he had brought with him. His fingers brushed the soft fabric like it was something sacred. Then, instead of handing it to her, he gently placed it on her head. For a second, time stopped. Aagya froze, her breath caught. No one had ever done that for her. Not in play, not in ritual and not even in love. This wasn't a casual gesture. It was a claim. A vow. Rudra adjusted the dupatta carefully, letting it fall over her shoulders covering her head as if she was his bride. And then he stepped back, just enough to see her face.

"Perfect.", he said, blushing at the sight of her divine beauty.

Aagya's eyes welled up before she could stop them. It was ridiculous. It was just a piece of cloth. And yet... she had never

felt this seen, this cherished and this loved. Her lips parted, but no words came. Rudra noticed her silence and, for the first time, softened his expression completely, *"Last night... you came into my dreams like this."*

That broke her trance. Aagya blinked rapidly, swallowing the lump in her throat, then smirked to hide her emotions and teased him, trying to lighten the moment, *"Oh? Dreaming of me already, Rudra? Should I be worried?"*

He didn't laugh. Just gave a small, crooked smile... the kind that said he wasn't joking, *"Maybe you should."*

The tension between them crackled and turned electric. Aagya quickly looked away, adjusting the dupatta over her head to compose herself, *"You say one more thing like that, and I might actually believe you have a heart."*

Rudra replied with a rare and slow smile, *"Don't. It ruins the reputation."*

She laughed. A real one. Not the corporate chuckle. Not the press conference smirk. This was different. He asked her to come along, and they walked together to Babulnath Temple which was about a 15-20 minutes' walk away from the Avaan Mansion. Then they walked together to the temple's gate. The temple stood like a stone hymn... quiet, ancient, and drenched in golden morning light. The steps that led to the sanctum were still cool from the night. A soft breeze carried the scent of sandalwood and marigold, while the rhythmic bells echoed like a heartbeat.

She stood still for a moment, looking up at the temple's intricate carvings which included the towering spire, the weathered idols, the flock of pigeons circling above as she spoke, *"I haven't been to a temple in years."*

Rudra glanced sideways at her but said nothing.

She added after a pause, *"There was a time I used to pray every day... when I was little. But when life kept getting worse, when no prayer was answered, when all I got in return was silence... I just stopped."*

Rudra didn't interrupt. She turned to him slowly, a bit vulnerable now, *"I don't think I ever stopped believing, Rudra. I just stopped hoping."*

He looked at her, really looked, and then smiled, not with pity, but with a kind of understanding that only comes from living the same ache, *"I know that feeling. I've been there. Maybe I still am."*

She looked surprised. Rudra looked up at the temple and smiled, *"I have a hate-love relationship with them. Even I don't believe the gods will solve things. Not anymore. But... I still come."*

"Why?", asked Aagya.

Rudra shrugged slightly, *"To talk. To breathe. To sit in silence that doesn't demand anything from me. Sometimes the answers don't come. But the storm quiets down. And that's enough."*

She went still beside him, *"Is this why you brought me here?"*

Rudra smiled faintly, *"No. I brought you here... because you deserve peace before your biggest day. And also, because I needed to see you in red, standing in sunlight, looking like an answered prayer."*

Aagya blinked. Her breath caught. He didn't press it. Instead, he led her by the hand toward the stairs. They removed their shoes, washed their hands in the cold water at the entrance, and stepped inside together. One by one, they bowed their heads at every shrine — **Lord Shiva, Goddess Parvati, Goddess Durga, Lord Ganesha, Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Lakshmi, Lord Hanuman, Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, etc.**

Rudra offered fresh **motichoor laddoos** and **kaju katli** at each one and even placed a tiny marigold garland at Maa Durga's feet. His hand lingered there for a moment. Aagya watched him, her heart

a strange tangle of emotions. When they stepped out, sunlight filtered through the leaves overhead and the city was still just waking up. Aagya touched her fingertips to her forehead, trying to hold on to the quiet she felt.

Rudra looked at her and then said softly, *"You know something? You remind me of her."*

Aagya asked, turning to him, *"Who?"*

He pointed back toward the statue of Maa Durga inside, *"You carry rage and compassion together. That kind of balance isn't easy. You lead without trying. You heal without showing the wounds. You fight like fire... and still forgive like water."*

Aagya smiled as she got a little overwhelmed, *"You make me sound divine."*

Rudra replied gently, eyes fixed on her, *"You are, Aagya. You just forgot. Let today remind you."*

She didn't respond immediately, but something in her posture softened. Her shoulders relaxed. Her jaw unclenched. And for the first time in days, the anxiety visibly lessened. They sat for a moment on the temple steps. Aagya leaned against the railing, breathing in the cool air, while Rudra pulled out the almost empty prasad box and handed her one of the last motichoor laddoos.

She blinked remembering he offered them at every shrine and asked playfully, *"Motichoor and kaju katli, huh? That's your secret?"*

Rudra smiled shyly, *"What secret?"*

Aagya grinned, *"The reason you're so sweet on some rare occasions."*

Rudra chuckled, then turned away slightly with the faintest blush creeping up his neck, *"Don't spread that. I have a reputation to ruin."*

Aagya laughed softly, *"Too late. The sweetness is out."*

They both sat there a while, the prasad box between them, the city below, and a quiet understanding bloomed in the silence. And for the first time in weeks, they weren't actors. Or soldiers. Or broken children trying to prove their worth. They were just... Rudra and Aagya. And in that simplicity, there was peace.

After a while they left the temple and walked side by side along the quiet, tree-lined lanes of Malabar Hill. The streets were freshly washed with sunlight, and the sound of birds filtered through the morning calm. Aagya's red suit flowed with the breeze, and Rudra kept stealing glances at her... not the kind that yearned, but the kind that admired, that thanked the universe for letting him be near her this morning.

Aagya teased him while walking, *"You keep looking at me like I'm a painting you're trying to memorize."*

Rudra half-smiled and then held both of her arms shifting her away from the point connecting the footpath and the road and spoke, *"No painting ever made me trip on the footpath though."*

This protective gesture from him melted her heart completely. For the first time in her life, she was able to feel in touch with her feminine side as her brain always turned off whenever she was around him. She never felt so safe and seen with anyone since Agasthya.

"What are you doing to me Rudra?", she spoke in her mind smiling at him as if he was the only thing that mattered to her.

As they walked, the world around them buzzed softly with the waking city. There were milk vans rolling by, temple bells fading in the background and sparrows flitting through the peepal trees above. But for Rudra and Aagya, the path uphill toward her mansion felt distant from all of it. Like they were in their own quiet dimension... stitched together by silence, subtle glances, and the echo of what they weren't saying. Rudra kept walking just a

little behind her, hands in his kurta pockets, his hair swaying slightly in the breeze. Aagya walked beside him, brushing lightly with her every step, the sunlight weaving between her hair like strands of gold.

At one point, Rudra looked up, really looked at her, and his foot caught the edge of a loose stone on the pavement and he stumbled, *"Shit – "*

He quickly steadied himself, glancing sideways. Aagya had already turned, arms folded, smirking, *'Careful, now! You fall this close to enemy territory, and they might just take you hostage.'*

Rudra replied, half-laughing, half-sighing, *"I wouldn't even resist."*

She chuckled, and he found himself smiling despite everything... despite the ache, despite the morning's fragile beauty that he knew would vanish soon. They reached the final turn and came to the tall, imposing black gates of the Avaan Mansion, flanked by security guards in pressed suits. From there, her world began. The one with chandeliers and whispers. With rules, reputation, and silence instead of affection. Rudra paused before they crossed the final stretch. Aagya took a breath. Her smile had faded now and her lips pressed in a line.

"You good?", he asked.

"No. But... I will be.", she replied with a faint smile.

They walked to the gate in silence. One of the guards stepped forward to stop Rudra, but Aagya waved him off without looking. They stopped just before the threshold.

Rudra turned to her, *"This is where I leave you."*

Aagya looked at him, really looked. There was so much in her eyes. Gratitude. Fear. Longing. And something else. Something deeper. She didn't say anything. She just stepped forward and hugged him... full, tight, and fierce. The world could have split

open and she wouldn't have let go. The guards were completely astonished at this site because this was not the Aagya Avaan they knew.

"Thank you. For always being there. For not fixing me... but just... holding space when I was breaking. For believing when I couldn't. For seeing me when no one else did. For holding the pieces without ever asking me why I broke in the first place. You stayed through it all, Rudra. Even when I shut down. Even when I broke things. Thank you... for never treating me like I was a burden. Thank you, Rudra. For everything.", she whispered.

Rudra exhaled sharply through his nose, his hand trembling slightly as it landed on the back of her head. He didn't hug her like a lover. He hugged her like a home she didn't know she had. He pulled back just enough to kiss her forehead, slow and reverent, *"This wasn't much, Aagya. This was the bare minimum. And if I can't understand you... then I don't deserve you."*

Aagya smiled through misted eyes, *"Still. You were there."*

He let go gently and stepped back, *"Go win. And don't forget to breathe."*

And with that... he turned. His shoes echoed down the empty street as he walked away. Aagya watched until he vanished around the corner before turning to face the gates of her world. They opened slowly, heavily, like the jaws of a beast. And she walked in. Straight-backed. Chin high. Eyes burning. Ready to face the fire.

The moment Aagya stepped inside the mansion, the air changed. The polished marble floors reflected the golden chandeliers above. The silence was thick, almost theatrical... like the walls themselves were holding their breath. She turned toward the grand staircase to head upstairs to her room. But she stopped cold. Her father stood there in a grey suit, neatly combed salt-and-pepper hair, stern eyes that didn't blink. Her mother stood a step

behind, in her embroidered sari, arms folded across her chest like a judge awaiting testimony. They had seen everything. From the window upstairs, they'd watched their daughter hug a man. A man from a lower middle-class background. A nobody in their world of curated surnames and diplomatic circles. And they didn't look pleased. Not even close.

"That... was embarrassing.", said her father coldly.

Aagya asked quietly, *"What?"*

Her mother clipped, *"The way you threw yourself at him. Out on the street. Like some common girl with no self-respect."*

Aagya didn't flinch. Not this time, *"I hugged someone who stood by me when no one else did. That's not a lack of self-respect. That's having the decency to say thank you."*

Her father asked sharply, *"Did you forget who you are?"*

Aagya's eyes hardened, *"No, Papa. You forget who I am."*

Her father stepped forward, anger rising in his jaw, *"Don't you dare raise your voice...."*

Aagya replied, cutting him off, *"I'm not. But maybe for once, you should listen to mine."*

There was a long pause. Her mother spoke icily, *"You're making a scene. That too on the day of your film's submission?"*

Aagya interrupted her with a bitter laugh, *"Oh now you care about my film?"*

She looked between them, the old pain flaring up like reopened wounds, *"You two didn't lift a finger to support this. You mocked it. Laughed at it. Called it a distraction. Said it was my way of coping with guilt."*

Her father snapped *"And it was! You're the reason Agasthya is gone!"*

Her mother added, *"But we still financed this little project of yours."*

The words landed like a knife. But this time, Aagya didn't crumble. She burned, *"I was five Papa! Five!"*

Her voice cracked, but her stare didn't, *"And you needed someone to blame more than you needed a daughter. So, you chose the easiest target."*

Her mother looked away, guilt flickering but not quite landing. Aagya continued tears brimming from her eyes, *"Every time I cried, you told me to 'be strong'. Every time I tried to speak, you shut the door. You made me believe I was a burden. That I wasn't meant to exist."*

Her mother spoke softly, trying to interrupt her, *"Aagya –"*

Aagya added firmly now, *"You guys called me a curse. Do you know what that does to a child?"*

Silence. The weight of years collapsed into the moment.

She stepped back slightly, chest rising and falling, voice now calm but sharp as glass, *"You've controlled everything. What I wear. Who I talk to. How I breathe in public. But this... this one thing... this film... it's mine. And he helped me make it real."*

She turned toward the stairs, *"You should be grateful to Rudra. Because if not for him, I would've broken long ago. And there would've been nothing left to control. He has done for me more than any of you ever did."*

She paused and then landed the final blow, *"And don't act like you ever cared about me. You financed the film only to protect your image and reputation in public."*

She didn't wait for their reply. She climbed the stairs, her feet clicking like war drums. Her parents remained frozen below, stunned into silence for the first time in years. And Aagya? She didn't cry yet. She had work to do. The moment Aagya stepped

inside her room, she locked the door behind her. The soft click echoed like a boundary drawn between the world outside and everything she had held in for years. She stood still. The silence hit her harder than any slap. Harder than her father's words. Harder than her mother's silence. Harder than years of being treated like a flaw in their legacy. Then she exhaled a long, shaky breath and her shoulders crumbled under the weight of it all. She slid down to the floor, back against the door, fists clenched in her lap. And then... she sobbed. Not the quiet kind. Not the movie kind. But the real kind... messy, loud and raw. The kind that only comes out when the soul has nowhere left to run.

She hugged her knees to her chest as her body trembled. Everything burned... her throat, her eyes, her heart. All the years she was blamed for her brother's death. All the guilt she internalized. All the times she stayed silent when she wanted to scream. And today... she finally screamed inside. She cried for Agasthya. She cried for the little girl who kept shrinking to fit their image of **"dignity."** She cried for the woman they never allowed her to become. But even as her tears blurred her vision, her eyes fell on something. The clock. It had hit 9:00 AM. Her breath hitched. Her heart dropped. Submissions would begin now. There were barely minutes left to pull herself together. She wiped her face with her sleeve, blinking the tears away. Her hands were trembling, but her spirit... her spirit stood up. Literally. Aagya pulled herself off the floor. She stumbled once toward the mirror... eyes puffy, lipstick ruined, hair undone. And then she remembered what Rudra had said:

"You're fire. Not fragile."

She tied her hair into a clean bun. Washed her face. Swiped on a fresh, muted shade of red lipstick. Changed into a crisp plain black shirt tucked into high-waisted trousers. It was understated, elegant, and powerful. She grabbed the hard disk from her desk. Held it like it was her truth carved into metal. And just before

stepping out, she looked at herself in the mirror. No makeup trick. No filter. Just a girl who had been through fire and didn't burn. She walked out, shoulders square, and chin high. And this time, she didn't look back.

The sun had fully risen, casting a golden warmth across Malabar Hill. But inside the Avaan Mansion, the air remained cold. As Aagya walked down the grand staircase, the marble echoed beneath her heels. She didn't bother looking for her parents. She knew they were still somewhere in the mansion... probably in the drawing room, probably still angry, probably still seething at the audacity of their daughter finally finding her voice. She didn't care. Not anymore. Dressed in black, her presence now felt like a silent rebellion... sharp, focused and untouchable. The hard disk clutched in her right hand wasn't just a project. It was a war cry. A proof of everything she had built, everything she had fought for with blood, sweat, and sleepless nights.

As she exited the main doors, the butler opened them with a nervous bow, but she didn't acknowledge him. Her Rolls Royce waited at the base of the curved driveway. The driver, startled to see her so early, quickly straightened up and opened the door. She paused for a moment before getting in. She could feel her parents' eyes watching her from one of the upper balconies. She ignored them and stepped into the car, shut the door firmly behind her, and rolled down the window just enough for her voice to carry, *"I'm not your mistake. I'm my own miracle."*

Then she rolled up the window. The engine purred to life. The gates of the Avaan estate opened. And Aagya didn't look back even once.

28. A Night without Wars

The drive from Malabar Hill to NIVSEA wasn't long. It was about thirty minutes with light traffic. But today, every red light, every turn, every heartbeat felt sacred. She looked out the window, not as the girl who grew up in a golden cage, but as the woman who had unlocked it from the inside. She replayed the last 72 hours in her mind: Rudra's unwavering support, his eyes at the temple that morning and his words echoing in her head like armor:

"If I can't understand you, then I don't deserve you."

"You're fire. Not fragile."

"I believe in you, Aagya. With all I've got."

And she did too. Finally.

As the NIVSEA gates came into view, her fingers gripped the hard disk tighter. The car stopped. The campus was buzzing with nervous energy... students running, checking folders, finalizing submissions. The world may have tried to break her. But today? She came to submit not just a film, she came to submit herself... unfiltered, unstoppable, and unforgettable.

Her sleek black car rolled past the familiar NIVSEA Mumbai gates, its wheels gliding over the morning dew-kissed driveway. The guard, half-sleepy but alert, straightened up as Aagya Avaan rolled down the window and flashed her ID card.

The guard opened the crossing and nodded respectfully, *"Ma'am, best of luck."*

Aagya simply nodded, her expression unreadable behind her sunglasses. But her clenched jaw and the way she gripped the

steering wheel betrayed the storm inside. She drove to the parking lot where a small group waited... her team. They all stood in the soft sunlight, holding coffee cups and half-eaten muffins. They looked up the moment they saw her car.

"There she is! The Queen is here.", said a relieved Megha.

Aagya parked her car in the underground car park and stepped out, dressed in a plain white shirt tucked into high-waisted trousers. Her red suit from earlier had been replaced, but the fire in her eyes hadn't faded.

Shyam grinned, *"You made it. We were ready to storm Avaan Mansion if you didn't show up."*

Aagya smiled faintly, *"That would've been... cinematic."*

The group laughed nervously... partly at the joke, partly to shake off their own anxiety. She hugged them briefly, short but sincere. Then without wasting a second, she pulled out the sleek silver hard disk from her leather sling bag and walked toward the admin block. Inside, the campus buzzed with quiet anticipation. Tech staff moved swiftly between desks, collecting final submissions. Students paced nervously, eyes red from sleepless nights and laptops hugged to their chests like fragile dreams. Aagya approached the submissions desk.

The submission coordinator checked her name, *"Aagya Avaan. Got it. Entry ID 42."*

She placed the hard disk down like placing a piece of her soul for judgment.

The coordinator smiled reassuringly, *"You're done now. The award ceremony will be held two days from now. Results will be announced live."*

Aagya nodded, then turned away. But something about the word *"results"* caught her chest in a vice. Two days. Just two days. And

yet, it felt like eternity. Her breath faltered for half a second. She walked out into the courtyard, the sunlight feeling too sharp. Too exposing.

Megha ran catching up beside her, *"You okay?"*

Aagya replied quietly, *"Now that it's out of my hands... I don't know."*

Ayush assured, *"Maybe that's a good thing."*

She didn't respond. But her mind was racing. She had faced monsters. both within her house and inside her head for the last 24 hours. And yet, this? This waiting? This silence? It scared her more. Still, she stood tall, eyes forward and shoulders straight, because that's what a warrior does when the battlefield goes quiet. Aagya stepped out from the main admin block, heart still pacing with the weight of submission. She leaned against one of the white marble pillars in the courtyard, the sun casting long shadows across the ground. Her phone buzzed in her hand with a dozen messages from student groups, reminders, and well-wishes. But she ignored them all and dialed one number. Just one.

He picked up within two rings and spoke in a voice low, grounding, *"Hey! You did it?"*

Aagya exhaled trembling just a little, *"Yeah. It's in. The hard disk. It's gone. They said results in two days."*

There was a pause and then Rudra asked softly, *"And how do you feel?"*

Aagya replied with a slight crack in her voice, *"I should feel proud, right? Relieved? But... I'm scared, Rudra. Like... now that it's not in my hands, all the doubts are crawling back in."*

She tried to laugh it off, but her voice betrayed her.

Rudra stayed quiet for a moment, then spoke with warmth, *"You gave it everything. There's no doubt left to have."*

Aagya asked, doubting herself, *"You think so?"*

Rudra gently teased her, *"I know so. And I think someone needs cake. And maybe a hug from a 7-year-old who's been asking about you since morning."*

Aagya blinked, *"You mean Latika?"*

Rudra smiled, *"Yepp... It's her birthday. We're throwing a small party at the chawl. You promised her, remember?"*

Aagya froze for a moment... and then a memory came rushing back when Rudra invited her to Latika's birthday at the end of their Taj date while exiting her car.

Aagya's entire face changed. The storm cleared and she spoke softly, *"Oh god... I did promise her."*

Rudra replied, *"She's been making a crown for you out of glitter and paper. You bail now, you'll break a princess' heart."*

Aagya laughed, for real this time, *"Then we better not be late."*

She turned on her heel and jogged back to where her team was hanging out on the lawn with coffee cups and backpacks strewn around and spoke with urgency, *"Guys. Cancel all plans. We're going to a birthday party."*

Everyone looked up.

"Wait, what?", asked a confused Megha.

"Wait, like... right now? Whose birthday?", added Simran.

Aagya replied excitedly, *"Latika. The little girl from Rudra's chawl. I promised her weeks ago and she hasn't stopped asking about me, apparently."*

Ayush spoke, *"Ooooh! The legendary Latika! We've heard so much about her!"*

Geeta grinned, *"She's the tiny boss Rudra reports to, right?"*

Aadarsh stepped forward, *"I'm in. I need something wholesome after all this workload trauma."*

Ravi asked, *"Do we need to dress fancy? Because I need to dig out my nice kurta."*

Simran added, *"No glitter this time, Ravi. Please."*

Saadhna replied, *"Count me in too. Let's surprise her properly."*

Aman spoke, *"I'll bring my handheld cam. Let's make a little birthday montage for her."*

Ramesh added, *"Still shots are my department. This kid's going to have a portfolio by the end of the night."*

Mishika adjusted her makeup pouch, *"Should I bring glitter or no glitter? I'm on the fence."*

Shyam grinned, *"Seeta already packed snacks. We're twins. We sense party energy in the air."*

Seeta added, *"It's true. I packed namkeen and laddoos this morning and didn't know why."*

Everyone burst out laughing. And in that moment... in that spontaneous, bubbling laughter, Aagya felt a warmth she hadn't felt in a very long time. A team. A family. A reason to smile beyond the project, beyond the pressure, beyond perfection. She looked up at the sky which was blue and clear above the campus and whispered under her breath, *"I'm coming, Latika."*

And then they all piled into two cars — Aagya's and a cab. And they headed to the chawl where a little girl's birthday was about to become the most special night of her life. But on their way, a bright shop window caught Aagya's attention. She stopped the car and went in. Megha accompanied her. Inside, mannequins gleamed under warm lights. There were elegant suits, soft sarees, and shimmering dupattas. Megha caught the glint in Aagya's

eyes and smirked, *"Don't tell me you're planning a fashion show before the party."*

Aagya laughed softly, *"Not really... but it's Latika's birthday. I should look presentable, right?"*

Megha crossed her arms, *"Presentable? Or are we talking about impressing someone in particular?"*

Aagya rolled her eyes, pretending not to understand, but the slight pink tint on her cheeks betrayed her, *"Oh please, Megha. It's a kid's birthday party, not... not a date."*

Megha grinned widely, *"Uh-huh. And yet, someone's heart seems to be skipping beats at the thought of a certain injured warrior seeing her tonight."*

Aagya froze, half amused and half embarrassed. She looked down at a deep red suit on display embroidered with delicate golden vines that shimmered faintly under the light. Something about it called to her. Strength and softness, together. Aagya looked at it and smiled, *"This one..."*

Megha stepped closer, studying it with a playful grin, *"It's bold. Fiery. Definitely not just for a party."*

Aagya smiled faintly, running her fingers across the soft fabric, *"Maybe... it's time I stop hiding behind neutrals."*

They spent the next twenty minutes inside the shop. Aagya tried on a handful of suits including pastel, ivory, maroon etc. But every time she stepped out of the trial room, Megha had a comment ready. Megha folded her hands after one pale pink suit, *"You look like a teacher attending parent-teacher meetings."*

Aagya laughed, *"Rude!"*

Megha replied, raising her hands, *"I'm just saying! Try the red one again. That one said 'Queen energy.'"*

She smiled and went inside the trial room. When Aagya finally stepped out in the deep red suit embroidered with gold threads that danced in the light, the store went silent for a heartbeat. Her long hair fell neatly across her shoulders and the gold dupatta draped like a soft flame over her arm.

Megha whistled, *"Okay. Wow. Forget Latika. Rudra's gonna need another hospital stay after seeing this."*

Aagya's eyes widened, *"Megha!"*

Megha laughed, *"What? I'm just saying! You look stunning, girl."*

Aagya turned to the mirror, trying to hide her smile, but her cheeks betrayed her again. For the first time in weeks, she wasn't the strategist, the perfectionist, or the leader in the reflection. She was just... herself. A woman smiling softly, feeling alive. She decided to buy it without hesitation. And then, much to everyone's surprise, insisted on picking something for each of her teammates too. At first, they refused. Then they gave in. Fifteen minutes later, the team stood outside the shop, holding packets of new clothes and wide smiles on their faces.

Megha said, swinging her bag, *"You realize you just turned a birthday visit into a full-blown celebration, right?"*

Aagya grinned, *"Maybe we all needed that."*

Everyone burst out laughing. And then they all piled into their cars. They then moved, laughter echoing through the street, arms full of gifts and clothes, hearts light and hopeful. They were headed to the chawl, where a little girl's birthday was about to become the most special night of her life.

.....

The chawl was glowing. Strings of fairy lights danced across rusted balconies. Someone had set up a music speaker that kept switching between 90s Bollywood hits and crackling birthday

tunes. The air smelled of homemade pakoras, incense, and something sugary... probably motichoor laddoos. Every corner of the courtyard buzzed with life. Children zipped around with balloons tied to their wrists. Women from neighboring homes were placing chairs and setting out food. The men handled decorations, some climbing ladders, others complaining about how *"Why do we have to always do this kinda job?!"*

In the center stood Latika, eight years old now, her hair neatly braided, a glittery birthday sash around her tiny frame, and a tiara that kept slipping sideways on her head. She was pouting, *"But she said she'd come! You said! Where is my red queen?"*

Rudra, stood beside her in a maroon kurta with his sleeves rolled to the elbows and a faint scar still visible on his knuckles, bent down to her level. He smiled, that soft half-smile that rarely made an appearance these days, *"I know. But I wanted to give you your biggest gift after the lights were up."*

Latika blinked, *"A bigger gift than the bicycle!?"*

Rudra replied, *"A thousand times bigger."*

Just then, a hush fell. Not the kind that's loud. But the kind that ripples through the air like a slow breeze carrying something... sacred. All eyes turned toward the entrance gate of the chawl. She was here. Draped in a deep red suit embroidered with soft golden vines. Her hair tied in a flowing ponytail. No makeup beyond kohl and lip balm. But the way she walked... slow, unsure, slightly overwhelmed... made her look like a queen stepping into a kingdom she didn't know she already ruled.

Rudra turned toward her and forgot how to breathe. His hand, still holding a cup of Rasna for Latika, lowered slowly. Aagya's eyes met his and the moment felt like a freeze frame in a film. The background blurred. The sound faded. All that remained were

the two of them bound by every secret, every scar, every smile that never reached their lips.

Before Rudra could even say a word, Latika screamed, *"SHE CAMEEEEE!!!"*

And like a firecracker, she burst forward sprinting across the courtyard straight into Aagya's arms. Aagya dropped to her knees just in time, her hands wide open, catching the full-force hug of a child who had waited for this moment like it was Diwali and Eid rolled into one.

Latika's arms squeezed her neck, *"You came, you came, you came, you really came! You're the best! You're my queen for real!!"*

Aagya hugged her tight, laughing softly, *"And you're my tiny princess, remember? I wouldn't miss your big day for anything."*

She kissed Latika's temple and ran a hand over her little tiara, *"Looks like I'm not the only royal here tonight."*

Rudra watched the scene from a few steps away, arms crossed and for a second, he forgot the chaos of the world. He forgot missions, betrayals, past wounds. At that moment, everything was right. Megha, Simran, Ravi and the whole team stood at the gate, smiling wide, holding gifts and sweets. They watched their director melt into a child's embrace and something inside all of them softened too.

