

MASKING THE MASQUERADE

When Faces Lie and Truth Bleeds Through

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Dedication:

For those who wear masks to survive, and for those who see
through them.

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And to my readers—may you find shadows where I left them.

Preface:

This novel was born from my fascination with the hidden layers of identity, the choices we conceal, and the masks we wear.

I invite the reader to step behind the curtain, where every smile may hide a secret, and every shadow may hold a truth.

Introduction of main characters:

Arya – The Rage

Fueled by anger and loss, Arya acts before he thinks. His fury is sharp, his pain visible in every move.

Vansh – The Intellect

Calm, calculating, and observant, Vansh sees patterns others miss. He thinks before he acts, always analysing.

Vanshika – The Heart

Compassionate and empathetic, Vanshika feels what others hide. She grounds the extremes, giving warmth to their cold world

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Appointment	1
Chapter 2: Vermin	9
Chapter 3: The Reunion	18
Chapter 4: The Two Faces.....	23
Chapter 5: The Seventh Appointment.....	26
Chapter 6: Wanderer's Spark.....	31
Chapter 7: A Boy Named Vansh	38
Chapter 8: The Midnight Three	45
Chapter 9: The Hall of Echoes	51
Chapter 10: The Ghost Town.....	57
Chapter 11: Orange Juice.....	63
Chapter 12: The Sixth Attempt	68
Chapter 13: The Bet	74
Chapter 14: Before the Party.....	80
Chapter 15: Hope	90
Chapter 16: Blue blood	92
Chapter 17: Back to the Party	99
Chapter 18: After the Party.....	105
Chapter 19 : Repent	110
Chapter 20: Exhibition.....	126
Chapter 21: Mr. Techman and The Vigilante.....	142
Chapter 22: Greed.....	155

Chapter 23: Greed (Act 2)	173
Chapter 24: Crucifixion of Greed	201
Chapter 25: Gluttony	213
Chapter 26 Gluttony Act 2	237
Chapter 27: Gluttony Act 3	256
Chapter 28: Sloth	273
Chapter 29: Sloth (Act 2)	297
Chapter 30: Collapsed	313
Chapter 31: Pride	328
Chapter 32: PRIDE (Act 2)	356
Chapter 33: Pride (Act 3)	384
Chapter 34: PRIDE (Act 4)	405
Chapter 35: Blue Right Hand	437

Chapter 1: The Appointment

It was the beginning of sunset, that sacred hour when the city's gold began to melt into shadow, and the day's noise withdrew to a hush. In a dimly lit room, heavy with silence and framed by indigo-tinted blinds, the therapist sat alone, waiting. The last patient was due one whose presence, though familiar, was met each week with quiet reluctance.

The room was always draped in a kind of reverent half-darkness, its stillness deepened as the day waned. As the hour approached, the assistant moved quietly through the space, drawing down the switches one by one, until only a single lamp remained unlit, waiting. Other patients had, in passing, asked about its presence, puzzled by its ritualistic position, though none had ever seen it glow. It stood there for one reason alone. As evening deepened and the final appointment neared, the air grew heavier, as though time itself paused to observe the routine. The lamp would be lit only after the door clicked shut, casting its narrow circle upon the therapist's figure just enough for the client to see, but never to be seen.

With a slow breath, the therapist pressed a button beneath his desk, and shortly, his assistant entered. Wordlessly, she stepped into the hall and moved toward the waiting area. From a cautious distance, with hesitation in her voice and unease in her step, she called out to the lone man seated at the far end.

Through a narrow slit in the door, she watched him rise. He wore a plain black T-shirt and simple trousers casual and unfamiliar compared to his usual dark, sharply tailored suits. It was the first visible crack in a ritual that had held fast for seven weeks. Something had shifted.

The therapist straightened in his chair and inhaled. The door opened gently, and with it came a voice low, respectful, and unexpectedly tender:

“May I come in, Doctor?”

The therapist, somewhat surprised by the uncharacteristic civility, gestured him in with a nod and a faint smile. The guest stepped into the darkened office, and the assistant turned the lamp to a low glow just enough for the man to see the therapist’s face, though the reverse remained obscured. This, too, was by design.

As he seated himself on the couch, the man’s athletic form settled with poise, though something in his posture spoke of restraint held too long. The therapist folded his hands and spoke softly.

“Mr. Arya. How has your day been?”

Arya hesitated. His voice, when it came, was almost a whisper.

“It was... quiet. I spent most of it