Geeta whispered to Megha, *"She's glowing. I've never seen her like this."*

Megha replied, *"She looks... safe."*

Latika finally pulled away, wiping her nose, *"Now it's a real party! Let's go cut the cake!"*

The crowd cheered. Neighbors clapped. Someone shouted *"DJ wale babu!"* from an upstairs window, and the music volume spiked. A soft cheer rippled through the courtyard as the crowd

began to circle around the center table. Latika stood on a small wooden stool, her sash now slightly tilted, cheeks flushed with excitement, and eyes glimmering brighter than the fairy lights above. In front of her stood the cake which had two tiers of chocolate and vanilla swirled together, topped with small edible butterflies and a miniature tiara made of sugar. The words *"Happy Birthday Latika!"* were written in bright red icing. It was the exact color she'd once said was her **"superpower color."** A big '8' candle stood tall at the top unlit.

Aagya stood beside her now, one hand protectively on Latika's back, the other holding a sparkler lighter. Rudra stood just behind them, watching the scene like it was sacred. The crowd began to chant, *"Latika! Latika! Latika!"*

Aadarsh clapped in rhythm. Megha recorded the moment with her phone held high. Simran had tears in her eyes for reasons she couldn't explain. Geeta held a plate of samosas but forgot to eat it. Even Ramesh paused, clicking photos just to soak in the emotion.

Aagya leaned down and whispered, *"Ready, birthday girl?"*

Latika whispered back breathlessly, *"I've never been more ready."*

Aagya lit the candle, and the glow hit Latika's face like magic. A golden flame dancing in her eyes. As soon as she blew the candle, everyone began singing:

♪ *"Happy birthday to you..."*

♪ *"Happy birthday to you..."*

The courtyard echoed with claps and off-key voices. Laughter. Cheers. Neighbors on balconies above joined in. Little kids held balloons high like torches. Rudra found himself humming along. But his eyes weren't on the cake. They were on Aagya. And hers? Were on Latika.

Just before the last line, Aagya leaned in and whispered again, *"Make a big wish."*

Latika closed her eyes tight. She clasped her hands. And for a long, still second... the world paused. The music. The crowd. The chaos. Everything stood still for her wish. Then she opened her eyes... and blew. The candles flickered... then vanished.

And the whole chawl erupted, *"Yaaaayyyy!!!"*

Confetti popped from behind. Ayush and Ravi had somehow created a makeshift party popper. Shyam and Seeta yelled, *"Shaaabaash Latikaaa!"* in perfect sync.

Mishika ran forward with a party cap and gently fixed it on her head.

Latika spoke to Aagya, *"I made a wish."*

Aagya smiled, *"What did you wish for?"*

Latika grinned, *"If I say it, it won't come true!"*

Aagya chuckled, pulling her into a hug, *"Good answer."*

Then the cutting began. Latika sliced into the cake carefully, her small fingers trembling with excitement. She held up the first piece to Aagya, *"For my red queen."*

Aagya laughed through her tears, took the bite, and kissed Latika's forehead.

For the second piece, she turned to Rudra, *"And for my angry lion."*

The entire team burst into laughter, *"She NAILED that one."*

Geeta commented, *"That's the cutest roast I've ever heard."*

Rudra knelt down, *"I'm honored, Princess Latika."*

He took the bite and ruffled her hair. From there, chaos ensued.

Everyone then got cake, faces got smeared, selfies were taken, the stereo blared "*Aww Tera Happy Birthday*" and then randomly switched to "*Kala Chashma*". Children danced. Adults swayed. Aman set up a slow pan camera shot across the smiling faces. Amidst it all, Aagya looked around and realized something. This place, this moment, this warmth... it felt more like home than her entire mansion ever had.

She turned to Rudra, who caught her staring. He raised an eyebrow, "*What?*"

Aagya smiled softly, "*Nothing.*"

But it wasn't nothing. It was *everything*. A laugh, a hug, a wish, a flame, a home. And a feeling that for the first time in years... she wasn't alone.

Latika shouted suddenly, "*Ravi bhaiya, don't forget! You promised to sing!!*"

Ravi replied, mock offended, "*I'm a costume designer, not a singer!*"

Simran grinned, "*But you have a flair for drama.*"

Ravi replied with a dramatic sigh, "*Fine. But only because it's your majesty's birthday.*"

They all laughed. Applause erupted. The whole chawl clapped. People cheered. Rudra, still frozen by the gate, finally exhaled. Megha, Simran, and the whole team stood nearby... some with phones out and some just watching quietly, hearts full.

Geeta spoke to Simran, "*That little girl just stole the show.*"

Simran smiled, "*Nah. They both did.*"

Back in the center, Aagya stood up, still holding Latika's hand. Rudra stepped forward, "*Told you she'd come.*"

Latika grinned at both of them, "*You guys should always be together. You're like... cake and frosting!*"

Everyone laughed. Aagya blushed. And Rudra? He just looked at her. Not like a soldier. Not like a guardian. But like a man finally standing in the presence of something pure... something that gave him hope. The music resumed. People danced. Megha passed out snacks. Aadarsh set up fairy lights on the selfie wall. Ramesh clicked candid shots like he was working for Vogue. Aman rolled the camera. And somewhere, under the glow of fairy lights and a ceiling of stars, Rudra and Aagya stood side by side, watching the little girl they both loved... the one who brought them together without even trying. It was Latika's night. But for them? It was a memory they'd carry forever.

Aagya stood in a quieter corner, sipping thandai as kids ran past her with balloons and paper swords. She turned to see Rudra standing beside her, quietly watching everything with a soft expression and asked, *"You did all this?"*

Rudra shrugged, *"She deserves it. Latika's the only person here who still believes in magic."*

Aagya looked at him, really looked, and something in her heart shifted, *"I think she's not the only one."*

Rudra turned to meet her eyes. There was a flicker of something unspoken between them. But before anything could be said, Latika came bounding toward them again, tugging both their hands, *"Come dance! Both of you!"*

And as the music swelled, laughter echoing and lights sparkling across the courtyard, Aagya and Rudra let themselves be pulled into that moment. That normal, imperfect, beautiful moment. A memory neither of them would forget. Ever. The courtyard of the chawl had transformed into a fairy-lit celebration ground. The speakers crackled for a moment and then a song erupted. Upbeat. Old-school. One of those songs that made everyone tap their feet whether they wanted to or not. *"Gallan Goodiyan"* came on. And just like that... the mood shifted, laughter got louder, plates were

put aside, and someone from the second floor yelled, *"I can't! I'm done!"*

Aadarsh, Ayush, Aman, and Ramesh jumped in first, doing exaggerated steps and nudging each other like schoolboys at a wedding. Geeta and Saadhna twirled in sync, their movements graceful, like a film scene come to life. Megha clapped to the rhythm beside Simran, who pulled Ravi and Mishika into the circle, refusing to take no for an answer. The editing twins Shyam and Seeta, who were always glued to their screens, were now mirroring each other perfectly, doing a quirky robot-style dance that got the kids screaming in excitement. And in the middle of it all, Aagya and Rudra stood watching. They were smiling, not the forced smiles that people wear in meetings or press conferences. This was something else. Relief. Freedom. Joy.

Latika tugged at Aagya's hand, *"Come on! Come on! You have to dance!"*

Aagya laughed, *"I don't know the steps!"*

Latika replied in a bossy tone, *"Then just jump like me!"*

Rudra grinned, *"She's not wrong."*

Aagya gave him a mock glare, *"And you? You're not getting away either."*

She held out her hand. For a second, just a second, Rudra hesitated. Then... he took it. And they ran into chaos. The music changed to a softer beat... still peppy, but more romantic. *"London Thumakda"* began playing. Someone tossed a dupatta toward Aagya. She caught it mid-air, spun, and laughed. Her red kurti fanned out as she moved, eyes glowing, cheeks flushed. Rudra just stood there, mesmerized. Then, Latika pushed him lightly, *"Don't just stare! Dance!!"*

So he did. Not perfectly. Not smoothly. But wholeheartedly. They circled each other laughing and teasing.

Aagya spoke breathlessly to Rudra, *"Look at you! Who knew Mr. Ghost could do bhangra!"*

Rudra grinned, *"I trained in the mountains of Punjab. Code name: 'Nach Punjabi.'"*

They laughed harder than they had in weeks. Some aunties joined in. Uncle Sharma from Room 103 pulled off his signature belly-shaking step. Children ran in figure eights between everyone, waving balloons. Even the local paanwala joined in, throwing flower petals he'd stolen from someone's rangoli. It was madness. Messy, loud, imperfect joy. And in the center of it all were Aagya and Rudra. Not the director and the animator. Not the wounded and the warrior. Just two people... dancing together. Free.

29. The Calm and The Code

The chawl had quieted down only slightly. The music had faded into soft background hums, but the joy was still alive in the air. Strings of fairy lights sparkled overhead like fallen stars, and the tables now brimmed with steaming food. Stainless steel plates clinked, the scent of ghee-laced poori and spicy chole filled the space, and jalebis gleamed like golden spirals under the lights. Everyone sat shoulder to shoulder, the Avaan Studios crew mixing freely with the chawl families, laughing, gossiping, and eating with both hands and hearts open.

Geeta dugged into a second helping of pulao, *"Oh my God... who made this pulao? I'd marry into this household for the recipe alone."*

Aadarsh replied wiping sweat off his forehead, *"That would be Kamla Aunty, right there in the pink saree. Just be ready to bring five sarees and a pressure cooker as dowry."*

Megha grinned, *"Noted. Anyone got a contact for a saree wholesaler?"*

The whole table burst into laughter. Kamla Aunty, who was sitting nearby with a proud smile and fanning herself, waved her spoon and said, *"Stop flirting and eat properly, children! Only praise after you finish the food!"*

Latika, seated between Aagya and Rudra with a huge bite of jalebi in her mouth and was quiet for a moment. Then suddenly she looked up at them with gleaming eyes and a mischievous grin, *"Rudra Bhaiya, when are you marrying Didi? I want to wear my pink lehenga again!"*

Aagya choked on her sip of water and Rudra on his bite of gulab jamun.

Simran snorted, *"Oh my god, Latika!"*

Ravi laughed loudly, *"That's not subtle at all! Straight-up final scene!"*

Ayush teased, *"Should we just start the sangeet now?"*

Shyam and Seeta added in perfect sync, *"Who's choreographing?"*

Rudra rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, his ears turning visibly red, while Aagya tried to hide behind her glass and replied, narrowing her eyes playfully, *'Latika! You're turning into a tiny terrorist.'*

Latika giggled, *"I just said what everyone's thinking!"*

Everyone roared with laughter again, while Rudra just gave Aagya a side-glance and whispered, *"She's too sharp for her age."*

Aagya whispered back, *"She's your sister. What did you expect?"*

Just then, three elderly women from the chawl approached, all of them in simple cotton sarees, hair tied in buns, carrying tiny bowls filled with salt and mustard seeds. Their eyes sparkled with fondness.

"You two... the way you look at each other... we had to come.", said Saraswati Aunty.

She gently moved her palm in circles near their heads, performing a traditional *nazar utarna* (evil-eye cleansing).

"You both shine so brightly together. It would be a crime not to protect that.", said Kamla aunty.

Then came Latika's mother and she spoke to Aagya, *"You're like our own daughter now. You brought something magical to this house tonight."*

They all blew the mustard seeds away into the wind and placed their hands lovingly on Rudra's shoulder and Aagya's head. Aagya's eyes welled up unexpectedly, and without thinking, she

reached for Rudra's hand under the table. He held it firmly... no words, just warmth. Soon, the night turned softer. Bellies were full, hearts fuller. People began to rise from the benches, hugging goodbyes, packing leftovers, kids dozing off on laps.

Ayush stretched himself, *"I swear, I'm going to dream about that jalebi."*

Mishika grinned, *"You're going to dream about someone making you jalebi."*

Aadarsh replied, *"Shut up, Mishika."*

Ramesh hoisted his camera, *"One last photo! Come on – everyone, group shot!"*

Everyone crowded together in front of the mural wall. Kamla aunty wiped her hands and joined in, Latika climbed onto Rudra's back, and Aagya laughed with her arms around Simran and Geeta. Click. A photo frozen in time... smiles slightly off-center, plates still in hand and jalebi smears on cheeks. Perfect.

The team began to leave in autos, cabs, and cars. Aadarsh yawned. Simran waved a sleepy goodbye. One by one, the chaos faded into silence. Only Rudra and Aagya were left standing at the gate of the chawl. She looked at him, eyes soft, hesitant to say goodbye. The narrow bylanes of the chawl were finally silent as the celebrations had folded into the night, and Mumbai's usual chaos had taken its pause. The fairy lights still glowed faintly behind them, and the air smelled faintly of ghee, rosewater, and warm earth after humidity.

Rudra walked beside Aagya down the slope, their footsteps echoing lightly on the uneven stone path. It wasn't a long walk since her car was parked a few hundred meters away at the junction where the autos turned, but neither of them seemed in a hurry to reach it. Their shoulders brushed every now and then. Silence held between them... not awkward, but stretched and full.

"Tonight felt... different.", said Aagya.

Rudra glanced at her, *"Because for once, you let yourself just be."*

Aagya smiled faintly, *"You think I don't usually?"*

Rudra replied quietly, *"I think you carry the weight of an empire on your back and still worry if your shoulders look strong enough."*

She stopped walking for a second. The night wind curled around them. Street lamps flickered.

"You always see too much.", she said blushing slightly while staring at the ground.

Rudra teased her lightly, *"Comes with the job. I observe. I draw. I never forget."*

They resumed walking. The car was just visible now... black, sleek, dusted with night dew.

Aagya's eyes glistened, *"I haven't felt this... safe in years."*

Rudra smiled, a slow and quiet curve of the lips, *"You're allowed to feel safe, Aagya. You deserve it."*

Aagya turned slightly toward him, *"I'll miss this."*

Rudra asked, *"What?"*

Aagya replied, *"Normalcy. Laughter. Your chawl. People who... just give. Without calculating what they'll get back."*

Rudra looked at her for a long beat. Then, in a voice that trembled ever so slightly beneath his usual restraint, *"You could have this. All of this. Anytime you want."*

Aagya lowered her gaze, *"Not with who I am. Or where I come from."*

Rudra replied gently, *"I don't care where you come from, Aagya. I only care about where you're going."*

They stood in front of her car now. She reached for her keys... then paused. And without a word, she stepped forward. And hugged him. Tight. Like she was afraid that if she let go, something in her would unravel.

She spoke muffled against his chest, *"Thank you. For everything. For fighting my fears. For listening. For showing up. For reminding me who I am... even when I forget."*

Rudra closed his eyes, as if grounding himself in that one perfect moment. He wrapped his arms around her, his chin brushing against her hair, breathing her in like she was the only real thing in the entire multiverse. Then, slowly, he pulled back just enough to look at her. And placed a soft, reverent kiss on her forehead, *"There's nothing big in what I did, Aagya. This is the bare minimum. All I want is to become the reason for your smile."*

She blinked fast, and he smiled to lighten the air, *"Go. Go rule the world. You've got your throne waiting."*

She let out a shaky laugh and nodded. The silence between them wasn't awkward. It was thick with unspoken things like gratitude, peace, a little hesitation, and something warmer, deeper... something fragile.

"Thank you for inviting me tonight. I don't remember the last time I felt this... free.", she said.

Rudra replied with a smile, *"Because here, no one cares about your last name. Only about your heart."*

Aagya smiled faintly, *"That's rare. And precious. I wish tonight didn't have to end."*

Rudra replied with warmth, *"It doesn't have to. We'll make more nights like this."*

She looked at him for a long second. Then, suddenly without a word, she stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek. That kiss

baffled him like anything. It literally took him to a whole other dimension where nothing, but her memories existed.

Aagya's face was completely red now, *"Thank you... for always being there. For reminding me I'm not just someone's shadow."*

Rudra pulled her face up by pulling her chin with his thumb and index finger, *"You're not a shadow, Aagya. You are the sun itself"*

He leaned forward and gently pressed his forehead onto hers and landed a small but grounding kiss on it. They both closed their eyes and cherished that beautiful moment in silence, smiling and blushing like two little kids. Until, A loud, dramatic clearing of the throat shattered the quiet.

"AHM-AHEMMM!!"

They both turned abruptly and there she was. The birthday girl, Latika. Hands on hips. Smirking ear to ear. Behind her, a small crowd had gathered of three auntyjis, a couple of neighborhood uncles, and half the kids who were still up because of the party sugar high.

Latika grinned devilishly, *"Well well well... what is this, hmm? Secret midnight romance? Should I get the dhol for the baraat?"*

Rudra groaned audibly and covered his face, *"Latika... please..."*

Latika laughed, *"Don't 'please' me! I saw those kisses. I saw everything. Very filmy. Very dramatic. You even tilted your head like Shah Rukh Khan."*

Chinta Aunty added gleefully, *"Exactly! I told you this boy was hiding something. And look at her... what a lovely girl!"*

Malti Aunty spoke to Aagya, *"You're beautiful, beta. And he... he's lucky. Very lucky."*

Manoj Uncle spoke, *"You both look like a scene from some movie. Just don't forget us when you win your Oscars!"*

Everyone chuckled. Rudra shook his head, both flustered and amused.

Aagya laughed through a blush, *"I'm never going to live this down, am I?"*

Latika replied, mock seriously, *"Not a chance."*

Then, suddenly the landlady came forward and took out a little pouch of black salt and red chillies, the classic **"nazar utaaro"** kit. She murmured as she circled them, *"Evil eye stays far, far away. May God always protect your bond."*

She blew softly on the items and tossed them aside, as was tradition. Aagya suddenly had the flashback of their first meet as the landlady winked at her and Aagya understood her signal.

Another aunty clasped her hands, *"May you two always stay this happy. You deserve it."*

A silence followed that was warm and sacred. Rudra looked at Aagya, who was clearly overwhelmed, her eyes misting a little.

Rudra whispered to her, *"I told you. You're home here."*

Aagya nodded, *"I know."*

They stood for a moment longer before Aagya finally opened the car door and playfully addressed the crowd, *"Okay, okay – I'm leaving. But I'm watching you all. Don't plan my wedding before I get the award."*

Everyone laughed again.

Latika replied, *"Fine! But we're keeping the dhol on standby!"*

As she turned the key, Rudra stepped back, hands in his pockets, watching her with that rare smile still lingering on his lips. The car rolled away slowly... but she didn't look back. Because she didn't need to. She knew he'd still be standing there. Just like always. As the car rolled away into the night, Rudra stood

watching until the tail lights disappeared. Behind him, Latika nudged him, *"So... should I call her Bhabhi yet, or do I wait till you propose?"*

Rudra blushed, *"LATIKA!!"*

And the night burst into laughter once again.

.....

The car rolled to a gentle stop outside Avaan Mansion. The laughter of the evening still echoed faintly in Aagya's ears of Latika's joy, her teammates' teasing and Rudra's soft gaze under the fairy lights. But as soon as she opened the door and the vast, cold silence of her mansion loomed in front of her, reality washed over her like a bitter wind. She stepped out, her feet clicking softly on the gravel, hard disk still safely zipped in her bag. The celebration was over. Now came the wait. The anxiety. The silence. The moment she entered the grand foyer, she didn't even glance around. No greetings. No small talk. She just climbed the stairs, one step at a time, till she reached the solitude of her room. She shut the door quietly behind her and leaned against it. Her fingers still tingled from Rudra's forehead kiss. Her ears still echoed with the words he'd said:

"All I want is to become the reason for your smile."

Her heart clenched. Tears brimmed before she could stop them. She didn't sob. Not loudly. But she did fold into herself with her back against the door, her legs pulled close and her eyes staring at the floor that had seen her break one too many times. Tonight... she cried in silence. Not because she was weak. But because for the first time in years, she had felt loved. Seen. Valued. And that contrast between what was and what could be, broke her. The memory of her parents' cold words slammed back into her chest. The slap. The accusations. The punishment of being born second, when they only ever grieved the first. Her tears came heavier

now. Not because she was ashamed of developing feelings for Rudra. But because she was ashamed of ever believing she wasn't worthy of being loved. She sat like that for a while like a lone figure in a palace of shadows. Until her eyes fell on her desk. On the submission confirmation email glowing on the screen. She'd done it. Despite everything. Despite them. Despite herself. She wiped her tears with the back of her sleeve, stood up shakily, and looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror. Her hair was a mess. Her makeup slightly smudged. Her expression was raw. But her eyes... Still fierce. Still determined.

"No more breaking. They can't break me anymore.", she spoke to her reflection.

She changed into something more comfortable, folded her dupatta carefully over the chair, and finally allowed herself to lie down. The festival would announce results in 2 days. But tonight, for once... she didn't feel alone. Because she had Rudra's words stitched inside her like armor. And that? That was enough to hold her through the storm.

.....

The two days leading up to the festival crawled slower than any before. Aagya had submitted the film. The work was done. Her team had returned to their routines. Even her parents had gone unusually quiet, perhaps stunned by the way she had finally spoken her truth. But the silence in the Avaan Mansion felt heavier than ever. Aagya tried keeping herself busy. She spent time double-checking her press outfit. Practiced a few potential speeches in the mirror and then threw the note cards away in frustration.

"What if I don't win? What if I'm not even nominated?", she said to herself as she paced in her room again and again.

Her anxiety wasn't loud. It was quiet, the kind that settled into bones and refused to leave. She rewatched old sequences from the film, this time not to correct anything, but to remind herself:

"I created this. We created this. That should be enough."

But her mind kept spiraling. She hadn't heard from Rudra since the birthday party. And though a part of her trusted him, another part, the part built from years of abandonment, began to whisper, *"He's drifting. He's hiding something again."*

She tried texting. Once. Twice. Then stopped herself.

"He'll call. When he's ready.", she said to herself.

And so she waited. And waited.

.....

Elsewhere in Mumbai, deep beneath a government safehouse near Colaba and far from the world of costumes and camera rigs, Rudra sat at a roundtable surrounded by intelligence officers and elite field commanders. Far beneath Mumbai's buzzing surface, inside a cold concrete chamber lit only by recessed ceiling lights and digital panels, a quiet tension pulsed in the air. The room was war-room level secure. No signal. No phones. Just silence, steel, and secrets.

At the center stood Lt. General Pratap Singh dressed in olive green uniform, his chest decorated with medals earned in blood, sacrifice, and legacy. He stood still, arms crossed, face stern watching Rudra closely. Around them, four other officers including intelligence, logistics, cyber-op, and field command hovered over maps, blueprints, and thermal surveillance footage. On the central screen displayed a rotating 3D model of the National Institute of Visual Storytelling & Experimental Arts (NIVSEA), Mumbai campus which was the location of the final round of the **NIVSEA-RIGA Film Festival**.

Zoomed in: The Amphitheater.

Zoomed again: The Award Stage.

Lt. Gen. Pratap Singh spoke in a gravel voice, *"Three entry points. Two possible sniping positions. And over 400 civilians including international dignitaries. You're telling me the man we thought was dead... is going to strike here? In front of cameras?"*

Rudra leaned over the table and spoke in a voice calm but edged, *"He won't just strike, sir. He'll make a statement."*

He tapped the table, switching the view to surveillance frames. Grainy footage from 8 days ago. Warehouse shell companies. Cargo vans near Avaan Studios. Hidden funding routes tied to the **Haqqani Trust**. All leading back to one emblem:

A spiral inside a triangle, a.k.a., The Black Spiral

Rudra added, *"He's not hiding anymore. He's nesting. Inside our culture. Inside our art spaces. Inside this city."*

Pratap Singh narrowed his eyes, *"And what does she know? Aagya Avaan."*

Rudra hesitated only a second and then spoke, *"She knows nothing. And I intend to keep it that way."*

A cyber intel officer spoke, *"We ran background checks. Avaan Studios is clean on the surface. But some of the offshore money laundering was masked through film grants. Cultural investments. Shell donations. Smart."*

A logistics officer added grimly, *"He's not planning a blast. He's planning a broadcast."*

Rudra replied, *"Exactly. He wants to hijack the narrative. Use the festival as the perfect distraction. Discredit our systems. Showcase his reach."*

The general turned away from the screen, stepping closer to Rudra now, his eyes sharper than ever, *"And you? You're the bait. Again."*

Rudra didn't deny it. He just nodded, *"He's obsessed with me, sir. He tried to kill me in Rajasthan. Failed. Tried to break me during the shoot. Failed. Now he'll try to destroy everything I care about... starting with her."*

A silence fell. The unspoken truth was out. This wasn't just about Zameer anymore. This was personal.

Pratap Singh spoke in a quiet and calculated tone, *"Fine. You'll lead this op. From the inside. Surveillance embedded. We'll disguise our agents as campus crew, film techs and journalists. You give the signal. No one moves until you do."*

He walked over to a drawer and pulled out a small black signal trigger like a smooth pen lid, barely noticeable. He placed it on the table between them and asked Rudra, *"You know what this is."*

Rudra nodded, *"One press, one frequency. Covert teams lock and move."*

Pratap Singh replied, *"You press it only once. And only when you see him. Not a shadow. Not a guess. Do you understand?"*

Rudra looked him dead in the eye, *"I won't blink, sir."*

Pratap Singh replied in a gruff voice, *"Good. Then may God be with you. Because if this goes wrong... it won't be just your heart that breaks. It'll be national security."*

He turned to the rest of the officers, *"Gentlemen! Operation Narsimha is live."*

The lights dimmed. The screen went black. Everyone began to disperse. But Rudra lingered. He stared at the 3D projection of the amphitheater again and then tapped the auditorium where Aagya would sit, highlighted on his personal HUD. He zoomed

in. Then whispered to himself, *"One more day, Zameer. Just one more. And I end this with your face in the dirt... and her walking away untouched."*

30. The Film Festival

The day of reckoning had finally arrived. Rudra woke up to the vibration of his phone, buzzing insistently against the wooden desk in his room. For a moment, he didn't move. His neck was stiff from sleeping in the chair, eyes burning from the screen he had finally shut hours ago. The room smelled faintly of cold coffee and ink. Across from him, the black spiral on the board stared back with red threads, names and timelines. It was the anatomy of Lashkar-e-Qayamat still incomplete and still breathing.

His phone buzzed again.

SUPREME COURT.

He smirked despite himself and picked up. Before he could speak, her voice came through, sharp, amused, and unmistakable in Punjabi, *"So? My khotta puttara finally woke up? Or should I ask Waheguru to personally come knock you out of bed?"*

Rudra exhaled, smiling. *"Good morning to you too, Mumma."*

"Good morning nothing," she said. *"Today is your big day. I had to make sure my son wasn't drooling on his keyboard."*

"I was working," he replied. *"I fell asleep by mistake."*

"I know," she said softly. *"You always do."*

There was a brief pause. Then her tone shifted... calmer, deeper, *"I called to wish you all the best. Whatever happens today... remember, you've already done your duty. The rest isn't yours to carry."*

"Thank you, Mumma," he said. *"I really need your blessings for today's war."*

"You've had them since the day you learned to stand without falling," she replied. "And even before that."

Rudra leaned back, eyes drifting toward the ceiling.

"Mumma," he said after a beat. "How's work?"

She didn't sigh. She never did.

"The same mess," she replied evenly. "I'm still skeptical about the promotion, beta."

His jaw tightened. *"Still?"*

"One year," she continued. "One full year of files moving in circles."

He already knew the details. She'd never hidden them from him, only refused to dramatize them.

"The Millwright workshop post," she said. "After becoming its in-charge, everything changes. Authority. Responsibility. But the current man sitting there... everyone hates him."

Rudra's fingers curled.

"He's incompetent," she added calmly. "But very good at licking boots. Senior officers, politicians — favors, dinners, flattery. He's made sure they look away."

"And his candidate?" Rudra asked, though he already knew.

"My junior," she said simply. "Less experience. Less integrity. But very obedient."

"That bastard," Rudra muttered.

"Language," she warned gently. "Don't poison your own mouth."

"He's made things difficult for you on purpose, mumma," Rudra said. "I know he has."

"Yes," she agreed. "Transfers delayed. Reports questioned. Small things made heavy. But I will not bend."

"You deserve that post, Mumma." Rudra said firmly. "You've earned it."

She smiled on the other end... he could hear it. She replied, "I believe in Waheguru more than I believe in myself," she said. "And in Mahadev too. They never abandon honest work."

Rudra let out a dry laugh, "Yeah... right. They've done a brilliant job with my life too, haven't they?"

Her voice sharpened instantly, "Don't say that."

"Mumma – "

"No," she cut him off. "You don't get to speak like that. Not after everything you've been saved from."

He straightened.

"You think I don't see it?", she continued. "Waheguru and Mahadev have protected you from things I will never fully understand and won't ever know. From dangers that passed by your shoulder without touching you."

She paused and added, "There are dangers you were saved from without ever knowing their names. Paths you didn't walk because someone held your shoulder back. You don't have to see faith for it to be working."

She further added, "Beta.... You're alive. You still know right from wrong. You still fight without becoming cruel. That itself is grace and a proof of his blessings."

Silence stretched between them.

"Alright," Rudra said quietly. "For once... I'll believe you. From my whole heart."

"That's all I ask," she replied.

Then her tone lightened again, mischievous, "Anyways, how is Aagya?"

Rudra froze and then replied shyly, *"She's... fine."*

"Fine?" she teased. *"Or fine fine?"*

"Mumma," he muttered, ears heating up.

She laughed softly, *"Did you give her that?"*

Rudra swallowed, *"Yes."*

A beat.

"And?", she pressed. *"Did she take it?"*

"Yes," he said again, quieter this time.

Another beat. Longer. Dangerous.

"And how did she look when you gave it to her?", his mother asked, voice honey-sweet. *"Did she understand what it meant?"*

Rudra stared at the wall, jaw tight. Inside, his heart was doing something between a sprint and a victory dance.

"She... didn't say much," he replied carefully. *"But she held it properly. Like it mattered."*

His mother hummed with approval. *"Good girl."*

"Mumma – ", he muttered, clearing his throat. His face warmed despite himself.

"I'm serious," she continued. *"That chunni has seen prayers you've never heard. If she respects it, then she respects you."*

Rudra's lips twitched despite his effort to stay neutral. His shoulders straightened just a little.

"And now you're smiling," she said immediately.

"I am not," he replied but his tone conveyed the truth.

"You are," she insisted. *"I can hear it in your voice."*

He shook his head, alone in the room, grinning like an idiot, *"You imagine things."*

She laughed again, warm and full. *"Beta, a mother doesn't imagine these things. She knows. And I haven't whitened my hair just by simply standing under the sun."*

There was a brief silence... comfortable, glowing.

"Take care of her," his mother added softly.

Rudra's voice dropped, steady and sure. *"With my life."*

"So.... When are you introducing me to my future daughter-in-law?", she teased him more.

"Mummaaa....," he groaned. *"Latika wasn't enough that you've started too?"*

She laughed. *"Arre, I'm your mother. I've all the rights."*

"Soon," he said, embarrassed. *"Okay? Soon."*

"Hm," she hummed. *"So, what time does your event start?"*

"Twelve," Rudra replied. *"It'll go on till late night."*

"Take care, beta,", she said softly. *"May Waheguru bless you, puttara."*

In the background, his father's voice called out, asking for the phone.

She hesitated. *"Your papa wants to talk to you."*

Rudra's jaw tightened.

"I don't want to ruin today by talking to him," he said quietly.

She sighed. *"Don't speak like that about your father. Don't ruin your fate by speaking ill of him, my son."*

"You know why I say this, Mumma," Rudra replied. *"And you know my feelings aren't changing. Ever."*

There was a pause.

"...Alright," she said gently. "I understand."

"Thank you," he said. "Take care."

"You too," she replied. "No matter what happens today, I'm proud of you."

He smiled and said, *"Thank you so much for everything, mumma. I love you."*

"I love you too, beta.", she replied.

Just as Rudra was about to say goodbye, she stopped him, *"Oh – and Rudra."*

"Yes, Mumma?", he asked.

"I've sent something special for you," she said, her voice soft but certain. "You'll receive it by today."

He frowned slightly, *"What is it?"*

She smiled. He could hear it, *"It's something you'll love."*

Rudra froze, *"Mumma – "*

"No questions," she said gently. "Some things are meant to arrive before the storm."

His throat tightened. *"Thank you."*

"Take care of her," she added. "And of yourself."

"I will.", he replied like it was an unbreakable vow.

The line was disconnected. Rudra stayed still; the phone clenched in his hand. His gaze drifted back to the board to the black spiral, the red threads, the names that led inward like a prophecy.

Lashkar-e-Qayamat.

"If only I could tell you who I really am.", he thought.

"If only I could tell you what kind of war I'm about to fight."

But he couldn't. So, he stood there... a son who had just taken blessings for a battle his mother would never be allowed to know existed.

.....

Mumbai, that city of dreams and dread, had never sparkled quite like this. From the sea-facing promenades of Marine Drive to the high-rise skylines of BKC, the city buzzed with a peculiar electricity. The sun had barely risen over Mumbai, yet the sprawling lawns of NIVSEA were already buzzing with excitement. Flags fluttered. Banners danced in the breeze. Traffic swerved like veins of adrenaline through the streets, while every billboard, every news anchor, every digital feed echoed just one name – **NIVSEA-RIGA Film Festival**.

It was a cinematic behemoth born from a collaboration between two of India's most prestigious filmmaking institutions, **National Institute of Visual Storytelling & Experimental Arts** and **The Royal Institute of Global Arts**. This festival wasn't just an event, it was the battlefield of the boldest and brightest emerging creators. The event was hosted at the majestic amphitheatre of NIVSEA transformed entirely for this extravaganza. A red carpet stretched across its grand steps like a royal vein. Enormous LED displays cycled through teasers of the nominated films. Paparazzi clicked away as luxury cars pulled up in a steady stream, emptying out rising stars, producers, influencers, and cinema legends. Spotlights rotated slowly over the red carpet. A string quartet played soft cinematic themes. Volunteers in coordinated black-and-gold uniforms guided filmmakers, professors, industry professionals, and student guests toward the registration desks. It wasn't just a university event, it looked like the Indian Oscars for youth cinema. And at the heart of it all stood a massive archway, crowned with golden letters:

NIVSEA-RIGA FILM FESTIVAL 2025

Where Stories Become Legends.

Inside the main auditorium, everything shimmered. Crystal chandeliers refracted light like shooting stars above the waiting crowd. Themed decor wrapped each corner in cinematic nostalgia with reels, clappers, vintage posters, curated installations. One hallway had even been turned into a tunnel of light, syncing frames from past winners in a seamless loop. And at the center of it all was – **The Theatre of Judgment.**

An 800-seater hall was equipped with 4K Dolby projection, surround sound, and two separate commentary decks one for the jury, and one for live feedback by guest faculty and mentors. The jury this year included some of the sharpest minds across cinema, animation, and visual storytelling:

- **Rohit Sen**, National Award-winning editor known for redefining rhythm and emotional pacing in Indian cinema.
- **Mira Saxena**, feminist film critic and screenwriting veteran whose essays had dismantled more egos than box-office failures ever could.
- **Anuraag Kapoor**, a firebrand indie director whose films rattled Cannes juries and local censors alike, unapologetically blurring realism with symbolism.
- **Dev Malhotra**, an internationally respected VFX supervisor whose work seamlessly fused live action with animation for global OTT originals.
- **Saira Qureshi**, a casting director and performance coach known for extracting raw, unsettling realism from both trained actors and complete newcomers.
- **Ishaan Rao**, an experimental sound designer who treated silence as aggressively as sound, famous for immersive audio landscapes that felt almost physical.

- **Kenji Watanabe**, an animation director whose hybrid storytelling techniques dissolved the boundary between hand-drawn emotion and live-action gravity.
- **Masaru Ito**, guest judge from **Kyoto Seika University**, whose presence alone elevated the festival onto a truly global stage.

Giant LED screens cycled through clips of nominated films. Seats were arranged row by row, with velvet ropes cordoning off jury and faculty sections. At the center stage, an enormous digital backdrop displayed the two institutions' logos – NIVSEA and RIGA, pulsating softly with cinematic music playing underneath. The room was buzzing in ten different directions. Filmmakers nervously checked their presentations. Technicians confirmed their file names for screenings. Makeup artists applied final touches to presenters. Laughter. Anxiety. Hope. It was all there mingled in the air like incense and light. Backstage, crew teams bustled with sweat, wires, scripts, and nerves. Security was tight. Especially this year. There were whispers of foreign fundings, of rigged panels, of politics. But no one knew anything for sure. Just that the Ministry had quietly added a special task force for backstage clearance. No IDs. No distractions. Just sharp-eyed men in civilian clothes.

Everywhere murmurs fluttered like moths. Then, they turned to whispers. Because she had arrived. Aagya was draped in an obsidian-black Indo-Western sequin saree with midriff exposure that shimmered with silver temple motifs. Her blouse was sleeveless, backless, and defiant. Her hair was pinned into a sharp bun with loose wisps like rebellion. But today, she wasn't walking alone. Clinging to her hand was Latika, proud as a princess, radiant in a navy-blue lehenga dotted with silver embroidery. She looked around wide-eyed at the lights, the cameras, the crowd and then glanced up at Aagya with a wicked little grin, "*Okay, sheesh, you weren't kidding. This does look like the Oscars*".

Aagya grinned, *"Better. Nobody here slaps anyone mid-ceremony."*

Latika giggled, tugging Aagya's hand like they were sneaking into a candy store.

And then, a familiar silhouette appeared. There he stood in a sleek black three-piece suit. No tie. Just a black shirt, two buttons undone, and a dark silver phoenix lapel pin catching the light. His stubble was sharp, hair slicked back, posture effortless... the kind of man who didn't seek attention, but somehow drew it anyway.

Aagya noticed it immediately. Not the suit. Not the pin. The chain. A dark silver locket with a spider logo rested just visible against his collarbone, slipping in and out of sight as he moved. Her eyes lingered there for half a second longer than necessary. The moment he spotted her, Rudra smiled... soft and sheepish. Like a man who never quite believed he deserved this version of life, but was trying anyway. In his hands was a bouquet of blue forget-me-nots.

"For the woman who turned ash into art.", he said quietly, handing them to her, *"and still managed to drag me back into the blaze."*

Aagya's breath hitched as she took them, *"You remembered?"*

"I live two doors down from this one," Rudra replied. *"I couldn't forget even if I tried."*

Latika gasped dramatically. *"Wow. Rude. I told you not to copy my surprise."*

Rudra knelt beside her and flicked her forehead gently. *"Trust me, moti, nothing I do can top your chaos."*

"First of all," Latika shot back, hands on hips, *"I'm not moti. I'm majestic. And second, stop deflecting. You are totally crushing on her."*

Aagya raised an eyebrow. *"Excuse me?"*

Latika turned to her with the smug satisfaction of someone sitting on nuclear-grade gossip, *"He talks about you all the time in the chawl. Even when he's fake-fighting with the aunty next door."*

Rudra groaned. *"She watches too many serials. Ignore her."*

"You once called her a Shah Rukh Khan climax monologue with legs," Latika fired back instantly.

Aagya laughed, but her gaze drifted again. To the chain. To the locket.

She gestured toward it, *"Can I ask... that necklace. What is it?"*

Rudra's hand instinctively rose to it, his thumb brushing the edge. He hesitated for a moment, then smiled faintly. *"My mother sent it to me."*, he said quietly. *"It's a good-luck charm."*

Aagya's expression softened.

"She sent it before my first major assignment," Rudra continued. *"She doesn't talk much about fear. She just said, 'Take both your heart and your head with you.'"*

He exhaled lightly, *"The Spider-Man symbol was her idea. She said, 'If you admire him so much, remember what he stands for. Power with responsibility.'"*

Latika nodded eagerly, *"Didi he's been obsessed with him forever. Posters. Comics. Dialogues."*

"And...", Latika added, grinning wider, *"the day you and Megha went to his room to pick up his things, I found a full Spider-Man 3D-printed mask hidden under his bed."*

Rudra's face turned red instantly. *"It was... for practice,"* he muttered. *"And it was a limited edition."*

"I hid it back," Latika continued proudly. *"I've been waiting for the perfect moment to reveal this information."*

Aagya and Latika burst into laughter while Rudra started hiding his face in embarrassment. Aagya then smiled at Rudra, *"So, which Spider-Man is your favorite?"*

"Tobey Maguire's.", he answered without hesitation.

Latika groaned, *"Vintage taste."*

"He's the reason," Rudra said simply. *"The quiet strength. The responsibility. Choosing to do the right thing even when no one's watching."*

Then he leaned slightly closer to Aagya. Close enough to be felt, not noticed and lowered his voice. *"The version of me you seem to hate so much,"* he whispered, *"exists because of Spider-Man. He made me who I am today."*

Aagya felt warmth rise to her cheeks before she could stop it. She knew what the word **'hate'** meant in their language.

Latika noticed immediately, *"Didi's blushing. Repeat! Didi is blushing. I officially confirm it."*

Aagya shot her a look, *"Latika."*

Latika grinned, *"What? I ship this!"*

Rudra laughed softly, embarrassed, exposed and lighter than he had felt in a long time. For once, he wasn't a soldier. Or a survivor. Or a storm. He was just a man wearing a good-luck charm his mother had sent him, standing beside a woman who saw him clearly and smiled anyway. Just then, the team arrived and erupted.

Geeta spoke, *"Oh my god, Latika! The legend herself!"*

Aadarsh added, *"Rudra's not-so-silent sidekick! You told me that you made him cry on Holi, remember?"*

Latika crossed her arms, *"That was strategic emotional sabotage. And I regret nothing."*

Megha smiled at Aagya, *"She's way cuter than your casting brief said."*

Simran fake-fainted into Saadhna's arms, *"I can't take this. She's got more star power than all of us combined."*

Ravi added, *"She just hijacked the carpet and we haven't even stepped inside yet."*

Latika tilted her head, *"Hey, I'm just here to collect my award and cause light disruption."*

Geeta said, *"She's officially part of the team now. No takesies-backsies."*

Aagya grinned at Latika, *"You ready to walk the carpet?"*

Latika grabbed both Rudra and Aagya's hands together and squealed, *"Let's go. The world deserves to see how hot my family looks."*

Rudra raised an eyebrow, *"Family?"*

Latika smirked, *"Well, you're basically her bodyguard, I'm your emotional support system, and she's clearly the main character. So, we're a dysfunctional power trio."*

Aagya laughed so hard she had to pause. And just as they reached the golden arch, another voice cut through the rising chatter. It was Zameer posing as Devraj. He looked far more polished than usual, dressed in a deep emerald suit, holding a gift box, *"Hey, Aagya. Been a while."*

Aagya replied in a gentle and polite tone, *"Devraj. You made it."*

He walked forward, hugged her longer than usual, mocking Rudra through his eyes.

"I've been following the buzz. This film... it's going to change everything for you. I just wanted to say... I'm proud of you.", he said, backing off.

Rudra, still beside Aagya, went silent. His jaw tightened. He didn't blink. But Latika noticed. She'd seen it before on set, in between takes and in the way Rudra always looked at Aagya when he thought no one was watching.

Latika spoke sweetly to Devraj with a little too much sugar, *"Bhaiya, I think the press team is looking for you near the photo booth."*

Devraj was caught off guard, *"Huh? Oh... okay. Are they?"*

Latika blinked innocently, *"Yup. They said something about... lighting and angles. Wouldn't want your suit to go unnoticed, right?"*

Devraj gave a tight smile, hesitating for a moment, but then walked off a little flustered.

Aagya spoke to Latika in a soft but scolding tone, *"Latika... that was unnecessary."*

Latika shrugged, swinging Aagya's hand playfully, *"Oops. I'm just a kid. What do I know?"*

Rudra, behind them, nearly grinned. He didn't say a word. But his shoulders relaxed. And somewhere inside, a private orchestra played.

Latika spoke under her breath, to Rudra, *"You're welcome."*

He gave her a subtle side-glance and a quiet nod, nothing more. And together, Rudra on her left, Latika on her right and Aagya walked under the golden arch. The cameras didn't just capture their entrance. They captured a moment. Three lives. Not bound by blood, but by loyalty, mischief, truth... and a love that still hadn't found words. And somewhere behind all the flash and glare, the real story was just beginning. And this time, nothing and no one could interrupt their frame. And together, they walked through the arched entrance, as if the night itself parted for them.

.....

As the sky turned indigo and the stage lights came on one by one, the giant open-air amphitheater of NIVSEA Mumbai transformed into a cathedral of cinema. Velvet ropes guided invited guests to their cushioned seats. The jury panel, seated in the front row, included names that had once mentored Oscar-winning shorts, nationally televised documentaries, and even India's first VR feature. The screening hall inside the NIVSEA-RIGA Film Festival campus was nothing short of regal with a domed ceiling lit with gold-tinted chandeliers, velvet-lined walls soundproofing the intensity of emotions within. Giant projectors buzzed overhead. Each seat was assigned, embroidered with the names of teams and guests in golden thread.

Aagya walked in, arm-in-arm with Rudra, who held a bouquet of forget-me-nots in one hand and quiet pride in the other. But walking just ahead of them chin up and shoulders back like a miniature empress was Latika. Her lehenga shimmered under the golden lights. And her eyes were already scanning the theater like she was the youngest jury member. Behind them followed Aagya's core team, each member glowing with anxious excitement, Geeta fixed her dupatta twice in five seconds, Megha clutched her phone but didn't dare look at it, Simran whispered something about how her heartbeat matched the BPM of war drums, Saadhna was already misty-eyed and Aadarsh, Ayush, Ravi, Mishika, Aman, Ramesh, and the editing twins Shyam and Seeta followed like soldiers behind their general.

They were shown to their reserved row which was the center section, third from the front. Prime seats. Aagya and Rudra sat beside each other in the middle. Latika wedged herself comfortably between Geeta and Simran, proudly swinging her tiny legs over the carpeted edge. Aagya adjusted her saree and stole a glance at Rudra who in his sharp black suit looked like a man sculpted out of secrets and smoke.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?", she whispered to him.

Rudra replied with a faint smirk, *"I was never the one hiding."*

They exchanged a silent look somewhere between war and worship. From two seats down, Latika leaned toward Geeta, *"If they hold hands during the sad scene, I win the bet."*

Geeta tried not to laugh, *"Shh. Focus, you little agent of chaos."*

And then the lights dimmed. A golden reel animation glided across the screen, followed by the official festival logo:

NIVSEA-RIGA Film Festival 2025

The stage announcer stepped up, mic glowing under the spotlight. And then, the lights dimmed. A spotlight appeared. The Dean of Arts & Media Studies stepped forward, dressed in a crisp bandh-gala, his smile warm but ceremonial and began his speech:

"Good morning, visionaries. Welcome to the NIVSEA-RIGA Film Festival... where students don't just learn cinema, they live it."

Thunderous applause erupted. And as he continued his welcome speech, a giant screen lit up with a festival sizzle reel which had clips from behind-the-scenes moments, emotional actor breakdowns, storyboarding sessions, and final cinematic cuts. Some students in the audience teared up quietly, recognizing their hard work on screen. Then came the festival theme announcement:

Theme of the Year:

"Reclaiming Truths, Redefining Futures."

Everyone felt the gravity of those words. This was not just about films anymore. This was about voices. This was about stories that shook the ground beneath silence. And then another announcer took over:

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the NIVSEA-RIGA Film Festival 2025. Today, we celebrate not just films, but the fire that forges them. Two schools. One screen. Countless stories. And tonight... one crown."

Thunderous applause. One by one, many films were screened which received mixed reactions from the audience. And finally, it was their turn.

A deep voice echoed through the auditorium, *"Presenting... Ashes of the Crown. A film by Aagya Avaan in collaboration with Avaan Studios."*

The title emerged in black flame over a parchment-colored screen. Each letter was animated. It was charred, yet eternal. The first frame faded in: An arid battlefield at dawn. Bodies strewn. The crown in the dirt. The camera panned up and there she stood the Princess. Barefoot. Unblinking. Unbroken. Her armor was dented, and her sword bloodstained. The hall was still. Not a single cough. Not a single whisper. Not even a breath misplaced. The story flowed like poetry set to fire. Her brother's assassination in the opening act sent a ripple of shock. The betrayal of the ministers drew involuntary gasps. A child actor's single tear drew soft sniffs from the audience and a proud fist-pump from Latika.

Latika grinned, *"That was me. One take."*

Simran replied teary-eyed, *"Of course it was. You're terrifyingly good."*

Aagya's voice-over narration carried strength and restraint in equal measure. But what made it otherworldly was the animation. Rudra's work danced in every frame: When the Queen touched her brother's crown, flames gently flickered in her reflection. When she smiled for the first time, the background bloomed with sunlight peeking through broken rafters. During the war council scene, shadows moved like ghosts of former kings. Every sword clash, every ember, every falling feather felt... alive. At one point, the camera zoomed in on a royal scroll and in the corners, a tiny flame flickered, almost imperceptible. A layer only a few could catch.

Geeta whispered to Megha, *"That's not animation. That's love."*

Simran added, *"I swear Rudra painted this with his blood."*

Ayush spoke in awe, *"The sound design barely exists. And yet... I can hear the grief."*

Then the infamous stable kiss scene was played. It was tender, muted, and agonizing. Rudra didn't blink. Aagya's knuckles whitened. But neither of them looked away. Because art demands the truth. The Princess, now cloaked in black, climbed the ruined palace stairs alone after the great war with the demon king. Everyone she had loved was gone. Everything she had built, turned to ash. But she still walked. Crown in hand. Face streaked with war paint and quiet rage. She placed the crown on her child version's head, kissed her forehead, and turned into the inferno. The screen turned dark. And in that final moment, a faint golden flame appeared behind her shadow. The very last frame? Her eyes. Looking back... not in fear, but defiance.

There was silence. Deep. Holy. And then, thunderous applause. First row. Then the back. Then everyone was on their feet. A standing ovation. The RIGA faculty were clapping with misty eyes. A famous guest director stood up and whistled. The jury panel exchanged impressed, hushed words.

One jury member spoke to the other, *"This... is not a student film. This is masterwork."*

Back in the middle row, Aagya's hands trembled. Rudra, still clapping, leaned slightly toward her and whispered, *"You didn't just burn the world, Aagya. You lit a whole new one."*

And Aagya? She looked up at the screen, now fading to black, whispered only one word to herself, to her brother and to her past, *"We did it."*

Latika, now standing on her seat with zero shame, let out a victorious whoop, *"And that's how a dysfunctional trio makes history!"*

The whole team laughed. The night wasn't over. But the legacy... had already begun. The lights dimmed once again, this time glowing soft gold, as the stage was rearranged with a shining podium, a tall floral centerpiece, and the gold-plated **"Phoenix Flame"** trophies stacked elegantly in rows. A screen behind projected the festival logo, which slowly faded into a looping highlight reel of the finalist films.

The emcee returned, flanked by two jury members, *"Tonight... we don't just celebrate films. We celebrate fire. The kind that burns inside a director's vision, an editor's precision, an actor's soul. It's time to honor those who turned frames into feelings. Let's begin."*

1. Best Animated Film

Winner: *Echoes of Dusk*

Thunderous applause erupted from the Whistling side. A powerful dystopian short, stylized and avant-garde. The director, Kabir Vyas, walked up beaming, his voice shaking with emotion.

2. Best Live-Action Film

Winner: *The Dusk of Devotion*

Directed by Parth Rajan, it was a cinematic love letter to grief and loyalty. The applause is warm, deep, and well-earned.

3. Best Overall Film

Winner: *Ashes of the Crown*

A gasp escapes the crowd, then cheers erupt. Aagya swallowed hard. Her entire team around her rose in stunned silence. Then, bursting into laughter and hugs.

Geeta whispered with wet eyes, *"We did it... we actually did it."*

4. Best Director

Winner: *Aagya Avaan – Ashes of the Crown*

The host spoke softly, *"Bringing fire to screen, and storm to silence. For a debut that carved its name in thunder – Aagya Avaan."*

Aagya walked up in her black saree with silver motifs, glowing under the spotlight. A standing ovation was there.

5. Best Actress

Winner: *Aagya Avaan – Ashes of the Crown*

The host spoke, *"For embodying rage, grief, love, and leadership all in a single frame. This award goes to the queen of nuance."*

Aagya, now visibly moved, accepts her third award. Her hands shake slightly. Her eyes find her team. Her voice caught, but she spoke and everyone listened.

6. Best Actor

Winner: *Armaan Verma – The Dusk of Devotion*

A solid performance. Polite, proud applause. Armaan bows gracefully before the mic.

7. Best Animator

Winner: *Rudra Suvigya – Ashes of the Crown*

Spotlight swung. Rudra stood in his black mafia-style suit composed, calm, a storm hidden behind those eyes. He walked to the stage with quiet authority and spoke into the mic, *"I don't animate characters. I animate the pieces of people I wish I could hold onto."*

His work was appreciated by **Masaru Ito**, the guest judge from Kyoto Seika University. Aagya's fingers tightened around her trophy with pride when she saw Rudra getting so much appreciation.

8. Best Editor

Winner: Raina Chopra – *Monsoon Hearts* – RIGA

Raina grinned and did a small happy dance before reaching the podium. The crowd chuckled.

9. Best Original Screenplay

Winner: *Hollow Skies* – Written by Kabir Vyas

Kabir collected his second award, visibly overwhelmed.

10. Best Adapted Screenplay

Winner: Diya Mehta – *The Dusk of Devotion*

The Whistling side was buzzing now. Cheers and whistles.

11. Best Cinematography

Winner: Rahul Kumar – *The Dusk of Devotion*

Raw, cinematic textures. A deserving win.

12. Best Production Design

Winner: Pooja Rathie – *Echoes of Dusk*

Futuristic minimalism meets decaying nostalgia. A visual feast. Pooja walked up in tears.

13. Best Music

Winner: *Aarav Sinha – Silent Strings*

The haunting violin score echoed faintly as he walked up.

14. Best Child Actor

Winner: *Latika – Ashes of the Crown*

There was a sudden gasp from Aagya's row. Latika, dressed in a delicate blue lehenga with sash around her shoulder, looks stunned. Her tiny hands cover her mouth.

The host smiled, *"For portraying childhood innocence and internal conflict with startling honesty... this young soul captured our hearts."*

Aagya whispered, *"Go, Latika."*

Rudra nudged her gently. The entire crowd parted to let her pass. She ran up and nearly tripped on her way. The hall laughed warmly. She stood in front of the mic, blinked at the sea of people and spoke in her tiny voice, *"Thank you... for letting me be a part of this."*

The audience melted. Aagya wiped her cheek. Rudra? He was already clapping the hardest.

15. Special Jury Award

Winner: *Children of Shadows – NIFA*

A haunting documentary about war orphans. The audience wiped tears. Some journalists stopped taking notes. Some just listened.

The Jury Head spoke, *"For creating a film that went beyond narrative. That reached into the soul of storytelling itself. We present this award not just to the filmmakers... but to the fire inside them."*

People surrounded the teams. Selfies, interviews, invites and press cards were being handed out like rose petals at a wedding. Photographers clamored. Producers whispered. And the world... took notice.

Latika clutched her tiny golden certificate close, her cheeks flushed from all the attention and muttered to Simran, *"Is this what it feels like to be famous? Because my feet are sweating and I still love it."*

Simran laughed through tears and hugged her from the side. Aagya turned to Rudra. And finally smiled, without anxiety and without fear, *"We made it, Rudra."*

Rudra replied softly, *"No. You did. I just animated the soul you already had."*

He looked toward the sky, the lights, the roaring crowd and then back at her, *"This is your throne. You didn't inherit it. You earned every ash."*

Just then, Latika squeezed between them, tugging both their hands, *"You guys are gonna make me cry again. And if my mascara ruins, I'm suing someone."*

Aagya burst into a short, emotional laugh, just as the emcee stepped forward again. The spotlight softened, the crowd gradually calming after the standing ovation.

The emcee spoke into the mic, *"And now, before we close tonight's historic ceremony... The jury has unanimously requested this. A final word... from the one who lit this fire. Please welcome... the director of Ashes of the Crown... **Ms. Aagya Avaan.**"*

Another wave of applause erupted. Her entire team leapt to their feet. Rudra simply looked up, eyes glinting, his hands gently guiding Latika aside to give Aagya her path.

Latika beamed, *"Go, Queen. Burn the damn stage."*

Aagya stood, her saree shimmered like forged armor. The applause crashed down like rain. She moved forward and paused. Because just past Rudra, barely two rows behind stood Zameer. Clapping. But not smiling. His expression was

unreadable... somewhere between admiration and something colder.

And when Aagya brushes past, he leans in just slightly and murmured, *"Careful, Aagya. The higher you rise, the lonelier the sky gets."*

Rudra caught it. He turned a fraction too late to hear, but fast enough to feel the shadow in Zameer's voice. A muscle ticked in his jaw. Latika perched like a watchful owl in her seat and narrowed her eyes. She got a gut feeling about him that told her to be careful around him. As Aagya walked towards the stage, the crowd roared for her. Meanwhile, Zameer stayed behind clapping. But now with a smile. Too calm. Too calculating. And in his eyes... not defeat, but strategy.

She walked up the steps with the poise of a queen and the heart of a phoenix. No speech in her hand. Just a breath. And truth. She reached the podium. Her eyes swept the room and saw her team, the jury, the press... and finally the back row, where Rudra stood like the only audience she'd ever needed. And from the edge of the aisle, standing on her toes to see better, Latika blew her a kiss.

She took a long breath and spoke, *"I was never meant to be on this stage. I was raised to obey. To keep my voice soft, my opinions quieter, and my dreams tucked away like old saris in a locked trunk."*

Her voice strengthened with every line as she spoke, *"When I said I wanted to make films, they said, 'It's not for girls like you.' When I showed my first script to my parents, they said, 'There's no market for a woman's rage. Try something lighter.' And when I kept fighting... they stopped hearing me altogether."*

She paused. Took a breath. Her eyes shimmered, but her spine stayed straight and she continued, *"This film, **Ashes of the Crown**, isn't just about kingdoms or bloodshed or grief. It's about what it means to be born with fire in your lungs and be told to breathe quietly. It's*

about the girls who stare at their ceilings every night, wondering if the life they dream of exists outside their heads."

Her voice cracked, just slightly, then steadied again as she continued, *"We talk so much about women empowerment. But what about everyday disempowerment? The girl who's told not to laugh too loud. The girl who's scolded for asking 'too many' questions. The girl who clutches her phone tightly on a dark road, praying she won't need it. The girl who cries in silence... because she knows no one's really listening.*

She looked into the sea of faces and for a second, it felt like she was speaking to every girl in the world. She then added, *"I was one of them. And I know I'm not alone. I've met women far stronger than me who never got the chance to speak. So this film... every frame, every breath, every battle... is for them.*

She touched her heart, softly, *"There are girls out there... who go to war daily without swords, without armor... just their silence. This is for them."*

She smiled with teary eyes, *"We were never broken. Just buried. Under shame. Under silence. Under tradition."*

She wiped her tears and continued, *"This film was never about glory. This was about telling a story no one else would. And... making sure every silent girl in the crowd... finally feels seen."*

Her eyes now shimmered with confidence, *"And if my voice tonight helps even one girl feel seen... feel less alone in her fight. Then I've already won."*

She smiled, fierce and tender, like someone who has earned every scar. *"When I wrote her... I didn't know I was writing myself."*

She paused, then looked directly into the crowd, *"Thank you... for seeing her. And thank you... for finally seeing me."*

She then added after a pause, *"To every girl who's ever been told she's too much... You're not. They're just too little to handle your fire.*

Don't shrink to fit into their world. Build your own. You are not a side character. You are the storm that rewrites the script."

She nodded once and concluded, *"And lastly a special thanks from the bottom of my heart to everyone who made this dream possible."*

She glanced at her team and went through all their faces. She clocked her eyes with Rudra and smiled while a single tear dropped from her right eye. Then she went silent. And stepped back.

For a second, just one aching second, there was silence. Not the kind that feels empty. But the kind that follows after a truth has been spoken so loudly... even the air forgets how to breathe. Then, thunderous applause. Like a dam had broken. People rose to their feet. One by one. Then all at once. Every girl in the auditorium, from students to professors, clapped with a kind of ferocity that felt personal. Because it was. Even the jury, old and weathered, are leaning forward with misted eyes. Somewhere near the front row, a young girl from RIGA clutched her chest and whispered to her friend, *"She said everything I've never been able to."*

Rudra didn't clap at first. He just stared. Like she wasn't standing on a stage, but flying. His eyes were glassy, and his chest was rising and falling too fast. And when he finally brought his hands together, it was not for the world to see. It was for her. And only her. A smile played on his lips... not proud. Not smug. But soft. And in love. Like he's just witnessed a miracle he always believed in. Latika sniffled loudly from the team's row, *"Okay. Okay. That was epic. But next year I'm giving her my dialogue coach award."*

Geeta added teary-eyed, *"You are her dialogue coach, baby."*

Latika sniffled, *"Then I want a raise."*

Somewhere to the side, Lt. General Pratap Singh, who came under the radar for security duty, watches her quietly. He leaned

toward his aide and muttered, *"That girl's not just a director. She's a revolution in disguise."*

Aagya's team was in tears.

Megha dabbed her eyes with her sleeve and mumbled, *"I swear I didn't bring tissues because I didn't think I'd cry at our own film."*

Ayush grinned wide and nudged Aadarsh, *"Dude, we worked on that. She made us part of something historic."*

Even the cynical ones, the kind who always believe awards are rigged, were quiet. They know what just happened wasn't manufactured. It was earned. Then finally, the host walked back on stage clearly shaken. He fumbled for words before finally saying, *"Well... I've hosted this ceremony for ten years. But this... This might be the first time I feel like the stage didn't elevate someone. She elevated it."*

The applause continued louder, longer and prouder. And as Aagya stepped down the stairs from the stage, dozens of hands reached out to her... some to shake, some just to touch her arm, as if to say *'thank you.'* And in the middle of it all, she looked up and found standing in the aisle, eyes shining. He gave her a small nod and clapped slowly, fully and proudly letting her take every ounce of the spotlight. And standing just beside him was Latika who raised her hands like a boxing ring girl and shouted proudly, *"Dysfunctional Power Trio for the win!"*

And just like that, the storm had a crown, and the fire had a face. And her name was Aagya Avaan. But far behind the applause, one person hadn't moved, hadn't cheered and hadn't blinked. Standing in the shadows near the last aisle, away from cameras, away from congratulations was Devraj, a.k.a. Zameer. His jaw tightened. His hands went behind his back. Eyes fixed not on the stage, but on her. Not with admiration, but with calculation. He watched her glowing in the spotlight and adored her. And then,

ever so slightly, he smiled. Not wide. Not warm. A silent smile. The kind you wear before you set something on fire.

Zameer spoke to his hidden comms, *"Let them cheer. They don't know that the fire starts tonight."*

He turned, walked into the dark corridor, his silhouette swallowed by the black velvet curtains. Behind him, the applause still echoed like thunder. But the storm... had only just begun.

31. The Night He Chose Her

The air inside the amphitheater still buzzed with the echoes of applause. The stage, still lit in soft amber and gold, radiated the afterglow of a night that had witnessed dreams take flight. Aagya's final words from her speech still hovered in the air like stardust that refused to settle. Then the host returned to the stage, microphone in hand, his smile impossibly wide, trying to ride the high of the moment, *"And now... before we let this night disappear into memory, we have one last surprise for our brilliant creators, stars, and guests."*

He paused as the house lights brightened slightly and then continued, *"The official NIVSEA-RIGA Afterparty begins now! Outside, through the south promenade. We're talking live DJ, private bar, gourmet snacks, a rooftop fireworks show, and yes... the legendary infinity pool is open for the bold."*

The room burst into an explosion of cheers. People laughed, clapped, and immediately stood from their seats. It was like someone had uncorked a shaken bottle of champagne and excitement foamed over in every direction. Aagya's team, still reeling from the emotional storm of the ceremony, looked at each other half stunned and half electrified.

Simran grinned, *"Aagya, we have to go. Tonight is officially historic."*

Geeta nudged her, *"Come on, Director Sahiba. Time to dance like no one's writing reviews."*

Aagya, still catching her breath, glanced toward Rudra who stood silently by the side, watching her with unreadable calm. But her heart was still thundering from the speech, the awards, the

applause... and the quiet pride in his eyes. She let out a soft laugh, *"Alright. Just for tonight... no rules."*

Cheers erupted from her team. Together, they moved through the golden archway one last time. This time not toward pressure, judgment, or competition... but toward celebration.

Outside, the world had transformed. The south promenade glittered with fairy lights hung between palm trees. The pool shimmered like liquid sapphire. The DJ booth blasted thumping bass lines as blue and pink lights danced on the surface of the water. Floating bars lined up the pool's edge, staffed by professional bartenders in sleek black uniforms. Guests were already kicking off their shoes, popping champagne, and diving into the pool fully clothed, laughing, screaming with joy. Every detail screamed luxury, freedom, and release. It was a party worthy of legends. And it had only just begun.

The bass dropped. Lights shattered into a thousand dancing prisms as the crowd poured into the afterparty arena. It was unlike anything Aagya had ever imagined. A glimmering open-air lounge wrapped around a colossal pool lit from beneath like a sapphire. Chandeliers dangled from temporary canopy beams. Bar counters glowed in gradients of gold and emerald. LED panels flashed between festival highlights and abstract visuals. The DJ stood high on a transparent platform, headphones on, soul wired into the soundboard. Confetti cannons blasted into the night. Balloons floated lazily through the warm Mumbai air. And all around, the celebration surged like a living organism.

Near the center, Aagya stood still, taking it in. The team circled her tired, overwhelmed, and radiant. Simran clutched a mocktail and spun in place, laughing. Ravi and Aman attempted an awkward dance battle. Geeta and Megha clicked selfies while trying not to cry. Then... Aagya smiled. The real kind. The kind that wasn't forced through pain or curated for a camera. It was

reckless. Free. She reached for the bartender's tray and grabbed a shot, *"To madness."*

She gulped it and threw it back. Megha spoke wide-eyed, *"Aagya! That's actual tequila!"*

Aagya replied, *"I know."*

She spun, kicked off her heels, and stepped right into the center of the dance floor. The lights followed her like she was gravity. Music thumped. Her body moved... not like a performer, but like a woman finally letting herself breathe. No direction. No choreography. No script. Just her. The team froze for a moment in shock. No one had ever seen Aagya Avaan lose control.

Simran spoke with an open mouth, *"Is she... is she dancing?"*

Aadarsh replied, *"She's not just dancing. She's – she's unleashing."*

One by one, the crew followed her. Laughter echoed. Mishika did a little twirl. Shyam and Seeta started a weird, synchronized arm wave. Geeta dropped her phone and screamed, *"This is history! This is history happening!"*

Aagya kept spinning. She threw her head back. The lights caught the water droplets still clinging to her hair from earlier. A soft spray flew through the air catching the strobe like moonlight. She reached out, pulled Megha into a spin. Then Simran. Then Ravi.

Aagya spoke breathlessly laughing, *"You're all too uptight! It's a party, not a panel discussion!"*

Ayush yelled over the music, *"You're drunk!"*

Aagya giggled, *"Drunk on life!"*

The music grew louder. Behind her, someone did a cannonball into the pool. Cheers erupted. The party was no longer civil, it was alive. And in the far shadows, near the stone pillars lining the perimeter, Rudra watched her. She danced like the world hadn't

almost ended. She danced like she didn't have scars. She danced like he wasn't bleeding from watching her be this happy... without him. Away from the glow of the dance floor, past the neon archways and laughing silhouettes, beneath a crumbling stone pergola at the very edge of the venue stood Rudra. One hand in his coat pocket. The other rested lightly on the curved railing that overlooked the pool. A glass of untouched whiskey sat on the ledge beside him sweating under the summer night. He wasn't dancing. He wasn't smiling. He wasn't even blinking much. Because his eyes... were locked on Aagya. She was the moon tonight. Spinning like a comet in human form... wild, luminous, unaware of the shadows crawling behind her light. But Rudra saw them. He always did.

Beneath the music and mocktails, the high heels and heels of laughter, there was movement. He tapped the tiny transmitter clipped behind his ear, *"Phoenix to Echo Base. Visual on all perimeters confirmed. The crowd is fluid. High civilian concentration. Proceeding with a full scan."*

Lt. General Pratap Singh replied through comms in a static-gruff, *"Copy that, Phoenix. Our operatives are in position. Repeat: no civilian casualties. This is still a public event."*

Rudra replied, *"Acknowledged. Eyes on Aagya. Eyes on Sector Delta, Bravo, and the back bar. No movement yet... but I don't trust this silence."*

He reached the inside of his coat and adjusted a hidden switch beneath his shirt collar. An encrypted tactical signal activated. Somewhere in the venue, three disguised agents took subtle steps closer to their checkpoints.

Lt. General Pratap Singh spoke, *"If Qayamat's Phase One initiates tonight, we intercept before collateral. Maintain surveillance. Don't engage until confirmation."*

Rudra's jaw tightened, *"Understood, sir."*

But his eyes kept drifting back to Aagya. To her spinning. To her laughter. To the way her hair framed her flushed cheeks. To the way her crew looked at her, like they'd just discovered the eighth wonder of the world. She was happy. And Rudra was burning. Not from jealousy. Not even from longing. But from a fear he couldn't name... a knowing. Something was about to shatter. And she didn't even see it coming. He took a step back, sinking deeper into shadow. Then... a flicker. Movement. Someone entered through the east corner gate. Unannounced. Unexpected. Elegant. Smiling. Who else but Zameer? Rudra's spine straightened like a drawn bow. He didn't speak. He didn't breathe. He just watched. As Zameer walked straight through the crowd, past the lights, the music and the masks, the crowd parted as if fate itself had stepped onto the floor. Dressed in a velvet bottle-green suit with gold-trimmed lapels, Zameer walked like a man who owned every soul in the room, yet had never belonged to any world. His smile was art. Too perfect. Too clean. The kind of smile you'd see on a movie poster... Not in a mirror.

His eyes scanned the dance floor like a predator hiding behind a curtain of charm. And then they landed on Aagya. Laughing. Glowing. Drunk on joy and just enough alcohol to stop overthinking everything. She didn't notice him at first. Not until the music softened with a smooth transition to an ambient mix. Not until his shadow reached her before his hand did. He extended his palm, slightly bowed, *"May I?"*

Aagya blinked. The lights shimmered behind his head like a halo. Her instincts hesitated... but her mind was a blur. Everything felt warm and floaty. And somewhere inside, the drunk part of her whispered, *"He's just being polite. It's just a dance."*

Aagya finally spoke, laughing softly, *"Alright, sure."*

She placed her hand in his. From the shadows, Rudra's heart stopped. His grip clenched. His nails dug into the side of his thigh. A slow, steady storm began to rise in his chest.

He spoke into his comms, *"Eyes on Devraj. Repeat: Zameer present. Engaging with Aagya."*

Lt. General Pratap Singh replied with urgency, *"DO NOT MOVE. Let him play. We observe. We gather."*

Rudra growled, *"He just touched her."*

Pratap Singh replied, *"And if you blow your cover now, we lose him. Control your flame, soldier. This isn't personal."*

But it was. To Rudra, it was always personal.

Back on the floor, Zameer and Aagya began to sway. Slow. Gentle. Public enough to seem innocent. But Zameer's hand moved lower. His grip was a little too firm. His breath brushed her cheek as he leaned in just a little too close and whispered into her ear, *"You light up the room tonight. It almost makes me forget how flammable things really are."*

Aagya smiled, unsure if it was flirtation or... something colder. She tried to pull her hand back slightly, but he pulled her just a bit closer and she replied with a nervous laugh, *"You're quite the poet."*

Zameer whispered back, *"And you're dancing on the edge of a volcano. Let's hope you don't slip."*

Something in his tone changed from charm to chill. Aagya's breath caught for a split second. Her body stiffened. Her smile faltered. But the music kept playing. And everyone kept watching like this was just a movie scene. Except for Rudra. He wasn't watching anymore. He was boiling. Behind him, Latika noticed the shift in his breathing and the twitch in his temple. She stepped closer and tugged at his sleeve, *"Bhaiya... are you okay?"*

But Rudra didn't reply. He just unbuttoned his coat. And handed it to her without breaking eye contact from Aagya. Latika clutched Rudra's coat tightly in her tiny hands. It still carried his warmth. Still smelled faintly of him... that strange mix of aftershave and gunmetal she had unknowingly memorized. She stared at him. His eyes were burning, locked on Aagya and Zameer on the dance floor. The storm inside him wasn't hidden tonight. It raged, barely caged behind his soldier's skin. Rudra stood still at the edge of the chaos. He didn't look at Aagya anymore. Couldn't. He uncapped the whiskey bottle resting beside him and took a long, heavy sip. The burn in his throat was nothing compared to the one in his chest. Latika had been watching him silently. She stepped closer, more serious than ever before with no mischief in her eyes now. Just clarity and concern, *"Bhaiya... can I ask you something?"*

Rudra nodded slightly, without looking.

Latika asked firmly, *"Do you love Aagya didi?"*

He paused mid-sip. Lowered the bottle. Didn't answer. But muttered, *"Latika, not now..."*

Latika cut him off, *"No. Right now. Because I've seen enough."*

He turned to her. She stood like a rock. Tiny, but unshakable, *"I've seen the way your eyes follow her like she's sunlight. I've seen how your fists clench when she smiles at someone else. How your whole face changes when she laughs near another man. You clenched your jaw so hard just now I thought your teeth would break. And right now... watching her with Devraj bhaiya? You're burning, Rudra bhaiya."*

He clenched his jaw but said nothing. Rudra looked away. But she grabbed his hand and spoke in a voice trembling but fierce, *"And I've seen something else, too. I've seen you smile. Like really smile. That never happened until she came into your life. Not once in this whole year... until her."*

His lips parted slightly. Words forming but failing.

Latika added innocently, *"I may have only known you for one year... but that was enough. Because before Aagya didi came, you were always quiet... guarded... alone. But ever since she entered your life, you smile more. You feel... alive."*

Rudra looked down, eyes tight.

Latika continued, *"I spent a lot of time with her on shoot. She told me about you. About how you make her feel safe. About how she doesn't have to explain her silence to you. And how bright her world became when you walked into it. She said your silence calms her more than anyone's words ever did."*

She paused. Let it sink in. Then smiled, *"She even told me about your Taj Hotel not-a-date. The closet. The Dinner. The Sketch. The Almost kiss in the rain. She called it a 'non-date'... but her eyes said otherwise."*

Rudra's eyes snapped to her, stunned, *"She told you that?"*

Latika replied proudly, *"Yup. Everything."*

Rudra smirked faintly and shook his head, *"You're way too smart for your age, Latika."*

Latika giggled, *"I get that a lot."*

She reached out, placed her small hand on his, *"I may be a little girl, Bhaiya... but I know when two people are meant to be. And you and Aagya didi... you're made for each other. And I won't stop until I dance at your wedding."*

They both burst out laughing... a sound that felt rare, sacred, fleeting. Meanwhile, in the comms room the strike team was silent. Then team member Echo 3 spoke quietly, *"Damn... that kid's got sharper eyes than intel satellites."*

Echo 2 added, *"Captain's in deep trouble."*

Even Lt. General Pratap Singh, listening from the mobile command van, couldn't suppress a small smile and muttered, *"Emotional mess... but honest."*

On the other side, Rudra laughed and it broke something in him. A real laugh. Hoarse, shaken, vulnerable, *"You're dangerous, Latika. You're gonna rule the world someday."*

Latika replied cheekily, *"Only if I get to rule it with people like you."*

He looked down at her, really looked, as if seeing her not as a child, but a soul that had walked through more than most grown men. Rudra took a deep breath, *"You're right."*

Latika blinked.

Rudra added with a smile, *"I love her. I love her more than I ever thought I could ever love anyone. She healed wounds she didn't even know existed inside me. She made me want to live again. Not just survive, live. I would burn the world down for her, Latika. But... I don't think I deserve her. I'm not whole. I'm not clean. I'm not worthy. I'm not... enough."*

Latika shook her head furiously, *"No. No one can love her like you do. No one sees her the way you do. You're not broken, bhaiya. You're just scared. No one deserves her more than you."*

He looked at her and, in her eyes, he found calm. He finally spoke, *"Thank you for everything, Latika."*

Latika lowered her voice, *"You're welcome Bhaiya... But I have to tell you something. Devraj bhaiya... he makes me uncomfortable. He looks at people like... like they're puzzles to break. I'm scared of him."*

Rudra's expression darkened instantly, *"He's not what he appears. And if he dares to lay a finger on you, Aagya or anyone... I'll kill him in a way that even Yamraj will tremble before coming for his soul."*

Latika stepped back, a little shaken... not in fear, but awe. She saw something in Rudra she had never seen before. Not just a protector... but a storm.

Latika asked softly, *"Something bad is coming... isn't it?"*

Rudra replied, *"Yes. And fast."*

He knelt in front of her, held both her hands and added, *"Listen to me. Remember this code: 'Agniveer Echo – K2 secure vault'. If I ever signal, take everyone you can and hide there. Don't wait. Don't ask. Just go."*

Latika nodded nervously, *"Okay... But promise me something..."*

Rudra replied, *"Anything."*

Latika commanded, *"You'll protect Aagya didi, no matter what."*

Rudra's eyes flared. He stood tall and growled, *"Even the wind that tries to touch her with harm will be turned to ash by my hands."*

Comms clicked on. Pratap Singh spoke sharply, *"Captain Rudra! This isn't storytime! You just leaked intel to a civilian minor –"*

Rudra replied coldly, *"She's not just a civilian sir. She's family."*

And with a click he shut off his comms. Latika's tiny fingers tightened around his. And for a moment... before the night truly collapsed, there was silence. Latika didn't say a word. But Rudra saw the shift in her eyes. She was scared now. And unlike all the other times she acted bold and wise beyond her years... this fear wasn't pretending. It was real. And Rudra felt it too... not just in his gut, but in the air. The silence between music drops. The delay in the lights. The brief power flicker no one else seemed to notice. Something was coming. No, it had already begun.

Rudra turned to scan the crowd again and his instincts spiked. Then he saw him. A man in a guest suit. Average height. One side

of his face mangled with a deep scar that pulled his lip slightly upward, as if frozen in a permanent smirk.

Rudra spoke under his breath, *"Scarface..."*

The blood in his veins turned ice. Flashback hit him like a bullet of that night in the chawl. Latika's screams. The ambush. The fight. The kills. And he was the only one who got away. He immediately tapped the button on his comm device, *"Echo-1 to Command. Visual confirmation on target. Scarface. Code Shadow-77. He's here."*

Lt. General Pratap Singh replied, *"Understood. Lock eyes but do not engage. Phase One might be in motion. Confirm surrounding threats."*

Rudra, *"Copy that sir."*

But before he could assess further, Zameer made his move. On the dance floor, under the pretense of slow rhythm and party glamour, Zameer suddenly leaned in close to Aagya... dangerously close and whispered, *"Didn't I tell you? Volcanoes don't always warn before they burn."*

Aagya frowned, her drunken haze slowly giving way to discomfort as she tried pulling back slightly, *"Devraj... you're being –"*

Zameer interrupted her, *"Sshhh. No one's watching your screams tonight."*

And before she could react, he gripped her wrist tightly, yanked her forward and planted a forced kiss on her lips. She gasped and tried to pull away, but he held her for a heartbeat longer than any dancer ever should. Then, he grabbed the edge of her saree. A flick of his hand. A smile of pure venom. And in the very next second he shoved her backward into the pool.

A SPLASH!!

Loud. Jarring. Brutal. For one long second, time froze. Then, chaos erupted. Zameer's hand moved. Aagya felt it before she understood it... the sudden shove, the loss of balance and the cold shock ripping the ground from beneath her feet. She hit the pool hard. Screams tore through the air. Shocked gasps followed. Footsteps scrambled in every direction. This was the signal. Before Aagya's body even sank fully beneath the surface, Zameer's men emerged from every access point, rifles already raised. No warnings. No theatrics. They opened fire. Panic detonated across the venue. Glass shattered. Tables overturned. People dropped, screaming, crawling, trying to escape as bullets tore through the space with ruthless precision. Aagya's body floated just beneath the water... her limbs slow, uncoordinated. Her eyes were wide... panicked and unfocused. She was drunk, disoriented, drowning in more than just water. Rudra moved instantly. He was already bringing his hand up to his comms.

"Control," he barked, voice ice-cold. "This is Phoenix. Zameer has initiated Phase One. His game has started."

Lt. General Pratap Singh responded without hesitation, *"Confirmed. Stand by."*

Rudra didn't wait.

"Latika!" he roared. "Inside my coat. There's a pen! Press the nib!"

Then, he ran. No cover. No calculation. He ran like a round fired without a trigger and leapt into the pool fully clothed, fully armed. Behind him, Latika stood terrified, shaking and fumbled into his coat pocket. Her fingers found the pen. For half a second, she froze. Then she pressed the nib. Somewhere far beyond the chaos, a signal went live.

"Engage," Lt. General Pratap Singh ordered.

Mission Narsimha went live.

From rooftops and blind angles, Rudra's forces opened controlled fire. Precision strikes. Clean movements. Zameer's men were hit from multiple sides. The carnage escalated fast. Underwater, Rudra reached Aagya. He hooked an arm around her waist, pulled her up, shielding her head instinctively. She clung to him, coughing and barely conscious. He surfaced with her like an animal breaking through water.

"HELP!" he shouted.

The team at the pool's edge rushed forward despite the danger. Hands grabbed Aagya. Rudra lifted her again and climbed out... soaked, shaking, eyes burning with something feral. They moved her immediately, shielding her as bullets cracked overhead. Latika stood frozen nearby, face drained of color, heart pounding so hard it hurt. People were running everywhere, screaming, tripping, abandoning shoes, phones... literally doing anything to survive.

"LATIKA!" Rudra yelled. *"COME HERE! NOW!"*

She snapped back into motion and ran to him. Rudra pulled everyone behind a reinforced wall, positioning them tight to cover. He scanned the chaos. Before they could move again, there was movement. A foot soldier emerged from the smoke, AK-47 raised, advancing toward them. Rudra gently put Aagya down.

"Look after her!", he said to Latika and stepped forward, placing himself between the threat and the group.

"Stay behind the wall," he ordered everyone quietly.

He scanned the debris. Spotted a thick metal rod. Picked it up. He stepped out just enough to draw fire. The soldier panicked and emptied a burst. The rifle clicked. He paused to reload. That was the opening. Rudra didn't waste a second and moved. He hurled the rod with brutal accuracy. It struck the soldier square in the head, knocking him off balance. Rudra closed the distance in

seconds with no hesitation and no wasted movement. Hand-to-hand. Fast. Efficient. Over before anyone could process it. He disarmed the man, pulled the knife from his belt, and ended it cleanly. There was silence, just for a heartbeat. Everyone stared. For a moment, no one spoke. Rudra quickly stripped the fallen man of weapons, slung the rifle, secured ammo, and adjusted his stance... battle-ready and composed. When he turned back to the group, Megha finally breathed, *"How did you – "*

"Not now," Rudra cut in sharply. *"This isn't the time."*

That's when he grabbed Latika's shoulders. Firm. Grounding. Dead Serious.

"Listen to me," he said to Latika, lowering his voice so it cut through the chaos. *"You're in charge now. You take everyone out of here to the safe spot we discussed earlier. Use my name. Don't wait for me. And do exactly as I told you."*

Latika swallowed hard, then nodded, *"Yes bhaiya, I understand."*

Rudra then pulled Latika aside for half a second longer. The chaos roared around them... gunfire, explosions, shouted orders. But for him, everything narrowed down to just her. His voice dropped.

"Latika," he said, steady but heavy, *"Look at me!"*

She did. Her eyes were glassy. Shocked. Terrified. Still standing.

"You protect her," Rudra continued, every word measured. *"No matter what happens here. You don't let her out of your sight. You don't take risks. You don't hesitate."*

Latika swallowed hard, *"I will."*

Rudra shook his head once raising his pinky finger, *"Promise me."*

That broke something in her. Her lower lip trembled as tears finally spilled over. She raised her little finger between them.

"Pinky promise," she said softly, voice cracking as she shook his pinky finger with his. *"I know what she means to you. I won't let anything happen to her. I swear."*

Rudra stared at her for a second. For a heartbeat, the soldier disappeared. He pulled her into a tight hug. Not long. Not dramatic. Just enough to say everything he couldn't out loud. He then picked up a weak and barely conscious Aagya and gently transferred her into Ayush's arms, with Aadarsh helping support her. Rudra touched her forehead once, briefly. Soft.

"I'll come for you," he whispered. *"Always."*

And he pressed a passionate and grounding kiss on her forehead.

"Take them," he said quietly to Latika. *"Get them out. Now."*

Latika nodded fiercely, wiped her tears, and straightened.

"Move!", she shouted at the group. *"With me!"*

Then he turned toward the fire. No one questioned her. Because when the fire speaks, even thunder listens. Latika led the group away toward the designated safe corner, disappearing into cover as the battle continued behind them. She led them away without looking back. Rudra watched them go for one second longer than necessary. Then he turned back toward the fire. The war wasn't over. But Aagya was alive. And that was enough. His eyes scanned through smoke and fire. Zameer was already smiling at him from the far end of the venue half-lit by burning décor, glass crunching beneath his boots. Then he vanished. Rudra didn't chase. He lifted his comms instead.

"All units," he said coldly. *"No mercy."*

The words had barely left his mouth when the automatic fire erupted again. Zameer's remaining shooters turned their weapons on the crowd... indiscriminate, ruthless. Students. Guests. Anyone still moving. Screams tore through the night. But

this time, they didn't last long. From multiple ingress points like service corridors, broken windows and shattered balconies, Echo teams crashed in, returning fire with lethal precision. Suppressed rifles barked in tight bursts. Targets dropped mid-stride. The soundscape shifted from panic to war. The music had died mid-beat. Now there was only gunfire. The air smelled of chlorine, sweat, burning wiring, spilled alcohol, and fear. Rudra stood at the pool's edge soaked, armored and scarred with his battle gear clung heavily against his body. He rolled his shoulders once, grounding himself. Scarface stepped out of the smoke. Every step echoed off the marble tiles.

"Captain Rudra," he called, spreading his arms. "We meet again. And this time... I'll have my revenge."

Rudra's mouth curled into a dark, feral grin, *"You have no idea how long I've waited to burn you alive."*

The first explosion hit the DJ booth. The shockwave slammed into the pool like a giant hand, sending water surging over the edge. Speakers tore loose. Lights shattered. Glass rained down in glittering arcs. The venue was no longer a party. It was a kill zone. Tables flipped. Fire crawled along spilled fuel. Guests slipped, fell, and crawled. Some didn't get back up. And then, the sound. The sound Rudra had been waiting for. The synchronized metallic click of dozens of weapon safeties disengaging. From every direction, men emerged. Not guests. Not security. Killers. Some in suits. Some in party shirts. All with Kevlar plates under fabric, suppressed SMGs, machetes, combat knives. They spread out, moving in practiced formations, tightening the circle.

Scarface smiled wider, *"Remember the chawl, Captain? Where you buried nine of my men? Tonight – I bury you."*

Rudra exhaled once. Rolled his neck. Drew his Glock 19 in a single smooth motion.

"Only one of us leaves this party," he said. "Spoiler alert – it won't be you."

The first attacker charged.

POP. POP.

Two rounds. Shoulder. Thigh. Down. A second shooter fired from behind. Rudra spun and kicked a champagne bucket into the air.

CLANG.

It smashed into the man's face.

POP. POP.

Chest. Head. Down. Scarface roared and rushed in with a short axe. Rudra sidestepped, grabbed a fallen mic stand and...

CLANG.

Steel met steel. Sparks flew.

He twisted Scarface's wrist, disarmed him, and drove an elbow into his jaw.

CRUNCH.

Blood sprayed, but there was no time. Another attacker jumped onto Rudra's back, garrote tightening. Rudra hooked the wrist, flipped him overhead, and slammed him spine-first into a granite buffet table. The table shattered. A blade flashed. Rudra snatched a fork and drove it clean through the attacker's hand. The man screamed. And then,

TAT-TAT-TAT.

Short, controlled bursts from above.

"Echo One," came the calm voice over comms. "Phoenix engaged. Target confirmed. Mobilizing."

Lt. General Pratap Singh cut in immediately.

"All Echo units – green light. Eliminate and secure. Reinforcements inbound. Do not let Zameer escape."

From the balconies, Echo operators fast-roped down like black silhouettes, MP5SDs whispering death. Headshots. Center mass. Relentless efficiency. But the battle didn't slow down. It escalated. A new sound cut through the chaos. A thin, mechanical whine. Rudra's eyes snapped upward. There were drones. Not two. Not five. A swarm. At least twelve dark, insect-like shapes cutting through smoke, red indicators glowing beneath them. Each armed with micro-charges.

"Drones active!", Echo Two shouted. "Multiple vectors! Civilian zone compromised!"

Rudra took the AK47 and started firing in the direction of those drones. His rounds hit the first drone, and it detonated near the bar.

KAAABOOOOOOM.

The blast ripped through glass and bodies alike, throwing debris across the floor. Rudra ripped a serving tray off a fallen table and hurled it.

WHAM.

The tray struck a drone mid-air.

BOOM.

A fireball exploded above the pool, sparks raining down, water hissing violently.

Another drone dove toward the corridor.

"LATIKA – MOVE!" Rudra roared as he saw her taking them all to safety.

CRACK.

A suppressed sniper round cut through the drone inches from the entrance. It detonated harmlessly mid-air. But two more slipped through.

BOOM. BOOM.

One near the staircase. One near the lounge. The structure shook. Concrete cracked. The team got off balance but somehow managed to move with Latika leading them courageously. Echo teams took heavy hits as two operators went down; one dragged clear under fire, another lost under falling debris. Still, they pushed forward. Grenades detonated in tight corridors. Missiles from rooftop launchers streaked in, collapsing escape routes. Drones fell one by one, but not before leaving fire and ruin behind.

Scarface, bleeding, staggered back into view. He pulled a long combat blade. Rudra dropped his empty pistol and AK47. No words. Just movement. Fist to gut. Backhand to jaw. Scarface stormed towards Rudra slamming him into a marble column. Rudra kned his ribs, crushed his throat, and spun him into a burning table. Scarface rose one last time. Rudra pulled a grenade from his vest, pulled the pin and shoved it forward and growled, *"Hell's too soft for you."*

He kicked Scarface back...

BOOM.

The blast tore through the poolside, sending fire and debris into the water, turning it dark with ash and smoke. Rudra staggered, blood dripping from his arm. The Echo teams regrouped around him.

"Clear," Echo One reported. *"Multiple losses. Zone secure."*

Lt. General Pratap Singh's voice came through steady but grim, *"Report status, Phoenix."*

Rudra wiped blood from his mouth, breathing hard, *"One target neutralized,"* he said. *"But this was just the opening act."*

He looked at the burning venue. At the smoke. At the sirens approaching. This war had only begun. He turned to face the fire and the empty space where Zameer had vanished. Somewhere out there, the real storm was gathering. Qayamat wasn't over. It had just begun.

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The corridor echoed with chaos. Screams. Gunshots in the distance. Glass shattering like thunder. But at the front of it all, a 7-year-old girl marched with fire in her eyes. It was Latika with the team. She held Aagya's limp hand in one of hers and the other pointed forward, leading the terrified team through smoke and panic.

"Come on! Everyone with me! Don't stop until I say!", she yelled.

Geeta supported Mishika. Simran dragged a limping Ayush. The twins sobbed silently, clutching Ravi's hands. They reached the far corridor of the venue, i.e., the backstage section. Through there they went to the K2 vault. Latika stopped at a plain wall panel. She took a breath. Remembered Rudra's words and spoke, *"Agniveer Echo."*

A soft beep. Metal hissed open. The hidden green room vault revealed itself. The team rushed inside an armory-like shelter, with steel walls, supplies, and backup generators. Latika laid Aagya down on a thick mattress. She was drenched, shaking slightly, and barely able to keep her eyes open.

Aagya mumbled, *"W-Where... what is this...?"*

Her voice was slurred. Eyes bloodshot. Makeup streaked with water.

Simran knelt beside her, *"You're okay. Just rest. You hit your head when you fell. You're safe."*

Aagya replied unconsciously, *"Devraj... was dancing with me... and... he..."*

She blinked slowly, confused, *"He pushed me...? Was it a joke? Haha... funny..."*

She broke into a small, hiccupped laugh, then suddenly looked like she might cry. She added with her voice trembling now, *"I don't... I don't get it. Why is everything... spinning...?"*

Latika replied gently, *"Shh... didi. Just lie down. You're safe now. Bhaiya's fighting out there... for all of us."*

Aagya looked at her, dazed, *"Bhaiya... Rudra? He was there? Was he mad at me...? I didn't mean to... dance with..."*

She trailed off. Her voice was fading. Latika just held her hand, stroking her damp hair back, *"He wasn't mad. He jumped in after you. He'll always come for you. Always."*

The others were seated quietly, catching their breath. Some cried. Some clutched each other. Latika paced in front of the door like a tiny general. One hand on Aagya. The other near the vault's internal lock panel.

Simran whispered to her, *"You did it. You saved all of us."*

Latika whispered back, *"Bhaiya told me how. I just listened."*

Meanwhile, far from the carnage, Zameer sat on a plush chair in front of glowing screens. His green suit was replaced by a jet-black kurta and tactical gloves. His hair now slicked back, face cleanshaven and eyes like polished steel. Behind him were maps, routes and news feeds.

The assistant returned, *"The Strike team is dead. The bombs were neutralized. Phase 1 contained. But the other side suffered a huge loss."*

Zameer smiled, calm and undisturbed, *"They saved the girl. How noble."*

He stood and picked up a glass of wine. Swirled it, *"Let the Captain think he won Round One. Let them all breathe for a moment. It'll make what's coming... hurt more."*

He walked over to a console and hit a glowing red button. The wall lit up with satellite maps of marked cities with timers ticking down.

Zameer whispered in a deep dark voice, *"Now this country will know fear."*

Back in the vault, Aagya was asleep now. Her head rested against Latika's lap. She murmured Rudra's name even in her unconsciousness. Latika spoke softly to her, *"I won't let anything happen to you, didi. Bhaiya will fix this. He always does."*

But as the vault lights dimmed into emergency mode, Latika's eyes didn't close. She wasn't tired. She was waiting. For the storm to knock on their door.

32. Where Fire Drowned

Smoke still curled from the shattered edge of the pool. The night outside the venue had gone eerily quiet, the kind of silence that only follows mass violence. The air was thick with gunpowder, burnt wiring, chlorine... and something heavier. Regret.

Rudra stood inside the temporary military command center. It was a steel-clad van converted into a mobile operations unit. Monitors lined up the walls, looping CCTV footage, drone feeds, thermal maps blinking red across multiple zones. His clothes had dried stiffly against his body. Blood had crusted over his knuckles. A cut near his temple still leaked faintly, tracing a slow line down his cheek. He didn't wipe it away. He stood straight. Silent. Like a soldier awaiting a sentence.

Across the room, Lt. General Pratap Singh stood with his back turned and hands clasped behind him, staring at the wall of screens. No one else spoke. Not a single Echo operator dared breathe too loudly. Finally, Pratap Singh turned. Slowly. His face was carved from stone.

"Where is Zameer?", he asked coldly.

Rudra met his eyes without hesitation, *"He escaped, sir."*

The words landed like a gunshot. Pratap Singh's jaw tightened, *"Why?"*

Rudra didn't answer immediately. That was mistake number one. Pratap Singh's voice rose... not loud yet, but dangerous.

"Why," he repeated, stepping closer, *"is the single most dangerous man we have been hunting for five years still breathing?"*

Silence stretched. Then it snapped. Pratap Singh exploded.

"WHY THE HELL IS HE STILL ALIVE, CAPTAIN?" he roared. "You had the visual. You had proximity. You had a goddamn perimeter lockdown. You had authorization!"

The entire Echo Unit froze. No one had ever heard him raise his voice like this. Rudra finally spoke... calm, stripped bare of excuses, *"He pushed Aagya into the pool. She was drowning. I had to choose."*

That did it. Pratap Singh stepped in close, fury boiling under control, eyes locked onto Rudra's, *"And you chose her?"*

Rudra nodded once, *"Yes, sir."*

No justification. No hesitation.

A slap came without warning. Sharp. Hard. Echoing off steel walls. Rudra's head snapped to the side. The room went dead silent. Every Echo operator stared, stunned. Men who had followed Rudra into hell looked away, not out of disrespect, but because watching this felt wrong. Rudra didn't move. Didn't touch his face. Didn't look away.

Pratap Singh's voice cut through the silence like a blade, *"You were the only one who saw through his mask," he snarled. "You were our only shot at stopping **Qayamat-e-Hind** before it ever began. And you let him walk away... for a girl."*

Rudra's jaw tightened. Not with anger. With grief.

"She's not just a girl, sir," Rudra said quietly. "She's a civilian. And I swore an oath to protect civilians. Not just territory. Not just flags. The people who make this country worth protecting."

Pratap Singh turned away in disgust.

"And how many died tonight because of your morality?" he shot back. "How many soldiers? How many students? How many families will never get answers?"

Silence. He didn't wait for a response.

"You let your emotions blind you, Captain.", Pratap Singh continued, voice sharp with contempt. *"You were not a soldier tonight. You were a man in love."*

That one cut deeper than the slap. Rudra lifted his head slowly. Eyes bloodshot. Voice steady.

"I was both, sir.", he said. *"And I will fix this."*

Pratap Singh scoffed and turned his back again, *"No, you won't. You're off the mission."*, he said coldly. *"Effective immediately. Hand over command. You're done."*

A murmur rippled through the room. Shock. Disbelief. Rudra, the man everyone trusted, dismissed like dead weight. Rudra didn't argue. He took one step forward. Then another.

"I accept responsibility," he said. *"For every mistake. For every life lost."*

He paused and then added, *"But not for saving one."*

Pratap Singh turned sharply. Rudra met his gaze... unbroken.

"Give me one last chance, sir.", Rudra said. *"Strip my rank. Put a leash on me. Put a bullet in my back if I fail. But let me end what I started."*

The room held its breath. Pratap Singh studied him for a long, brutal moment and finally spoke, *"When Phase Two begins,"* Pratap Singh said slowly, *"you won't be saving her."*

He stepped closer and added, *"You'll be saving India."*

A pause. Then, quieter as he stepped closer, *"You're my most trusted soldier. Don't you dare fail me again, Captain. Or it'll be your last mistake."*

Rudra saluted. Not with pride. With resolve, *"Yes, sir."*

As he turned to leave, every Echo operator straightened. Not because of rank. But because the man walking past them had just been broke and had refused to bend.

Meanwhile, the vault was silent. Too silent. Only the soft hum of the generator buzzed in the background. Everyone sat huddled in corners with wide eyes, pale faces and stiff limbs. No one spoke. No one dared. Latika sat beside the unconscious Aagya, brushing her damp hair away from her face. Simran held Seeta, whose tiny shoulders still trembled. Ravi, Ayush, Geeta were all pressed together like survivors of a shipwreck. Then, **THUMP**. The vault door jolted. A moment of panic exploded in the room.

"Did they find us?!", asked a terrified Geeta.

"Stay back! Grab something – !", said Ayush.

Mishika grabbed a metal rod, *"Defend Aagya!"*

The door creaked open, and a tall silhouette stepped inside with heavy boots echoing.

Ayush shouted, *"NOW – !"*

Everyone lunged. Simran threw a chair. Ravi swung a camera stand. Latika stood in front of Aagya like a lioness cub. But, the silhouette raised both his hands.

"Stop! It's me!!", he said.

The room froze. Minds caught up to what hearts had already sensed. They saw that it was one other than Rudra. Seeing him relaxed their minds and hearts. Latika's eyes widened. Her chest heaved. And then she ran forward and threw herself into his arms with everything her tiny body could manage with tears pouring from her eyes. Rudra dropped to his knees, hard, on instinct. His arms wrapped around her like they were built only for that moment. He held her tight. Tighter than ever. And she cried into his shoulder with tears of fear, relief, exhaustion... and love.

Rudra spoke softly and shakily to her, *"You're safe. You did it. You saved everyone."*

Latika muffled against his shoulder, *"You came back... like you said you would..."*

Their hug didn't break for a long time. The rest of the room stood frozen watching something stronger than bullets unfolding. He turned toward Aagya. She was still unconscious. Still pale. Her chest was rising slowly. Something inside him cracked. He dropped to his knees beside her slowly, like the weight of the night had finally caught him. He touched her face. It was cold. He panicked, *"Aagya...??"*

No response. His fear increased as he shook her slightly, *"Aagya... please... Can you hear me?"*

He pulled her into his arms, lowered himself to the floor and cradled her against his chest, holding her like the world would snatch her away. Tears welled in his eyes. His lips trembled. Then Latika came up to him putting her little hands on his shoulder, *"She's okay, Bhaiya. She's just unconscious. She's alive because... you saved her."*

Rudra looked up at her and for the first time in hours, his breath returned. He closed his eyes, held Aagya tighter. Like she was the only anchor keeping him from drowning.

"Thank you...", he said in a barely audible voice to Latika.

The rest of the crew stood quietly... afraid, but too tired to ask more. But Simran somehow found the courage to ask, *"What... what was that? Who were those men?"*

Ravi joined her, *"Was it some political thing? Some local gang?"*

Ayush added, *"Is this a prank gone wrong or... something bigger?"*

Everyone looked at Ayush in anger and gave him a death stare for saying something so stupid at such a time.

Rudra then looked at them all. Paused. He couldn't say it. Not yet. Because no one here, not one soul, knew the truth. And they shouldn't. Only Rudra knew who Zameer really was. Only he knew that "**Devraj**", the charming actor, was actually a terrorist mastermind. A ghost in plain sight. A snake in a velvet suit. And until the time was right, no one else could know. Rudra spoke after a pause, *"I'll explain everything. But not now. You're safe. That's all that matters tonight."*

A buzz came from his earpiece from the Echo Unit, *"Vault location reached. Extraction in progress. Vehicles inbound. Confirm number of civilians: 13?"*

Rudra replied in his comms, *"14. Including one unconscious."*

The Echo officer replied, *"Copy. Preparing for a secure escort."*

Minutes later, military trucks rolled into the outer complex. Officers stepped in to escort each person gently, calmly. And a few minutes later, the Echo officers arrived at the vault. The Echo Lead saluted him, *"Evac units ready. Civilians will be escorted home immediately. Per orders from Command."*

Rudra nodded. He gently lifted Aagya into his arms. She stirred slightly, head resting against his shoulder. The crew was guided into an armored van. Rudra stood back, holding Aagya in his arm, her breath steady now with her body light against his. Latika stayed by his side. She refused to let go of his jacket sleeve. She didn't need to speak anymore. He understood.

"You saved her.", she said to him.

Rudra replied, looking ahead, *"I wasn't going to let her drown. Not tonight. Not ever."*

As Rudra walked with an unconscious Aagya in his arms, the others followed, clutching each other, whispering prayers.

Outside, a row of military vehicles waited, headlights piercing the smoke. Everyone was stunned at this sight. Rudra then addressed the group, *"This vehicle will take you home. Six officers will be with you the entire way. You'll be safe."*

Ayush, Simran, Mishika, Ravi, Geeta, Saadhna, Megha, Aadarsh, Ramesh, Shyam and Seeta... all settled into two armored vans. Rudra, still carrying Aagya, walked towards a third vehicle. Latika walked silently beside him but didn't let go of his hand. As they entered and the doors shut behind them, the caravan of army trucks began rolling forward. Rudra cradled Aagya in his arms and Latika sat beside him. Silence wrapped them like armor. The battlefield disappeared behind them as they went through the broken gates of the venue into the still night. India had been bruised. But its protectors still breathed. And Rudra knew that Zameer was still out there. And India hadn't even seen the real face of Qayamat yet.

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The roads were unusually quiet that night. But the city wasn't asleep. It was watching. The army jeep roared softly through the night, its headlights cutting through the misty Mumbai streets. Inside, the air was heavy. Aagya was slumped against Rudra's shoulder, still unconscious, her breathing calm but tired. Latika sat on the opposite seat, her hands gripping the edge of the bench as her knuckles white. Two army officers sat near the doors, rifles across their laps. Their eyes stayed sharp, scanning the streets even as the vehicle moved. And then, one of them turned to Latika and spoke with quiet respect, *"You were brave tonight, Miss Latika. Most civilians freeze in situations like this. But you kept your head down, stayed quiet, and followed Rudra's instructions. That saved your life."*

Latika blinked, almost startled, *"I... I was terrified. But Rudra bhaiya... he didn't let me break."*

The other officer smiled faintly, *"He's trained for this. He knows how to handle pressure. How to handle fear."*

Latika's brow furrowed at that, *"Trained? What do you mean?"*

Rudra didn't answer immediately. He just looked out the window at the orange streetlights streaking past and stayed silent. But Latika wasn't letting this go. She asked in a firmer tone, *"Rudra bhaiya, I deserve to know. What happened tonight? Who were those men? Why were they after us? Where did you learn to fight like that? And why does it feel like... like you've been hiding something from me?"*

The officers glanced at Rudra, as if they were waiting for his permission. Rudra finally turned to face her. His expression was unreadable as he said, *"You really want the truth, Latika?"*

Latika swallowed but nodded. Rudra let out a slow breath, as if he'd been carrying this weight for years, *"Those men tonight? They were part of a terrorist organization called Lashkar-e-Qayamat. They have been active in Mumbai for months. Their plan is to burn India to the ground by carrying out an attack at such a large scale that no one had ever fathomed even in their wildest dreams. The man who led them was Zameer. He's the one everyone knows as Devraj and he is their leader. And they weren't there randomly. They were there for Aagya. For me. They were there to carry out the first phase of their mission."*

Latika's eyes widened in shock, *"Wait... what? But... why?"*

Rudra shook his head, *"That part is still classified. But I've been after him for years. You can almost say that he's the Joker to my Batman."*

Latika laughed at this and so did everyone in the vehicle. Rudra added, *"What you need to know is that they won't stop. Not until we dismantle every last one of them. And most importantly cut the head of the snake before it bites."*

The vehicle hit a bump. Latika barely noticed and asked hesitantly, *"But how do you know all this? Who are you really, Rudra bhaiya?"*

The question hung in the air. Rudra looked at her for a long time. And then, finally, he spoke... his voice low and controlled, *"I'm not just an animation student, Latika. I'm a Territorial Army officer. A trained operative. I work with the T.A. on special missions whenever they need me."*

Latika's breath caught, *"Territorial... Army?"*

Rudra nodded, *"Yes, we're part-time soldiers. We have civilian jobs, but we train, we serve, and when the nation needs us... we fight. I took my commission a few years ago. Tonight wasn't the first time I've been in a fire fight."*

Latika stared at him like she was seeing him for the first time, *"So... all those times you disappeared without explaining... all those late-night calls... you were on missions?"*

Rudra nodded silently, *"And now that you know, you can never tell anyone. Not your friends. Not even your parents. If this gets out, you put my life at risk, and yours, and hers and everyone else's. Understood?"*

Latika's lips trembled, but she nodded, tears brimming, *"I promise. I won't say a word. But Rudra bhaiya..."*

"Hmm?", Rudra met her eyes.

Latika spoke softly but with pride, *"I'm proud of you. So proud. You saved me. You saved all of us tonight."*

For a brief moment, Rudra's stoic mask softened. He replied with a bright smile, *"Thanks a lot for always believing in me Latika. Hold onto that pride. Because this fight isn't over yet."*

The jeep turned into the narrow lane leading to the chawl. The night was still watching. And Rudra's war, both outside and inside, was far from finished.

The news was everywhere:

"Terror Scare at Film Festival."

"Mystery Attack Shocks Mumbai Elite."

"Is Devraj Handa Missing?"

Screens flashed across markets, tea stalls, and living rooms. But in one quiet, humble corner of the city... a very different kind of tension was unfolding. The military vehicle pulled into Rudra's chawl. The moment he stepped out, still holding Aagya in his arms with Latika by his side, a sea of familiar faces rushed forward. Gasps. Tears. Voices.

A neighbor spoke in shock, *"Rudra beta?! What happened – ?"*

An aunty next door added, *"Is she okay? Who is – oh my god... that's Aagya!"*

The crowd gathered fast. Flashlights flickered. Phones clicked. Questions bombarded him. But Rudra didn't stop. Latika's eyes searched through the crowd and then she saw her parents. Her mother screamed, *"LATIKA!!!"*

Her father dropped the bag he was holding and ran to her. Latika burst into sobs as they wrapped her up, falling to their knees with her in their arms, *"Maa... Papa... I-I'm safe. Rudra bhaiya... he saved me."*

Her mother clutched her tighter. Her father's hands trembled on her shoulders as he spoke to Rudra, *"You saved our daughter... our only child... again... You've always been like a son to us, Rudra beta."*

He placed both hands on Rudra's shoulder. Eyes wet. Gratitude pouring like rain. Rudra simply nodded. No words could fit what they all felt. But the moment shifted quickly. Someone pointed toward Aagya who was still in Rudra's arms, completely unconscious and he was bombarded with questions again – *"Is she hurt?!", "Is she okay?!", "She's not moving – ", "What happened to her?!"*

Rudra kept his voice calm, *"She's not hurt. Just unconscious. She was exhausted. Drained. She'll be alright by morning."*

He didn't wait for follow-up questions. He gently adjusted Aagya in his arms and walked past the crowd, straight into the narrow stairwell that led to his tiny room on the third floor. The narrow stairwell creaked beneath Rudra's heavy boots. The third floor of the chawl was dimly lit with one flickering bulb overhead, buzzing like a lazy insect. The sounds of the crowd still echoed faintly below... but up here, it was quieter. Aagya lay still in his arms. Her wet hair draped across his forearm. Her hand, limp against his chest. Her skin still cold from the water, yet glowing under the amber streetlight pouring through the window slats. Every step he took echoed with questions he couldn't answer:

"Why did she trust me?"

"Why did I choose her over duty?"

"Will she ever forgive me if she finds out the truth?"

But his heart had stopped listening to his mind long ago. He reached his door which was old, wooden and slightly uneven. He took out his keys from his pocket while still holding Aagya in his arms, unlocked the door and kicked it open gently with his boot. With a creak, the room welcomed him like an old soldier returning from war. It was small. Just enough space for a bed, a shelf, and memories too heavy to move. He walked in carefully, ducking slightly as he passed under the cracked ceiling beam. The bed stood against the wall... single, slightly rusted frame, mattress worn in all the right places. But tonight, it looked like the softest place on earth. Rudra leaned down and slowly laid Aagya onto the bed. His arms lingered beneath her for a second too long... not out of desire, but unwillingness to let go. Her head rested into the pillow with a soft sigh. Her lips parted slightly. A drop of water rolled from her hairline, down her cheek, into the fabric. Rudra laid her down slowly and carefully as if she were made of glass.

He pulled a blanket over her. Tucked a pillow beneath her head. Then he just... sat beside her. On the edge of the bed. And stared. The storm outside still echoed in his mind... the gunshots, the explosions, the slap from his commander. The guilt. The pain. But right now, he was just a man. Sitting beside the woman he had chosen over everything else. He looked at her face. So peaceful. So unaware. He let out a breath, closed his eyes for a second.

Rudra whispered looking at the ceiling, *"Thank you... God... fate... whoever's listening. For once, you did something right. Even if I had stopped him tonight, it would've been in vain. Like what's even the point of my existence if I can't spend it with her? What's the worth of my strength if I cannot eliminate every pain and threat from her life?"*

He smiled faintly. Then looked again. He forgot how to breathe. She looked like a goddess fallen from the skies into the arms of a broken man. And he didn't know what terrified him more — losing her or deserving her. He pulled the blanket over her legs gently, tucking the corners like she might disappear if he didn't secure her tightly enough. Then, he sat beside her elbows on his knees, hands folded, and eyes down. His mind was loud. But the room was quiet. He stared at the wooden floor for a long minute. Then, he looked up again. His eyes scanned her face. Pale, yet perfect. Her eyelashes flickered slightly as she dreamed or maybe relived the horror he couldn't save her from in time. Her saree had dried unevenly. The pallu had slipped to one side. A breeze entered through the open window. It played with the edge of her saree lifting it slightly. His eyes caught a glimpse of her waist... smooth, soft muscle, the faintest line of abs visible beneath her skin. Her huge breasts caught his attention which fell and rose like a tide that could drown the entire earth. He froze. Not in lust. But in surprise.

Rudra spoke under his breath, adjusting her hair strands behind her ears, *"You're divine."*

He swallowed hard. His shirt still hung loose... unbuttoned, revealing the sweat dried ridges of his chiseled frame. Aagya Avaan... the poised, distant, invincible woman the world admired... wasn't made of marble. She was real. So painfully real. He stood up. Ran a hand through his messy, still-damp hair.

Rudra whispered to himself, *"Don't be a fool. She trusts you. She's too sacred and divine. I'd rather die before looking at her in the wrong way."*

He carefully reached out and adjusted her pallu over her shoulder, not because anyone was watching, but because she deserved dignity, even in sleep.

Rudra muttered, *"I won't touch you... Not unless you want me to."*

He began to step back toward the door... to give her space, to let her rest. But just then, her fingers caught his wrist. Delicate. Barely there. But they held him as she murmured in her sleep, *"Stay..."*

Rudra turned, stunned. Her eyes were still closed. But her hand gripped his like she never wanted him to leave. He knelt down slowly and spoke with his heart racing, *"You don't even know what you're asking for..."*

Still, he couldn't move. He sat next to her again. Only this time, he lay down next to her. Carefully. Quietly. She shifted in her sleep. Her body found his like it had done it a hundred times before. Head against his chest. Fingers curled near his ribs. Leg brushed his thigh. He froze for a second. Then let out the breath he didn't know he was holding. And wrapped his arms around her... protective, reverent and still. He didn't close his eyes immediately. He just stared at the ceiling. Because tonight... he didn't know if sleep was peace or punishment. But as her breath matched his, soft and slow, he finally let go. And sleep claimed him quietly, like a promise.

33. Where Love Ignited

The next morning sunlight spilled into the tiny room through the half-open window. The city had woken up. Birds chirped. Vendors shouted. Life moved. But inside the room... everything was still. Aagya stirred. Her eyes fluttered open. Head pounding. Mouth dry. Skin slightly chilled. And then... she froze. She was lying in Rudra's bed. Blanket half off. Saree wrinkled and awkwardly misaligned. Her blouse strap twisted. Petticoat loose. And Rudra... was holding her. His strong arm was draped protectively around her waist. Their bodies pressed close. Her breath caught.

"What the hell – ", she whispered.

And then she suddenly screamed, *"WHAT THE FUCK!?!"*

She shoved Rudra with both arms and he, still half-asleep, was thrown off balance.

CRASH.

He fell off the bed hard. His shoulder slammed into the edge of the wooden table nearby.

"Ah – shit! OUCH!!", he groaned.

He clutched his shoulder, pain blooming fast. He looked up, confused, and disoriented.

Aagya panicked, *"What did you do to me?! What the hell did you DO?!"*

Rudra got alarmed, *"What – Aagya, what are you – ?"*

Aagya's voice trembled in fear, *"I woke up half-exposed... in YOUR bed?! With YOU?! I trusted you, Rudra! I thought you were – "*

She grabbed a metal glass and threw it at him. He ducked. It hit the wall and clanged onto the floor as she shouted, *"What the FUCK did you do to me last night?! Why was I undressed like that?! I trusted you! And you... you – "*

She was shaking. Her hands grabbed anything in reach... a book, a water bottle... and she began throwing them and screamed, *"You RAPED me! You fucking raped me!!"*

Rudra was shocked and breathless. He never imagined even in his dreams that she'd ever think that way of him. Aagya broke down in front of him, *"I trusted you! You carried me here, didn't you?! You were alone with me! You had no RIGHT! You... you bastard!"*

Rudra finally shouted, *"Are you OUT OF YOUR MIND?!"*

Aagya replied furiously with a broken heart, *"I came to you unconsciously! And this is what you do?! I thought you were different. But you're worse than every monster I've ever met!"*

Rudra stood, wincing, holding his injured shoulder, *"I didn't even touch you!"*

Aagya screamed again, *"LIAR!"*

She grabbed a pen holder and threw it. Rudra dodged it and roared, *"STOP IT!!"*

He stepped forward, still holding his wounded shoulder, eyes filled with disbelief, not to harm, but to halt the madness, *"You really think... I would do that to you?"*

Aagya replied, *"You were in bed with me! You had your arms around me – !"*

Rudra replied desperately, *"You asked me to stay! You begged me to stay! You held my hand in your sleep and didn't let go!"*

She tried to push him again, but he caught her wrists and spoke in a shaking voice, *"Stop. Just... listen to me!"*

She thrashed once more, but he pinned her wrists gently against the wall... not violently, but firmly. His body didn't press into hers. His breathing was ragged. He was crying as he spoke, *"LISTEN TO ME, DAMN IT!"*

His eyes were full of tears. He spoke again, choking on his breath, *"Just listen... please..."*

She froze. Not in fear. But in shock. Because the man she thought had wronged her, was shaking in front of her.

Rudra's voice cracked open, *"Last night... I carried you home. You were unconscious. Wet. Shivering. Traumatized. I laid you on my bed. And then you grabbed my hand... and begged me to stay. So, I did. I held you like a fool... because for once, I thought maybe... just maybe... you trusted me too. And that I finally deserve you."*

Tears streamed down his face now, and he was barely able to speak. But he spoke somehow, *"You think I'd do that to you? You think I'd touch you when you couldn't even say yes...?"*

His voice started shaking as he spoke, sobbing like a child, *"I gave up everything last night, Aagya. My duty. My mission. My country. Because you were drowning, and I chose to save you. And the girl I risked my life and honor for... today looks at me like I'm a monster. Like I'm capable of defiling her. She thinks I'm a rapist."*

She opened her mouth, but no words came. She couldn't comprehend any of it.

Rudra added breathing unevenly, *"I've been called a killer. A tool. A monster. But even monsters have lines they don't cross. And if it ever came to harming you... I'd set myself on fire before I laid even a finger on you."*

He stepped back. Let her hands go. Turned away. Aagya couldn't speak.

He spoke bitterly, *"You want to call me a monster? Fine. All my life I've been treated like an outcast and an untouchable anyway. But I never thought that of all the people, you'd think that too."*

He wiped his tears roughly. Refused to look at her and turned away from her and spoke, *"Go!"*

She opened her mouth, but still nothing came out.

Rudra added firmly, *"GO! Before I say something I regret."*

She stepped back slowly. Shaking. Ashamed. Not from fear anymore, but from the realization of what she'd done. She picked her bag from the table and left. The door closed behind her with a quiet thud. Rudra stood still for a moment. Then leaned his back against the wall... And slid down slowly... Until he was sitting on the floor. He buried his face in his hands. And broke down like a man who had just lost everything.

Aagya stepped out of Rudra's room with trembling legs. Her heart felt heavier than ever. Her breaths were short. Her mind was spinning. The pain in Rudra's eyes and his words kept echoing in her ears like a curse she couldn't silence. Tears streamed down her face uncontrollably. She didn't care who saw her. But just as she reached the stairway, a soft voice called out, *"Aagya didi?"*

She looked up and saw Latika running towards her. She was dressed in a simple t-shirt and shorts, standing just outside her home; hair tied messily and eyes full of concern.

"Are you... crying?", she asked, looking at her wet eyes.

Aagya quickly wiped her tears, forcing a weak smile, *"No, no... I'm fine, sweetheart. Just... lack of sleep."*

Latika didn't buy it. Before she could say anything more, the doors began to open. Quietly. Slowly. The chawl came alive. Babita aunty, Latika's mother, stepped out first with her dupatta pulled neatly over her shoulder. Then Sunita aunty from the opposite flat. Chetna aunty followed. A couple of uncles lingered near the staircase, pretending not to stare but clearly worried. No noise. No gossip. Just concern. Babita aunty took one look at Aagya's face and immediately frowned.

"Beta," she asked softly, "are you feeling alright now? Your face looks pale."

Sunita aunty followed from across the corridor, concern written all over her expression.

"You should sit for a moment," she added gently. "After everything that happened... anyone would still be shaken."

Aagya shook her head lightly. *"I'm okay,"* she repeated, though her voice trembled. *"Really."*

No one pushed her. But no one believed her either. Babita aunty stepped closer, lowering her voice so it felt safe.

"You don't need to pretend in front of us," she said kindly. "We all saw the news last night. But no one knows the full truth... except Latika."

Aagya turned, surprised, *"Wait! What do you mean?"*

Sunita aunty spoke next, calm but certain, *"Last night, Rudra brought you here. You were unconscious, beta. He carried you like a soldier carries his wounded."*

Aagya's breath caught.

"There wasn't a single scratch on you," Sunita aunty continued. "And our Latika... he saved her too."

Chetna aunty nodded from behind them, *"He didn't even stop to rest,"* she said quietly. *"Didn't answer a single question. Just took you straight to his room, laid you down carefully... and sat beside you."*

Her eyes softened.

"Like a protector," she added.

Aagya's vision blurred. She turned slowly toward Latika. The girl's eyes were glossy now, her hands clenched together.

Babita aunty spoke again, her voice warm but firm, *"Whatever you're searching for, beta... Latika knows the truth better than anyone here."*

Her knees buckled, and she sank down in front of Latika, gripping her wrists with shaking hands. Her voice broke into a whisper, *"Tell me... please. Tell me everything."*

The chawl fell silent. No questions. No interruptions. Just people standing guard over a moment that mattered. Latika's face was unreadable. She nodded silently, took Aagya's hand, and guided her into her small, cozy room. The door clicked shut behind them. Latika turned the lock slowly. Not in fear... but in finality. Aagya stood in the middle of the room like she didn't belong in her own skin. The silence was so heavy, it almost made her ears ring. Latika didn't speak right away. She walked to the window, opened it slightly, letting in a soft breeze. Then turned around, her expression still unreadable, *"Why are you crying, didi?"*

Aagya swallowed hard, unable to meet her gaze, *"Because... I think I've done something unforgivable."*

Latika just stared as Aagya asked desperately, *"I need to know the truth. About last night. About Rudra. Please tell me everything. I-I think I've made a mistake... a terrible one."*

Latika walked over and sat cross-legged on the bed. She motioned Aagya to sit beside her. As soon as she sat, Latika spoke, *"Okay, I'll tell you. But no interruptions. No 'I'm sorrys till I'm done. Deal?"*

Aagya nodded, wiping her tears. Latika began, *"After the film festival ended, the host announced an afterparty. Everyone was excited. You were glowing. Free. Wild. Happy. Rudra bhaiya... didn't join us. He stayed behind. Watching. Because something didn't feel right to him."*

Aagya's throat dried. Her heart beat faster.

Latika added, *"We danced. We laughed. And then you drank... a lot. You were out of your senses. That's when he arrived. Zameer. The man you knew as Devraj."*

Aagya asked, stunned, *"Zameer...?"*

Latika nodded and continued, *"He's not an actor didi. Not even close. He's a terrorist. Leader of an extremist group called Lashkar-e-Qayamat who's planning an attack on India which will be a 1000 times bigger than 26/11. And Rudra bhaiya... he's been tracking him for years. Bhaiya is a Territorial Army officer didi. The best one."*

Aagya's eyes widened and she covered her mouth with her hands. Latika added, *"No one else knows. Not even his seniors knew it was Zameer until Rudra bhaiya confirmed it. They crossed paths a few weeks ago in a covert operation. Since then, he has risked everything to stop him."*

Aagya spoke, her body shaking rapidly, *"But... last night..."*

Latika continued, *"When Zameer asked you to dance, he saw it. When he kissed you, he saw it. And when Zameer shoved you into the pool, he jumped in without a second thought."*

Aagya's hand flew to her lips, *"I don't... I don't remember any of that..."*

Latika replied with teary eyes, *"You were out of your senses, didi. But he saved you. He carried you. Protected you. And he gave up the only chance he had to capture Zameer."*

Aagya screamed, *"Oh my God...!!!"*

Latika added, *"He handed you to me... and said just one thing: 'Keep her safe.' And then he went back into the carnage. Fought his men and killer drones. Got injured. And still didn't care."*

Aagya was frozen. The guilt in her chest rose like acid. Latika now revealed a secret, *"He told me all this on our way back to chawl in the jeep. And in the middle of all that chaos... when you were dancing with Zameer, he told me... that he loves you."*

Aagya turned sharply, *"He... what?"*

Latika nodded, *"Yes. He told me that you made him feel human again. That you brought light into a world he didn't even realize had gone dark. And he told me, if anything ever happened to you, he'd burn the sky to bring you back."*

Aagya covered her face. Latika almost broke down, *"He said he didn't feel worthy of you. But he would burn the world down just to keep you safe. And then... when I told him I was scared of Devraj, he told me he'd kill him in a way that would make even Yamraj flinch."*

Aagya broke. She sobbed into her hands, *"I... I thought he... I accused him... I said such horrible things..."*

Aagya stopped in between and thought that Latika was too small to understand what rape is. She was just an innocent little child after all.

Latika asked puzzled, *"What?"*

Aagya cried harder, *"I said something extremely filthy and accused him of something he could never even dream of. And he didn't even raise his voice at me. He just stood there... crying..."*

Latika was shocked by this revelation.

Aagya added, *"I was scared. I woke up in his arms. I thought he wronged me – "*

Latika replied furiously, *"Do you even hear yourself? Didi how could you even think that Rudra bhaiya could ever harm you? You were unconscious and he took care of you. He watched over you like a guardian spirit."*

Latika's jaw clenched. She looked away for a moment, blinking fast, *"I don't know what you thought he did that was so wrong, but I can bet my life on it that he can never even dream of hurting you."*

Latika looked into her eyes with a fury Aagya never saw before, *"Do you have any idea how much he has sacrificed? How much has he suffered? How much pain and loss has he endured over the years? He could have been a national hero last night. But he chose you. Not because you asked. Because he wanted to. Because you matter more to him than his duty."*

Aagya sobbed, *"I don't deserve that kind of love..."*

Latika replied fiercely, *"You didn't deserve it last night. But you still have time to earn it."*

Aagya looked at her, devastated, *"I've never felt this ashamed in my life. I broke him. And I don't even know how to put him back together."*

Latika moved closer and wiped her tears, *"You can. And you will. Because you're the only one who can."*

She cupped Aagya's face in her tiny palms and added, *"Rudra bhaiya doesn't need a perfect woman. He just needs you. The real you. The one who made him laugh that day in the car. The one who held his hand during the Taj date. The one he stayed up all night to protect. That you."*

Aagya looked up, lost and crumbling. Latika sat on her lap and hugged her tight.

Latika hugged her back even tighter and whispered, *"You're everything to him, didi. His only light. Don't let that light turn into his darkness."*

Aagya nodded, tears still brimming from her eyes. Finally, Latika broke the silence, *"Aagya didi... can I ask you something?"*

Aagya looked up, her lashes still damp, her expression fragile. Latika asked in a hesitant but honest voice, *"Do you... love him?"*

The question hit like a whisper and thunder at once. Aagya froze. Her throat went dry. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Her lips trembled as her eyes fell to the floor.

Latika added, *"And don't try to shush me this time. I want to know the truth, didi. The truth you always refused to tell me."*

Aagya looked at her with innocence. Latika waited patiently, the kind of patience born out of understanding pain. Aagya finally spoke, voice barely above a whisper, *"Love him...?"*

She gave a weak, tearful laugh and added, *"Latika... I tried not to. I really did. But the truth is... I do. God, I do. More than I've ever loved anything or anyone in my entire life."*

Her voice cracked as tears began to spill what she had hidden inside her for a long time, *"When he talks, it's like the world stops to listen. When he looks at me, I feel seen... like truly seen. Not as Aagya, the filmmaker, not as the leader, but just... me."*

Latika's eyes softened, but she didn't interrupt. Aagya continued, *"He's... everything I never knew I needed. And I hate myself for the times I made him feel small, unwanted or unseen. Because he never deserved that. Not him."*

Her words tumbled out like confessions from a soul long burdened, *"He's been through hell, Latika. And yet, he still manages to smile. Still cares about everyone else. And me? I only ever added more*

pain to what he already carries. I broke him when all I ever wanted was to protect him."

Latika reached forward, taking her trembling hands into hers, *"Then tell him that. Tell him what he means to you, didi."*

Aagya shook her head weakly, *"I don't even know if he'll ever look at me again. After everything... after what I said."*

Latika stood up slowly, then stood in front of Aagya so their eyes could meet. Her voice carried the kind of warmth that could melt walls built from years of fear, *"Then you'll make him look. Even if you have to sit outside that room all day... you'll make him look. Because he deserves to know the truth. And you deserve a second chance."*

Aagya's lips quivered as she tried to respond, but all that came out was a broken whisper, *"I don't know if I'm strong enough..."*

Latika pulled her into a tight embrace, holding her like an older sister, steady and unyielding and whispered in her ear, *"You are, didi. You always were. You just forgot for a while."*

Aagya broke down completely in her arms. The sound of her sobs filled the quiet space... raw, aching, real. Latika stroked her back gently, her voice barely above a breath, *"You're everything to him, didi. His only light. Don't let that light turn into his darkness."*

Aagya nodded slowly through her tears, her voice muffled against Latika's shoulder, *"I don't know if he'll even look at me again..."*

Latika pulled back just enough to cup her face, their eyes locking in a moment of fierce sisterhood, *"Then make him. Look him in the eyes and remind him why he believed in you in the first place."*

She smiled faintly, wiping the tears off Aagya's cheeks with her thumbs and spoke almost like a blessing, *"Go, didi. Before your fear becomes another regret."*

Aagya exhaled shakily. For the first time that night, a spark returned to her eyes... faint, but alive. She stood, wiping the last of her tears, clutching her phone in one hand and her courage in the other. Her voice was low, but determined, *"Okay... I'll go."*

Latika smiled proudly, standing beside her, *"That's my girl."*

Aagya pulled her into a tight hug again and both of them sobbed. But this time, the tears weren't just from pain. They were from hope. Then... she exhaled. A slow, deep breath... like she had finally stopped drowning. She then reached for her bag lying near the bed. Unzipped it with trembling fingers. Latika looked at her, confused. Aagya didn't say anything. She pulled out her phone. Opened her fashion assistant app. Typed quickly as her brows furrowed in resolve.

Latika asked, confused, *"What... are you doing didi?"*

Aagya replied in a quiet but sure tone, *"Ordering a new set of clothes. Something simple... something me. He deserves to see me as the woman I really am, not the broken one who threw knives made of words."*

Latika's eyes widened and her chest tightened. But she was proud of Aagya. She finally spoke, *"All the best didi. I won't stop until I dance at your wedding."*

Aagya laughed, *"Yes my queen. I won't disappoint you."*

They both smiled with hope as Aagya placed the order on Blinkit. But the smile didn't last long. Something tugged at Aagya's memory. Her heartbeat shifted. She looked down at her bag again.

"...One second," she murmured.

Latika watched as Aagya slowly reached into the inner compartment, the one she never opened unless something mattered. Her fingers brushed against something rough. Black

thread. A scroll. The one Rudra had quietly handed her that night, without a word. The one she'd avoided because she wasn't ready to face whatever was inside. Her throat tightened. She untied the thread with slow, shaky hands. There were ten folded pages joined together by a staple.

Latika asked with curiosity as she watched her face drain of color, *"What's that didi?"*

Aagya replied nervously, *"Rudra gave me this on the day we completed shooting our film and asked me to open it after the screening."*

Latika put her tiny hand on Aagya's shoulder and said, *"Then it's time to read it!"*

Then her face flushed with warmth as Aagya read it in silence. Rudra's handwriting was uneven. Like he wrote it fast, afraid if he stopped, he'd lose the courage. Every word was a wound and a homecoming. The letter was as follows:

"To the most annoying, infuriating, and yet the strongest woman I've ever met, after my mother:

Hey Aagya!

If you're reading this, then I might be dead now. But I'm glad that I was able to protect you. And if I somehow survived, I probably still won't be able to express my feelings to you.

Aagya's breath hitched as she continued to read.

To be honest, I've lived my entire life like a walking corpse. But that blurry childhood memory of you always gave me a ray of hope. Something I held on to no matter how bad things got. And years later when I met you again, it felt like I finally got my soul back. Like I was born again. I never said it, but you silently healed so many parts of me that I didn't even know existed. Before you, I had no reason to live. But after meeting you, not only did I get a reason to live, but I also got back the happiness I

had lost long ago. And I can never thank you enough for turning my life around.

Do you remember the day you hugged me for the first time? In the meeting room of your studio? That was completely unexpected. Just your touch alone felt like that Doctor Strange scene where the Ancient One pushes his soul out of his body for a world tour. There are no words to describe that feeling. Yes, we always fought a lot. But those fights only brought us closer. To tell the truth, whenever you said something harsh or tried to put me down, I didn't feel bad even for a second. Because I knew the pain you were hiding deep inside your heart. Your bitter words always carried that pain. Every sharp word felt like a cry for help. You were never evil. You were just never truly loved, Aagya. And even though you have grown into a woman now, to me you're still that little girl from that closet. When I look at you, I only see that child. And all I want to do is protect her and love her, no matter what. And even if I die doing that, I will have no regrets, Aagya. Because the most beautiful death is the one that comes while protecting your love.

That's right, Aagya. I never said this to you. I was scared of you. Yes, you heard it right. I may not show it, but I'm lowkey scared of you. I've just been trained to suppress my emotions. Otherwise whenever you're around, you scare the shit out of me. But then again, there's a saying that a man is only scared of the woman he truly loves. And you are that woman for me, Aagya. You are my happiness, my laughter, my world, my entire universe and the anchor that holds my humanity together and prevents me from turning into a monster.

Yes, it's you, Aagya. I love you. God, I love you so fucking much. I always have, silently. I never wanted you to get into any trouble because of me. Over the years, I've made a lot of dangerous enemies. And I can never let you get hurt because of me. Because the day you get hurt because of me is the day I'll set

myself on fire. Because what's the point of my life if I can't even protect the woman I love?

You're the one who made me feel human again. If you hadn't come into my life, I would've been finished, Aagya. I may hide it all I want, but I love you endlessly, Aagya. Loving you is like breathing for me. You know what my biggest nightmare is? A world where you don't exist. There is no Rudra without Aagya. I don't know if you feel the same way. But even if you don't, it won't change how I feel about you. Because loving you was my choice and I made it without expecting anything in return. I am yours Aagya, if you choose me. All the moments I spent with you are more precious to me than anyone could ever imagine.

When you cried like a baby in my arms, that is when I actually fell in love with you. Not out of pity, but because you felt safe enough to let go of everything you'd suppressed for years. No one ever trusted me that much or gave me that much importance. And our Taj date? That was the most beautiful thing that ever happened to me. I know you already know you're beautiful, but that day you looked divine. Like a goddess who descended from heaven while the gods showered flowers on her. I was so mesmerized that I literally forgot to breathe. And do you know what made you even more beautiful? Your innocence, Aagya. After more than a decade and a half, I saw that same innocent little girl I once met as a kid.

When we faced our fear together inside that closet remembering everything from the 26/11 attack, the way you held my hand... it was exactly the same when you held it as a kid. And when we came out, a new version of you was born. The strongest version. Then during lunch when you explained the difference between still and sparkling water, I loved it. And yes, it lowkey turned me on too. When we went out to eat ice cream, I saw the goofy side of you. The one I had only dreamt about. And I live to see that side of you, Aagya. Then when I drew your sketch... I drew you like a goddess because to me, you are one. You blessed me with

feelings I never knew I could experience. You resurrected the boy I had murdered inside myself. I am forever grateful for that. Then when you insisted on dropping me home and made me vibe to Taylor Swift songs, that was so wholesome. And when I played "Apna Mujhe Tu Laga", I think somewhere you understood that I had feelings for you. And when you ran and hugged me and it started raining the moment you touched me, that had to be the cinematography of God. Only He could design something that beautiful. When you hugged me like I was the center of your universe, that was the most beautiful moment of my life. For the first time, I felt like I mattered. Like someone actually cared whether I lived or died. You saved me, Aagya. You really did.

You've thanked me for so many things, but you did far more for me than I ever did for you. I just never had the courage to say it. And when you cooked egg biryani for me, like for the first time in your life? And that too for me? I swear I felt like the King of the Multiverse. I had never felt that valued before. You say I resurrected your inner child, but you resurrected my entire soul, Aagya. I love you more than I can ever express. When we worked together on the film, seeing you bring everything to life, I felt so proud. I prayed for your success every single day. I even asked my mom to pray for you because her prayers are stronger than mine. She hasn't met you, but she already loves you and wants to meet you.

Honestly, she roasts me worse than you do. So when you both team up, I'm doomed. But I can't imagine a more beautiful life than that. This saas-bahu duo will be my dreamy doomsday. This has always been my dream life. And my only goal is to become the man my father failed to be. I want to be everything to you that he couldn't be to my mother. I know you have a void inside you. And you're not the only one. Maybe that's why we came close. Maybe we are the missing pieces in each other's emptiness. For me, it's you. And I'd bet my life on that.

Do you remember the day Devraj carried me unconscious to the studio? The wounds you saw, he gave me those. His real name is Zameer Haqqani. He's the leader of a terrorist organization called Lashkar-e-Qayamat. Their mission is to carry out an attack on India a thousand times worse than 26/11. I've been chasing him for a long time. But I never thought you'd get caught in the crossfire. He kidnapped and tortured me, and threatened that if I tried anything stupid, he would hurt you. That's why I kept my distance during the shoot... to keep you safe. But when I saw you kiss him on screen, even though it was just acting, it shattered me. I ran into a storeroom and screamed until my voice disappeared. I broke the glass in rage, that's how I got the wounds you saw. I know it sounds childish and cringe, but that was all I could think of. I'm sorry. But seeing you with him made me feel unworthy. Like I should just die. Like everything I had gained, it finally slipped away. I felt powerless, Aagya. Now I'm just a walking corpse. The one only you can breathe life back into.

I love you so much. I am yours if you accept me. And if you don't, it's okay. I've always been alone anyway. I'll live with your memories. They'll be enough. One more thing... You know why I always backed away whenever we got intimate? Because I was scared of harming you. You feel sacred and divine to me... and I feel like I am unworthy to touch you. I know it sounds stupid, but it's the truth. You remember the day I took you to the temple? That idea was mom's. And I'm glad it worked. And that red chunni I placed over your head? It was my mom's too. She wore it on her wedding day. She sent it for you. She told me to place it on your head with my own hands. She is more filmy than I am.

Whatever your answer is... I will accept it. I want to hear it."

By the time she reached the last line, her vision was blurry:

"If one day I break, don't cry for me. Just know that I tried to love in a world that never taught me how to. And if I ever lose you, it

won't be because I didn't love you enough. It'll be because I didn't know how to show it.

— Rudra"

Aagya's chest caved, and the letter slipped from her fingers as her entire body started shaking. Her knees buckled. She collapsed to the floor. She was amazed to know how he saw her. How she made him feel. How loving her hurt him so much. How he kept loving her anyway. Not asking. Not demanding. Just saying. Latika ran to Aagya to comfort her. She couldn't understand this sudden breakdown of hers. She then picked up the letter, scanned the words, and her eyes instantly filled as well. Latika immediately dropped with her, wrapping her arms around her shoulders with all the strength her small body had. They didn't cry explosively. No drama. Just two women going completely silent because the truth hit clean and sharp. They finally understood the scale of the storm that boy carried alone.

Aagya took the letter from Latika and folded it slowly, carefully, like it was something sacred. Then she exhaled and for the first time in years, her breath broke. Aagya didn't sob loudly. No broken gasps. No dramatic collapse. Just a slow, silent tear rolling down her cheek. Latika sat beside her, not touching her yet because she could tell touch would only make her fall apart faster.

Aagya finally spoke. Her voice was quiet, honest and stripped bare, "...I thought he was just... strong."

She blinked slowly, another tear falling, but her voice stayed steady. "*But he wasn't just strong, he was alone. The whole time. And I didn't see it. I didn't see any of it.*"

Latika's face tightened... not out of pity, but realization. "*Aagya didi...*", she whispered.

Aagya shook her head. Not to deny. To accept. "*No. Listen.*", she continued. Her throat tightened, but she didn't cry harder. She

forced the words out, like someone confessing to themselves, *"He wasn't cold. He wasn't distant. He wasn't unreadable."*

Her voice cracked once, only once, *"...He was scared. Scared of me. Of losing me. And I kept pushing him further away thinking he didn't care."*

Aagya wiped the last tear... not to hide it, but to end it. And the hope that was mentioned earlier? This was not hope. This was a decision. Aagya read the last line again. For a moment, she forgot how to breathe. The words didn't just move her, they split her open. Like something inside her that had been locked for years suddenly burst outward. Her heart jerked in her chest sharply, as if it had been numb too long. Then everything hit her at once. Her face broke. Not slowly. Completely. The tears came in a rush... raw, sudden and uncontrollable. She tried to cover her mouth to hold it in, but a sound escaped anyway. A cracked, painful sob she had never made in her entire life.

Latika froze. She had never seen Aagya cry like this. Not truly. Only anger. Only silence. Never this.

"Didi...?" Latika whispered, her voice tiny, unsure. Aagya didn't answer. She couldn't.

She clutched the scroll to her chest, like it was a lifeline... like it was him.

"Why didn't he tell me...?" Her voice tore apart mid-sentence. *"Why didn't he ever tell me...?"*

Latika didn't fully understand the letter, but she understood the pain. She approached slowly with the careful, hesitant steps of a child who knows the world can break. She placed her small hand on Aagya's arm.

"Didi... Rudra bhaiya is like that only," she said, voice trembling. *"He gives everything. Everything. But he never asks for anything back."*

That one sentence shattered Aagya. Aagya wasn't just crying now. She was coming undone. All the years of misunderstanding. All the guarded walls. All the pain she thought only *she* carried. It poured out of her like a flood.

"He loved me... this much..." She choked on her own breath. *"All this time... and I – I..... –"*

Latika hugged her tighter, her own tears falling in small, helpless sobs, *"Didi... Rudra bhaiya isn't scared of anything. But he was scared of you. Because he loved you so much... that it hurt."*

Aagya broke harder, but not out of shame. Out of realization.

"I wasn't the only one hurting..." Her voice was cracked, but steady. *"He wasn't cold... He was just... waiting for me to see him."*

Latika nodded, cheeks wet, voice barely holding together, *"You and Rudra bhaiya are the same. Both of you thought you were alone. But you weren't. Not even for a second."*

Aagya cupped Latika's face with shaking hands gently and reverently. And for the first time in her life, she didn't hide her vulnerability. She let herself be seen.

"Thank you," she whispered. *"Thank you for loving him when no one else did."*

Latika's small arms wrapped around her neck again... this time tighter, like she was trying to hold both of them together. And in that moment, Aagya finally understood the answer she had been chasing her entire life – She wasn't unloved. She wasn't alone. She had never been. She was loved. Fully. Fiercely. Silently. Unconditionally. And she wasn't going to run anymore.

Aagya wiped her face with her sleeve, breath uneven but steady. She stood up. Tied her hair into a neat bun. Wiped her cheeks. Her voice was still shaking, but her spine had straightened.

"Latika..." she whispered.

Latika looked up. Aagya's voice didn't shake anymore.

"I'm going to him. But this time... Not to say, but to listen.", she added.

Latika nodded a small, fierce nod. The kind that means war is decided. Now Latika placed her hand on Aagya's arm. This time, Aagya didn't break. She breathed. A long, heavy, real breath. The kind that comes after years of misunderstanding. Then Aagya looked up and there was fire in her eyes again. Not anger. Purpose.

"I'm done running," she said quietly.

Latika swallowed, relieved and emotional all at once.

"What are you going to do?", she asked.

Aagya didn't hesitate, *"I'm going to him."*

Not as desperation. Not as an apology. But as someone who finally understood the weight of the love she was given.

Latika nodded once, almost like a soldier acknowledging another before a war. *"Then go,"* she said. *"No past. No overthinking. Just go."*

Aagya checked the delivery time on her phone. Three minutes were left. She looked in the mirror on Latika's wall. Makeup ruined. Saree disheveled. Eyes swollen. She didn't flinch. She just whispered to her reflection, *"I have to do this. I can't let the last thing he remembers of me... be that I called him something he's never been. I'm not going to cry anymore. I'll apologize... not with tears... but with truth. And if he never wants to see me again, at least he'll know that I finally saw him. I broke him... Now I'll kneel and pick up every shard."*

Latika came closer. She held Aagya's hand gently, *"He still loves you, didi. No matter how much it hurts."*

Aagya replied, *"Then I'll fight to earn it back. Not just his love. His respect."*

After some time, a package arrived. It was a traditional chikankari cotton suit, soft white with pastel blue embroidery. Simple. Unadorned. Like a prayer in fabric. Aagya immediately took a bath and changed. She tied her wet hair into a clean braid. No makeup. Just moisturizer. She wore no other accessories because all of it felt like a lie to her. Then, she reached into her bag and pulled out something old. It was Rudra's pencil. The one he used to sketch her as a goddess on their Taj Date. The one he had once forgotten on her car seat that night. She held it firmly in her hands. Not like fashionable pieces. But like a shield. Latika stared at her from the corner of the room. Eyes wide. Softly smiling.

Latika whispered, *"Now... you don't just look beautiful. You look like you mean it."*

Aagya smiled and walked toward the door. One step at a time. Head held high. Heart heavy, but open, *"I'm not going there to win him back. I'm going there to give him back... the truth he deserved all along."*

And with that, she walked out. As Aagya turned toward the hallway that led to Rudra's room, her footsteps were heavy but filled with resolve. She knew what she had to do. She had to tell him everything she had buried behind silence and pride. For once, she wasn't walking as a filmmaker, or a warrior, or a leader. She was walking as a woman who had finally found the courage... to love without fear. She walked out, not as Aagya Avaan, the superstar... but as Aagya, the woman who had finally learned what love looked like.

34. The Day they Became One

Rudra's room was dim. He hadn't opened the curtains since morning. The sunlight tried to creep in through the edges of the fabric, but the darkness inside was stronger. He sat on the floor beside the bed with his back against the wall, knees pulled up and head bowed. His shirt was still unbuttoned. His shoulder was still bruised. His eyes were bloodshot from the storm he never got to outrun. He hadn't moved in hours. No one had dared knock. Until now.

KNOCK! KNOCK!!

He didn't react. Another knock. A pause. Then a voice came... soft, trembling, *"Rudra... it's me."*

His eyes closed. A slow breath burned its way in and out of his chest. He said nothing. The door creaked open anyway. Aagya stepped inside carefully, almost afraid of disturbing the air around him. There was no camera-ready glow today. No curated elegance. Just a simple white chikankari suit, undone hair, and eyes swollen from crying for far too long. She shut the door behind her. Rudra still did not move. She came closer, voice barely holding itself together, *"I know you don't want to see me. But... please. Listen to me."*

He looked up. His face was empty... blank, still, unreadable. But his eyes... his eyes were howling. Aagya lowered herself onto the floor. Not close enough to touch him. But close enough that if he wanted to move away, he would have to choose to.

Her voice cracked, *"I came to tell you something you never got to hear. The truth. Not the one I assumed. Not the one I screamed."*

He didn't interrupt. So she continued, *"You carried me home last night. You laid me on your bed. You stood like a shield between me and the world. And when I woke up, I took your love... and threw it back at you like poison."*

Her fingers tightened around her sleeves, knuckles pale, *"I accused you of something foul. Something cruel. I said things I didn't even know I was capable of saying."*

Rudra's jaw clenched. His breath was shallow. The tears didn't fall... they never did... but they weighed in his eyes like storms waiting for landfall. Aagya swallowed hard, *"Latika told me everything."*

His eyes flickered with pain, then guilt and then exhaustion. She continued, *"She told me how you held me. How you panicked when you saw me fall in the pool. How you cried when you saw me unconscious. How you carried me home and watched over me like a guardian angel making sure I kept breathing."*

She reached into the pocket of her suit. And pulled out a pencil. Old. Plain. Worn smooth. She held it like something sacred, *"You used this the night after our Taj date... when you sketched me. You left it in my car. I... kept it. I just wanted something real of yours. Something that couldn't be edited or performed."*

Rudra's gaze dropped. He recognized it immediately. She placed it gently on the floor between them. Not returning it. Not giving it back. Just acknowledging it.

Aagya added, *"Felt wrong... holding on to it. So I brought it back."*

She placed it on the floor between them... not forcefully, not dramatically. Just... with quiet respect, *"Do you know what scared me the most, Rudra? It wasn't that you were near me. It was that I*

didn't remember how I ended up safe. And my fear... it shouted louder than my trust."

He finally spoke. Voice low. Cold, *"Your fear painted me as a rapist."*

Aagya nodded and replied in a broken voice, *"Yes. And I will regret it for the rest of my life. There's no apology for what I said. But I'm still here... to say it anyway."*

She looked at him, eyes burning with guilt, *"I'm sorry, Rudra. Not because you deserve to forgive me. But because I needed to forgive myself... for not seeing the man in front of me."*

Then, she took a slow breath and pulled out another object. **The scroll.** The one that he once gave her during the shooting of her film. The one written in his handwriting. The one filled with the truths he never said aloud. Her voice shook harder now, *"I read it today as you once told me to."*

Rudra's head snapped up. His eyes widened. But before he could speak, she began reading from memory:

"If one day I break, don't cry for me. Just know that I tried to love in a world that never taught me how."

She looked at him and continued maintaining eye contact, *"If I ever lose you, it won't be because I didn't love you enough. It'll be because I didn't know how to show it."*

Silence. Heavy. Cutting. Alive. She looked at him, really looked at him, and for the first time since the beginning, her voice had no shaking. Just the truth, *"Rudra, I am not here to apologize."*

He stared. She added, *"I am here to answer."*

She leaned forward just enough that her words entered the quiet between them like light through shattered glass, *"I love you."*

Not soft. Not hesitant. Not trembling. Just true, *"I don't love the way you love. I don't understand the world the way you do. I don't feel as deeply or as wildly or as painfully as you do..."*

Her hand moved slowly and steadily and rested on the floor beside the pencil and the scroll, forming a third point in the space between them, *"...but I know this. When you are gone, the world feels wrong."*

Her voice lowered to a whisper meant only for him, *"Come back."*

Silence. Long. Heavy. Rudra looked down at the pencil lying there like a memory that had come home wounded. He picked it up slowly. Held it in his palm as if it was weighing more than just graphite. Then, he looked at her, *"You shattered me."*

Aagya nodded. A tear fell. Rudra continued, *"I would've taken a bullet and smiled. But that moment... when you looked at me like I was a monster. I've never felt more... dead in my entire life."*

His voice cracked, *"I... I... I love you Aagya. More than anything."*

Aagya replied through tears, *"I know. And I destroyed it. But I haven't come to ask you to love me again. I've come to tell you... that I love you too, Rudra. Even if I never get to say it again after today."*

He looked at her. Something inside him shook. He wanted to stay angry. But pain... recognizes pain. Aagya smiled through tears, *"You can scream. You can break this room. I'll sit here and take it. Because this time, I won't run from the truth."*

Rudra blinked. A tear escaped. He looked at her, not as the woman who broke him, but the one who came back to pick up the pieces. Rudra hadn't said much since Aagya's apology. He just kept looking at that pencil like it was the last memory of a life before the heartbreak. But something inside him was boiling. And Aagya felt it. She stood up slowly. Stepped toward him.

Aagya called him gently, *"Rudra..."*

Rudra cut her off in between and stood up in an instant, *"No. You don't get to walk in, say sorry, and expect the storm to stop."*

He stood up. His eyes were wild, glassy and aching, *"Do you even know what you did to me?!"*

Aagya replied quietly, *"I'm trying to understand – "*

Rudra spoke even louder, *"You broke me."*

For the first time, he was talking to her that way. He stepped closer, *"You think this all started this morning? No. It started the moment I saw you laugh with that bastard Viraj. That slimy casting director who unnecessarily tried coming close to you all the time and couldn't keep his eyes off your chest."*

Aagya's eyes widened, but she said nothing. Rudra's rage started bubbling, *"I stood in a corner like a fucking invisible ghost, while he whispered filth into your ears. And you... you smiled. You laughed."*

Aagya replied defensively, *"I didn't even like him – !"*

Rudra snapped, *"BUT I LOVED YOU!"*

Silence. His breath was shaking now. Fists clenched. Voice cracking, *"Then came your Devraj, a.k.a., Zameer. My arch-nemesis. The man who's been trying to burn my country from inside... And I had to watch him hold you. Kiss you on the set. Dance with you in the afterparty. While I stood there... like a corpse wearing a soldier's skin."*

Aagya tried to say something, but he cut her off, *"Every second of that night, I was dying. And you... you looked alive in his arms."*

His voice dropped as he broke down in front of her, *"I became a dead man with a beating heart while the woman I love was enjoying happily in another man's arms. She... she didn't even think of me."*

They were standing close now. Too close. Aagya's voice trembled, *"I didn't know, Rudra. I swear – "*

Rudra replied immediately, *"I didn't want you to know. Because what was I supposed to say? 'Hey, I love you, but I'm under military orders to do NOTHING while a terrorist kisses you?!'"*

They stood there breathless and bruised by truths; two hearts shaking from too much silence finally spoken. Aagya's expressions changed suddenly, and her eyes were filled with anger and tears, *"You're not any innocent Rudra. You lied to me... You kept so many things from me. So many secrets, I've lost count!"*

Rudra tightened his jaw, *"I kept them to protect you, Aagya!"*

Aagya shouted, *"Protect me?! Or keep me in the dark like I was just some... side character in your double life?!"*

He looked at her... torn, exhausted, but no longer hiding. He replied, *"You're not some side character, Aagya. You're the entire story of my life."*

He stepped closer, eyes hard as steel and voice cold but steady, *"And I'm not just Rudra. I'm Captain Rudra Suvigya. Territorial Army. And I've been fighting shadows so the light could reach you."*

Aagya froze, her breath caught. It was the same thing Latika told him earlier that morning. She asked in disbelief, *"Territorial Army...? What does that even mean? You told me you were doing a master's in animation at NIVSEA Mumbai. Was that a lie too?"*

Rudra snapped, *"No. It wasn't. Territorial Army officers serve part-time. We blend in. Live like civilians. Study. Work. But when duty calls... we vanish into war zones and operations you'll never read about in newspapers."*

He took a shaky breath, eyes glinting with hurt, *"I topped my batch, Aagya. That's why I got deployed more than others. I've led missions where one wrong step means your body comes back wrapped up in the tricolor. And you think I could just tell you all that... between kisses and college projects?"*

Aagya replied in a quiet but broken voice, *"I just wanted you to be honest with me..."*

Rudra's voice softened but was still firm, *"And I wanted to survive long enough to deserve you."*

He didn't realise when he came so close to her that their lips were just an inch apart. Their breaths collided. Their pain radiated. Eyes locked. And suddenly, Rudra grabbed her face and kissed her. Hard. Raw. Like he was pouring every suppressed heartbeat into that one second. But Aagya pulled back and slapped him. A silence louder than any scream filled the room. Rudra froze... his cheek red, his soul stunned.

She looked at him... eyes wide, breath fast. And then she whispered, *"Don't ever kiss me like that... unless you're ready for this."*

She grabbed his collar. Yanked him close. And kissed him back. Fiercely. Desperately. Entirely. There was no music. No poetry. Just two broken people finding oxygen in each other's chaos. Their hands tangled. Breaths overlapped. Time collapsed. They kissed like it was their last night on Earth. Like nothing else ever existed... except this fire. This burn. This love. The room was electric. Breathless. Heavy with unsaid things that clung to the air like thunderclouds waiting to burst. Rudra and Aagya stood too close. Eyes burning. Chests rising with the weight of what had just passed between them... anger, confession, ache, and an apology that kissed like surrender. And then... Aagya's hands flew up. She grabbed Rudra's shirt and yanked.

RRRRIP.....

Every button flew apart like a shrapnel. The shirt hung loose and ruined exposing the man beneath like a secret finally unleashed.

Rudra spoke, stunned breathlessly, *"Damn. You could've just asked, you know..."*

Aagya smirked, *"Where's the fun in that?"*

The sound of tearing cloth echoed louder than any confession. Rudra had never felt so desired and wanted in his entire life. He

added, breathing heavily, *"Remind me to never get on your bad side again..."*

Aagya smirked again, *"No promises, soldier."*

Then her gaze dropped. And everything in her stilled. For the first time, she truly saw him. Not the calm, unreadable boy with cutting comebacks, but the man beneath. His chest rose and fell with controlled tension, muscles tight and sculpted, carved by discipline and storms she didn't know yet. And the scars. Some thin and pale. Some recent. Some jagged. All the stories she suddenly wanted to understand badly. They were all stretched across his body like battle medals. Her breath softened. Her hand rose, hesitating for a heartbeat before her fingers traced a slow, reverent line along his collarbone, not lustfully, but with a tenderness she didn't know she was capable of. The touch wasn't explicit. But it was intimate. Too intimate. Rudra's breath hitched as if she'd found a place he didn't let anyone touch.

Aagya spoke in a half-whisper, *"How are you even real..."*

Rudra replied in a deep voice, *"I was about to ask you the same."*

Aagya replied in the same tone, *"...You're not just dangerous. You're devastating."*

Rudra's eyes scanned her face like he wanted to devour her and protect her at the same time, *"If I'm devastating... then what the hell are you?"*

He stepped forward. But she stepped faster. Suddenly, her palms hit his chest and she pinned him to the wall. Just like he had once done to her and grinned, *"Revenge time soldier!"*

They both laughed. It was breathless. Broken. Hungry. And then... she lowered her lips and began to kiss him. Their laughter died the moment their lips touched. She kissed not just his lips, but everywhere. Not like she was claiming him, but like she was healing him. His chest. His throat. His shoulder. His abs. His

collarbone. Each kiss was a promise, a prayer, a punishment she placed on herself. Every touch was worshipful and wild. Like she was searching for forgiveness inside his skin. Her hands slid up his arms, over his shoulders, framing his face. She didn't kiss him everywhere, didn't mark him, but she hovered close enough that her breath brushed his skin, lingering over the places where the scars lived. Her touch carried something softer than desire. Something like acknowledgement. Something like healing. Her fingers traced the edges of a newer scar near his shoulder.

"Who did this to you...?", she whispered.

Rudra replied, *"You know who."*

Her heart skipped a beat. She understood that he was talking about Zameer. Her hand cupped his jaw. His eyes fluttered shut. It wasn't sexual. But it was intimate enough to break him. He grabbed the wall behind him for balance, not because of lust, but because no one had ever touched him like this. Not with reverence. Not with care. Not with the kind of hunger that came from emotional freefall rather than physical want. Like it was the only thing keeping him from falling apart. Their lips met again... slower, deeper and almost trembling. A kiss that wasn't about fire this time. It was about recognition. Two storms finally found someone who understood the destruction. Rudra's hand slid to the back of her neck, pulling her forehead to his. Their breaths tangled again... shaky, uneven, human. For once, the silence between them wasn't an enemy. It was the safest thing in the room.

Then, he snapped. He spun her and pinned her against the wall in one swift motion. And then, he kissed her like a man who had spent lifetimes thirsty for this exact mouth. He kissed her lips like she was the only thing between him and madness. His mouth trailed down to her neck, his breath hot and heavy, his hands gripping her hips like they were the only truth he believed in.

Aagya moaned... not just from pleasure, but from release. Like she was finally home. His lips moved to her neck and as he trailed down, Aagya's moans began to escape like the truth she could no longer hold back. He whispered to her in a dark and soft tone, *"I've burned down parts of me just to be soft enough for you."*

He didn't wait. Didn't hesitate. His fingers slid down and in one clean motion, he ripped her suit apart like a paper caught in a storm. In a moment that felt like lightning as her suit unraveled in his hands like it had never been stitched. She gasped. His strength shook her to the core. Not because she feared him. But because she had never felt so wanted, so claimed, so... powerful. From the way his strength wrapped around her like flame around oxygen. He stepped back. His eyes roamed her body like a man starved of sunlight. His breath hitched. Every inch of her looked like it had been carved by the gods in a moment of madness and mercy. He couldn't look away. Her skin, her curves, her muscles, her scars, her softness. She didn't look real. She looked like a fevered prayer he'd forgotten he had whispered.

Rudra spoke in a voice raw and reverent, *"You... You look like a goddess sculpted in the fires of creation. So fucking divine. And so, so heartbreakingly beautiful..."*

He took a slow step forward, voice almost trembling, *"I want to worship you, Aagya. Every inch of you. Even the ground you walk on... feels too holy for your feet."*

Aagya's breath caught in her throat. Her entire body flushed... not just from desire, but from the way his words sank into her very bones. Like they had been waiting all her life to be heard. She swallowed, her voice was barely a whisper. Her fingers gently reached for his wrists. And then, she placed his hands on her chest, where her vulnerability lived, and made his hands squeeze them as he watched her moan. She loved the desire in his eyes, watching her like that.

Her eyes shined, *"This is yours, Rudra. From today... all of me. My body, my scars, my soul... everything belongs to you."*

Rudra's eyes flickered with disbelief. With reverence. Her boobs were way bigger than he had imagined. He kissed her forehead. Then down her face... trailing lower... kissed her neck, then her breasts until he reached her navel and kissed it like it was the center of his universe. He kissed her like she was his redemption. His tongue healed every part of her that needed love. And she arched into every kiss like it was the only cure for her own wounds. Her breaths were trembling. Her fingers tangled in his hair. Her mind was gone. But then Rudra paused. He looked up into her eyes. Not asking for permission, but for her comfort. Her safety. Her peace.

"If this doesn't feel right, we stop.", he said.

Aagya melted. Tears brimmed but didn't fall.

Rudra continued, *"You're safe with me, Aagya. Always. Nothing matters to me more than your comfort."*

She nodded. And then she whispered, *"Thank you Rudra... But today, I don't want to be safe. I want to feel everything. Now kiss me before I lose my mind again."*

Rudra pulled her into his arms as she added, *"I want you to kiss me like I'm the only thing that's ever made you feel alive."*

She kissed his neck, slow and grateful. And Rudra, losing control again, pinned her back to the wall. This time, his hand gently held her throat as he kissed her like he was dying for her. Their lips bruised. Breath tangled. And then, he turned her around and unhooked her bra. Aagya's breath hitched. Her eyes fluttered shut. Every nerve in her body felt like it had been lit on fire and only his mouth knew how to soothe it. His kisses traced her body, until her knees gave out... and he caught her. She was trembling, but not from shame. From how much she wanted this. His hands

worshipped her body like a man drinking from his final source of water. His mouth followed her back tracing every inch as his lips and tongue reached her hips and he ate it like the snack he's been wanting to taste his whole life. And Aagya could barely breathe from how much she needed this. She gasped, moaned and clutched. Rudra devoured her like she was made of answers.

He then flipped her around and started squeezing and sucking her boobs as if he was drinking the elixir of life from them. He rubbed her nipples with his fingers and tongue until she was almost unconscious. Words were lost. Only breath. And fire. He then kissed her again, harder this time. Lifting her. Carrying her like she weighed nothing and laid her down on the bed like a fire he'd finally earned the right to touch. The room faded. Only breath, sweat, and hunger remained. Their whispers turned into gasps. Their moans into truths. And their touches... into something sacred.

He hovered above her, shirtless, breath ragged, eyes wild, *"Now you'll meet the real monster I am."*

Aagya blinked, her heart hammering in her chest. But there was no fear. Only a terrifying kind of safety.

"Then be that monster. Because I trust you more than I trust myself.", she replied.

That broke something in him. And healed something deeper. Their lips met again... not with hunger, but with knowing. Hands explored. Fingers traced lines no one else had touched. Mouths found places that had only known silence until now. Rudra kissed her forehead. Then her temple. Then down her jawline... and lower. As if he was praying with his lips. He lowered himself, slowly. Like he wasn't claiming a body, but entering a battlefield called love. He traced down her body with his tongue until he reached her feet. He then kissed her feet and sucked her toes making her skin crawl,

"Worshiping your goddess-like feet has always been my dream.", he said.

She laughed at this. He slowly crawled upwards, kissing her legs. He ate her inner thighs and he finally reached for her underwear. He took off her underwear and spread her legs getting ready for the feast of his life. Aagya was feeling so shy that her face went pink but his touch gave her a comfort she never thought she'd ever experience and she completely surrendered herself to him. He ate her pussy like he'd been hungry his whole life and now he finally found hope and kept going until Aagya was screaming with pleasure and begging him not to stop. She rubbed her hands on his hairs and squeezed his face between her thighs pushing his face deeper inside her. He was almost choking but he didn't complain as in such death he felt the most alive he has ever been in his life.

"Say my name like it belongs between your lips and nowhere else.", he growled.

And she did. After he was done, he moved up and kissed her again. He smiled breathlessly, *"Getting his head squashed between the thick thighs of a muscle mommy is a dream of every man... And today I'm the king of the world."*

They both laughed and curled into each other's arms. Aagya's hands roamed his back... gripping, scratching and surrendering. Breaths collided. Pulses quickened. Time forgot itself.

Rudra growled, *"You have no idea... what you do to me when you look at me like I'm yours."*

He whispered things in her ear... dark, possessive, worshipful things... the kind that made her spine arch and her eyes close like a spell was being cast. She then pushed him away and made him stand near the bed. She sat, took off his belt, and then his pants. And when her hands trembled while undressing him further, he

stilled her fingers, *"I'm not perfect. I've always been... insecure. About this. About me."*

She pulled back slightly, just enough to see his eyes and replied with a gentle smile, *"I don't want perfect. I want you. And everything that comes with you... already belongs to me."*

She then took off his underwear and saw his cock erect. He thought he had disappointed her. But she started stroking it while looking into his eyes and said with an innocent smile, *"It's perfect, babe."*

With that one line she healed a part of him and gave him the ultimate confidence killing off his anxiety and insecurities like they never existed in the first place. She then kissed it, spat on it, sucked it and licked it as if she was draining out all the pain he had hidden inside him. Rudra spoke with his voice strained and eyes shut, *"Keep going... I think I'm forgetting every bad thing that ever happened to me."*

She devoured his soul of all the negative energy, making him feel heaven on earth. She sucked away all his fears, insecurities, pain and sadness like they never existed. Rudra then leaned back slightly, propped on his elbows, eyes locked onto her. And then, he smirked, *"You know..."*

He brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, fingers grazing her flushed skin while his cock was still in her mouth, *"I've seen you smile. I've seen you cry. I've seen you fight the world without blinking..."*

He tilted his head slightly, eyes dark with mischief and reverence, *"But nothing. Absolutely nothing compares to how stunning you look... right now."*

Aagya blinked, her breath hitching... eyes narrowing with a smile that was part-shy, part-wicked. Rudra leaned closer and

whispered against her ear, *"This angle? Dangerous. Divine. Deadly."*

She rolled her eyes, cheeks burning. She slapped his cock. But the curve of her lips betrayed her thrill, *"Say one more word... and I swear I'll bite."*

Rudra grinned, *"Promise?"*

Aagya laughed softly... that throaty, helpless laugh that only ever came when Rudra completely disarmed her. Still flushed, still breathless, she leaned forward, slapped his dick again and planted a slow kiss on his penis head and whispered, *"Idiot."*

Rudra grinned, *"Your idiot, babygirl."*

She continued to blow him with a smile, and he got so aroused that he asked for a face-fuck. She nodded with his cock still in her mouth. Then he held her hair and started thrusting his cock in her mouth and slapping his dick on her face making it wet with her own saliva. She loved it all and he loved the fact that she loved it. He then brought her up and kissed her like his life depended on it. The room still pulsed with the aftershocks of their kiss... heavy breaths, flushed cheeks, trembling fingertips. Rudra hovered over Aagya, his forehead pressed to hers. Their eyes met... fire flickering behind them, but something unspoken passed in that silence.

Rudra asked breathlessly, *"Aagya... Are you sure?"*

She didn't hesitate. Not even for a heartbeat and spoke softly, *"I've never been more sure of anything in my entire life, Rudra."*

He smiled. Not the charming one, but the real one. The rare one. The feeling of being her safe space felt like the greatest achievement of his life. Then she raised an eyebrow and whispered nervously, *"You... do have protection, right?"*

Rudra let out a low chuckle, mischief blooming in his eyes. He picked her up and threw her on the bed as if she weighed nothing, reached toward the drawer near his bed, slid it open with one hand, pulled out a small silver packet of condom and held it up like a trophy. He then mimicked a sage from an Indian TV serial while showing it to her, “देवि! रणभूमि में तलवार से अधिक महत्व ढाल का होता है।”

Translation: *“Dear Goddess! In a battlefield, a shield has way more importance than a sword.”*

She burst out laughing, the kind of laugh that only ever came when she felt truly safe. She laughed until her stomach started aching and so did Rudra. Rudra tore the packet and showed it to her being playfully dramatic, *“Behold, the shield of the chosen one.”*

Aagya raised an eyebrow and snatched it from his hands, a smirk tugging at her lips, *“Give me that.”*

She took it, eyes glinting with a slow and teasing precision. Her fingers brushed his cock as she whispered, *“Let me do the honors.”*

He leaned back slightly, letting her take control. His gaze locked on her with awe and affection tangled into one storm. He teased her again, *“God, even this... you make it so sacred.”*

She smiled. And the room, full of shadow and sweat and whispered promises, stood still as the world prepared to watch them collide for real. She blew him again, rubbing his balls and covered his dick with the condom while still stroking it and kissing and sucking his balls. Their eyes met... not like lovers, but like two torn pieces of the same soul finally fitting into place. Rudra then pushed her on the bed and hovered above her, breath trembling. Not from desire, but from how much this moment meant. From how much he didn't want to break her... or himself.

Aagya got up and gently cupped his cheeks with her hands. Her thumb brushed the corner of his mouth, grounding him as she whispered, *"I'm yours... Completely. Now. Always."*

His forehead fell against hers, eyes shut tight, like her words had just stitched something inside him back together as she planted a slow kiss on his forehead showing him how much he meant to her and how much she loved him.

Rudra replied in a voice rough and vulnerable, *"And I've never belonged anywhere... until now."*

And then in one swift, fluid motion... he rolled beneath her, pulling her on top of him. His hands gripped her waist like she was the axis his world spun around. Aagya gasped, caught between surprise and thrill. Before she could say anything, his hand slid gently around her throat... not harsh, but grounding. And then his mouth crushed into hers in a kiss so full of fire, it felt like a storm had found a home as he spoke against her lips in a gravel voice, *"Show me Aagya... Show me how much you love me."*

His words were not a command. They were a plea. A prayer. Aagya's breath hitched. Not from fear, but from the weight of what she felt. What she had buried. What she could no longer hold back. She leaned in closer, letting her hands roam over his sculpted chest and her lips brushing his jaw as she whispered, *"I've been loving you in silence for so long... Tonight, I want you to hear it in every move I make."*

And then, she put him inside her. Not with force. Not with hunger. But with a reverence usually reserved for temples and prayers. Like this wasn't a desire. This was destiny. Her fingers intertwined with his and she started moving. Slowly. Deliberately. Completely. Not to tease. But to tell a story only the body could. She moaned with every movement, and her sound was music to his ears. He then spoke with half-laugh, half-growl,

"Every breath you take on top of me... feels like you're claiming me back."

Rudra's hands moved towards her boobs and he gripped them tighter while rubbing her nipples... not to control, but to hold on while she was riding him. As if she was the only thing real in a world built on illusion. Their eyes never left each other.

Aagya moaned through breath, *"Is this enough... or do you want more proof?"*

Rudra replied with half-laugh, half-growl, *"Prove it. Again. And again. Until I forget what pain felt like."*

She did. Not with words. But with rhythm. With fire. With love that finally had a body to breathe in. And in that moment, where she moved above him like a queen who knew exactly what she ruled, and he held her like a man who had finally found peace...

Rudra moaned, *"You don't ride me, Aagya. You ruin me... one slow breath at a time."*

He held her by her ass now and moved it the way he liked and kept slapping it in between like he owned her. They weren't just making love. They were writing a vow with their bodies over and over again. Their breaths hitched at the same time, one exhale crashing into the other like waves against the same shore. She rode him like it was the only option for her survival. The storm between them had calmed for a moment when Aagya collapsed on him, but not inside Rudra. Not in the way he looked at her. Not in the way she blinked up at him... lips bruised, heart wide open, skin glowing with afterglow and ache. His fingers brushed her face as he spoke mercilessly in her ear, *"You think we're done, Aagya?"*

She didn't answer. She only bit her lip and nodded no. That's all he needed. In a flash, he moved slowly but surely. He turned her around with a reverence wrapped in command. One hand on her

waist, the other tracing the curve of her back. She gasped... not out of fear, but because she knew what was coming. He leaned in. His breath brushed against the back of her neck. His one hand slid up, tangled gently into her long, flowing hair and the other crawling up her neck. And then, he pulled her closer. Not with cruelty. But with the desperation of a man who had waited too long to call someone his.

Rudra growled in her ear, *"You don't get to run from me anymore. Not after tonight."*

His hand curved around her from behind, resting over her heart and feeling its wild rhythm.

Aagya replied breathlessly, *"I'm not running, Rudra... Not now. Not ever."*

That broke him again. He growled, *"I'd let you break me a thousand times... if every time you'd put me back together like this."*

He kissed the back of her shoulder... slow, burning and then slid his cock inside her again. And then, with one smooth motion, he pulled her against him. Her back to his chest, his grip unshaking and his mouth barely inches from her ear while he started thrusting her.

Rudra whispered in a dark and soft tone, *"You're mine. You hear me? Not just like this... But in every lifetime."*

She nodded, trembling under his touch... but never backing away. His hand gently guided her movements... not as a master, but as someone who had given up every war except the one to keep her. Her head fell back against his shoulder. His name slipped from her lips like a prayer. And as their breath synced, their souls collided again... not in chaos, but in perfect, wild, messy poetry. He slapped her ass until it went red. They didn't just make love. They claimed it. And by the time he whispered her name again

and she whispered his, they had both surrendered to something that felt more eternal than the stars outside the window.

The room still trembled with aftershocks of confessions, collisions, and quiet chaos. Aagya's breath stuttered in her chest. She lay there flushed, open and glowing like a wildfire that had finally found its forest. And Rudra? He still wasn't done. His eyes darkened. His jaw tightened. And then, he flipped her gently beneath him in one smooth, commanding motion... not to overpower, but to surrender with dominance. Aagya gasped. Not out of fear. But because something about this, being under him, felt like finally being understood... completely. He hovered above her, not as a man trying to possess, but as someone who was terrified of breaking the thing he loved most. Aagya lay beneath him, eyes wide, chest heaving... not from fear, but from the terrifying beauty of being seen completely.

He looked down at her and for a moment, he didn't move and spoke in a hoarse voice, *"I've lived in ruins... And yet you still make me feel like I was carved to be worshipped by you."*

Aagya cupped his face, her thumbs brushing the corners of his lips, *"Then let this ruin you, Rudra... Because you already rebuilt me."*

That shattered him. Their mouths met again... not rushed, not wild. But like they were drinking memories they hadn't even lived yet. He lowered himself onto her slowly, eyes never leaving hers and with every inch of closeness, their heartbeats stopped dancing and started syncing.

Rudra added, *"You're not just under my skin, Aagya... you're in my bloodstream."*

His hands gripped the sheets and hers clutched his back. Not for control... but for anchor. He kissed her cheek, her jaw, her lips, her tears. And then he was inside her again. As they moved together... not in rhythm, but in revelation... the world ceased to

exist outside that bed. He pulled her legs over his shoulder squeezing his cock inside her while her back arched with every thrust he made. Slow, but rough. He held on to her boobs as if it were his anchor preventing him from falling in the avalanche of pain, he had lived his entire life in.

Rudra spoke, barely able to breathe, *"If this is a dream... I'll tear the sky apart if it tries to end."*

Aagya reached up, fingers tracing the side of his face as she spoke, *"Then hold on... Because I'm not letting you wake up."*

And with that, he lowered himself. Not to take. But to give. To become. To belong. Their mouths found each other in a kiss that was too slow, too reverent, to be called lust. Their hands interlocked, her fingers threading through his like anchors. Every breath was shared. Every heartbeat echoed. Every gaze unbroken. With each thrust, their bodies wrote a love letter in motion. She clung to him... not to escape the world, but to finally live in it.

Rudra was finally nearing climax, so he increased his speed and spoke against her lips, *"You're mine, Aagya. And I'm yours. No past, no enemies, no names. Just us."*

Her eyes welled up... not from pain, but from the ache of finally being home. Aagya spoke in barely a whisper, *"Claim me... Not like a warrior. Like a man who's been fighting for me all his life."*

And Rudra did just that. Not with force. But with a tenderness so fierce that it undid every war they had fought to reach this point. Rudra replied barely breathing, *"You were made for this moment. For me. I've waited all my life to be undone by you."*

They moved in sync... not chasing pleasure, but meaning. Each touch, each kiss, each breath was a language only the broken could understand. As he increased his speed, she clung to him like a storm as her nails carved into his back so fiercely that they bled him, marking him as hers. Their breaths stuttered. Their

bodies arched. And when their souls finally locked into each other, time broke. And then rebuilt itself around them. They didn't speak. They just moved like oceans crashing into their moon. Like a storm meeting calm. And when they reached the edge together, they didn't fall. They flew. And when the crescendo came, it wasn't loud. It was shattering. Soft. Sacred. Like they had finally let go of everything... except for each other. Their bodies tangled. Arms wrapped tight. Hearts finally beating without ache. He finally collapsed on her... not in exhaustion, but in peace. He then kissed her forehead making her feel secure and loved in him and then they kissed one last time with the little energy they had left in them. Clothes became memories. Words became gasps. Skin met skin... warm, trembling and reverent. She guided him. And he let her. He held her face. She held his heartbeat.

35. Until We Meet Again, Captain

The storm had passed. Their bodies lay tangled like rivers merging after a flood; skin still warm from fire and hearts still echoing each other's names. Aagya rested her head on Rudra's chest. His heartbeat was still wild, but steady. Like he had fought a war... and finally found peace. Rudra's arms wrapped around her bare back, holding her like she was made of smoke and stardust. Something fragile, yet divine.

Aagya murmured, *"I didn't know it could feel like this..."*

Rudra replied softly, *"Like what?"*

Aagya spoke with her fingers circling his chest, *"Like I've been fighting myself all my life... and tonight... I finally lost the war I never wanted to win."*

He smiled against her hair, pressing a kiss on her forehead, *"You didn't lose, Aagya. You just let go."*

A silence followed... not empty, but full. Of things they didn't need to say anymore. Her fingers traced the scar on his shoulder, *"You carry too much pain, Rudra."*

Rudra replied quietly, *"Not anymore. You took all of it away tonight. Without even asking."*

She looked up at him and for a moment, their eyes just held. Rudra gave her a kiss on her lips that lasted a few seconds and then whispered, holding her tightly with his chin on her forehead, *"You're not a chapter in my life, Aagya. You're the whole damn book."*

She blinked, tears welling up... not from sadness, but from the ache of being truly seen, *"You're still so dramatic."*

Rudra grinned, *"And you still love it."*

She rolled her eyes. He chuckled. Then, pulling the sheet over her bare shoulders, he tucked her in like a promise.

Aagya asked softly, *"What happens now?"*

Rudra replied in a serious tone, *"Now? We sleep. We breathe. We protect this... whatever this is... with everything we've got."*

Aagya nodded. Then whispered, *"Don't disappear on me tomorrow morning."*

Rudra looked at her, eyes burning softly, *"Even if the world ends at dawn... I'll still be right here, watching you breathe."*

She smiled. And finally, without fear and without weight, she closed her eyes. Rudra stayed awake for a while... watching her, memorizing her. Like a soldier finally allowed to love what he protects. And then... as the night approached, he whispered, *"I love you, Aagya. More than I've ever loved silence."*

For a moment, he thought she was already asleep. But then, her fingers gently curled into his. Her voice, barely a breath, *"...Then don't ever love silence again."*

Rudra froze. His eyes softened. His lips parted in disbelief... and then in awe, as she smiled into his chest planting a slow kiss on it, *"Because I'm not going anywhere, Rudra. And I heard you. Every word."*

She looked up, eyes glassy but glowing, and said the words like they'd been sitting in her chest for far too long, *"I love you more than you can imagine. So much that it scares me."*

Her voice faded. Her body stilled. But Rudra didn't move... except to pull her even closer, as if wrapping her around his soul. There was silence for a few seconds. Not the awkward kind. But, the

sacred kind. The kind only people in love can sit inside. Then, he whispered back, *"Then let it scare you... because I'm never going anywhere."*

Aagya smiled, eyes still closed and asked, *"Even if I push you away?"*

Rudra replied with a half-smile, *"Especially when you push me away. Coz I'll still hold on... until you remember how to pull me back."*

A pause. Then she murmured, barely audible, *"...Idiot."*

Rudra replied with a smile, *"Yours."*

She didn't reply. Her hand just found his chest right where his heart beat for her. And that night, for the first time in forever, two broken people slept like they'd finally been put back together. For the first time in forever, Rudra slept with no guard up and Aagya slept feeling whole.

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Hours passed. The world outside was calm. Too calm. Moonlight spilled through the half-curtained windows, painting soft silver outlines over two tangled bodies lying in perfect stillness. Aagya stirred, her cheek pressed against the bare skin of Rudra's chest. His heartbeat thumped beneath her... slow, steady, like the quiet drums of home. She smiled. Pressed a kiss on his chest. Then, trailed one upward to his cheek. His body twitched slightly in response.

Aagya whispered softly, *"Wakey wakey... idiot."*

Rudra replied in a groggy voice, half-smiling, *"Mmm. If this is a dream, don't wake me up."*

Aagya teased him, *"If this was a dream, I'd be on top of you and you'd be begging me not to stop."*

He chuckled sleepily, pulling her tighter into his embrace, *"You're trouble, you know that?"*

Aagya replied with a smirk, *"Only for you, my love."*

For a few moments, nothing existed except the warmth of their skin. The quiet breath shared between two people who had known too much war and too little peace. Until:

Bzzzt...

The bedside phone vibrated sharply against the wooden table. Rudra's eyes snapped open.

"Stay here.", he said to Aagya alertly.

His voice changed. No longer teasing. No longer gentle. Aagya sat up slightly covering her chest with the blanket and spoke with confusion, *"Rudra...?"*

He was already upright, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, picking up the phone. The screen glowed a strange green. Encrypted Line. Unknown Origin. He stared at it for a heartbeat longer... and answered, *"Captain Rudra speaking."*

Silence. And then, a voice came with a smug that made his blood boil, *"So... Captain. How was your night with your beloved?"*

Rudra's spine went rigid. His grip tightened around the phone. The air in the room seemed to freeze. It was none other than Zameer.

Aagya asked worriedly, *"Who is it? Rudra? What's wrong?"*

He didn't answer. Because he couldn't. Because he was too busy imagining all the ways he could kill the man on the other end of the line.

Zameer mocked him again, *"You've got good taste, I'll admit. Such a beautiful woman. Such soft skin. Such juicy lips. You must have had quite a time exploring it."*

Rudra's breathing became ragged as he growled, *"You piece of—"*

Zameer cut him in, *"Tch tch tch... such language, Captain. Don't forget... I'm not just watching your country. I'm watching you."*

Aagya gasped softly, pulling the blanket tighter around her breast, *"...What's happening?"*

Rudra turned his face slightly, eyes still blazing, voice trembling with suppressed fury as he mouthed to her, *"Zameer."*

Aagya's eyes widened. She went completely still. Her grip around the blanket tightened even more.

Zameer added coldly amused, *"You see that lovely skyline outside your window, Captain? The buildings? The lights? The heartbeat of your people?"*

He paused. They both stared at the skyline from two different points. Then his tone turned to ash, *"I'm going to reduce it all to dust. And when your nation burns, I'll raise my glass with my fellows... as your beloved dances naked for my men. The great Aagya Aavaan leading a group of mujra girls for my empire. India's pride... reduced to my private entertainment."*

The silence between them shattered.

Rudra snarled, *"If you even breathe near her, I will rip your tongue out and feed it to your own dogs. I will kill you so brutally that hell will file a restraining order against me. DO YOU HEAR ME, YOU MOTHERFUCKER?!"*

Zameer laughed, *"Oh Captain... Captain. So dramatic. You should've gone into the theatre instead of the army."*

Zameer's tone suddenly turned serious as he added, *"When the city burns, you won't be choosing between good and evil. You'll be choosing between what breaks you slower."*

Rudra swore a vow, *"I swear on everything I am... next time we meet, only one of us walks away. The other gets buried without a face."*

Zameer replied coldly, *"You don't get to decide who lives and who dies. I do. I'll fuck your country. And then, I'll rape your Aagya right next to your pyre where I burn you alive and make you watch the entire show. The pain and agony you'll face, the look on your face when you'll realize how helpless you are, that'll be the happiest moment of my life."*

That was it. Rudra lost it. He screamed at the phone with words that couldn't be contained... threats, rage, promises of destruction. Aagya rushed to his side, scared.

Zameer now spoke softly, *"Shhhhhh....What happened yesterday... was only the teaser. The trailer launches soon. And by the time the final film drops... your precious country will be drowning in fire and screams."*

He paused again, long enough to let the weight of his next words sink in.

"YOU BASTARD!!", Rudra growled.

Zameer overlapped his words, *"Tick tock, Captain. The clock is bleeding. Live your last moments well. Kiss her. Hold her. Because when the fire comes, you'll have to choose... your nation, or your love."*

Rudra furiously, *"I'll protect both. And I'll end you."*

Zameer laughed louder now, *"You protect what you love, Captain. I design situations where protection costs something else."*

He smirked devilishly and added, *"And yes. SPOILER ALERT!! She is part of the equation. Everything you love is."*

Click.

Zameer's voice faded into silence. The line went dead. Rudra didn't move. Not immediately. Aagya waited for the storm... the rage, the vows, the violence. It didn't come. Instead, Rudra exhaled slowly. Like a man standing at the edge of something irreversible. Aagya, trembling now, scooted toward him and

placed a hand on his back and asked, *"Rudra... What happened? What did he say?"*

He suddenly turned and grabbed her hard, but not to hurt, just to hold. Just to keep her alive in his arms. His grip was desperate. His voice cracked. He kissed her face everywhere and cupped it, *"I won't let anything happen to you, Aagya. I swear. You're mine. Mine. I love you. So much I'd die for you. I'd burn the damn planet if anyone even looks at you wrong."*

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he whispered against her skin, *"I can't lose you. I can't. Trust me, Aagya. Please..."*

Aagya suddenly placed her finger on his lips and silenced him, *"Shhh... Now you listen."*

Her eyes were steady as she continued, *"I'm not going anywhere. Not now. Not ever. I'm with you, Rudra. In life or in death."*

She held his face and added in a stronger voice, *"As long as you're next to me, I have nothing to fear. And if that bastard Zameer thinks he can take you away from me... then I'll kill him myself."*

She pressed a kiss on his forehead and added, *"No one can ever separate us, Rudra. Even if God himself wanted to do that, I'll do what Savitri did for her Satyavaan."*

She smiled and hugged him tight whispering against his chest, *"And if I ever lost you, I'll find you like Damayanti found her Nala."*

Hearing all this calmed down the storm erupting inside him.

"This isn't about winning," he said finally. *"It never was."*

Aagya looked at him. Really looked.

"And now?", she asked.

Rudra looked at her. His eyes were steady. Changed.

"Now," he said, *"we survive long enough to make him regret choosing us."*

She moved closer and took his face in her hands.

"Then don't protect me," she said quietly. "Fight with me."

For a moment, the world held its breath. Then Rudra nodded. Now with her by his side, he felt stronger than ever. Then they kissed. Hard. Fierce. Final. Like the world might end the next morning. And even if it did... they'd go down together. In love. In fire. In defiance. Wrapped in each other... unbroken.

.....

Meanwhile on the other side of the city, a tall, glass-paneled balcony stretched out from the luxurious penthouse about 30 floors above the sleeping city. It was past midnight. But the lights inside were still warm. The silence was unnerving. Zameer stood alone, silhouetting against the glowing skyline of Mumbai. A light breeze rustled the hem of his midnight-black suit, custom stitched, Egyptian cotton... the kind of elegance that masked violence underneath. He took a long drag from his cigar... not a cheap one but Cuban. Hand-rolled. Dipped in blood-red wine. Smoke coiled out from his lips, slow and sinuous, as if it had secrets of its own. The city twinkled beneath him. Trains rattled in the distance. Headlights danced on far away highways. But all Zameer saw... was his empire waiting to be conquered. Waiting to burn.

A man in a crisp suit entered the balcony quietly with his posture rigid and his eyes downcast. He held a black ashtray out, both hands cupped, *"Sir, the council is ready."*

Zameer didn't look at him. He simply pressed the burning end of the cigar into the ashtray slowly and deliberately, letting it hiss as the ember died and spoke dryly, *"About time."*

He turned. The camera of the moment would've followed him tracking behind his shoulder as he walked barefoot on polished wooden floors, past golden chandeliers and abstract weapon

sculptures hung as art. A gold-trimmed double door stood before him. He pushed it open. A massive underground briefing room unfolded before him lit like a secret theatre. There were rows of people seated around a long rectangular table with men in business suits, women in nurse uniforms, janitors, professors, street vendors, government clerks... everyday faces. But they weren't civilians. They were infiltrators. Sleeper cells. Enemies hidden in plain sight. They rose in unison when Zameer entered like he was royalty, and they were his loyal court. He walked past them slowly, like a king surveying his pawns. His expression was amused. His steps were soundless.

He sat at the head of the table. Not in a hurry. Not with an ounce of tension. The room was breathless. Silent. He placed both hands flat on the table, leaned forward and spoke in a calm and terrifyingly composed tone, *"You've all waited long enough."*

He looked around meeting eyes, one sleeper at a time and added with a dark smile, *"You've earned this night."*

A few of them exchanged glances... equal parts of pride and fear in their gaze as he continued, *"You are teachers, doctors, delivery boys, interns and what not. But under the skin... you are lions. You are bombs waiting to go off."*

He scanned the room and added, *"You wake up unnoticed. You move unnoticedly. You are ignored."*

He paused and added as his voice deepened, *"That is not weakness."*

He leaned forward slightly, *"That is camouflage."*

A few breaths caught in the room.

"Systems do not fall to explosions," Zameer continued. *"They fall when belief collapses."*

He let the silence stretch.

"Tonight... that belief cracks.", he added.

No shouting. No applause. Just stillness.

He paused. Smiled wider, *"Last night was just the teaser. Captain Rudra still believes he can protect everything he loves."*

"Let him keep believing," he murmured. *"Belief makes the fall beautiful."*

He sat back in his chair, lacing his fingers beneath his chin and spoke coldly, *"Because when Phase 2 begins, he won't know what to save first... his woman, his motherland, or the broken remains of his own soul."*

"When Phase Two begins," he said softly, *"there will be no heroes."*

He straightened, *"No villains either."*

He smirked and added, *"Just choices. And consequences."*

He tapped the table twice and a huge hologram erupted from the table with a political map of India. The system voice then spoke, *"Locations confirmed. Routes mapped. Cells activated."*

He looked at them all, every face still. Obedient. And then spoke in a voice, dropping to a whisper, *"Gentlemen..."*

He grinned. The kind of grin that made even gods flinch, *"Let's begin Phase 2."*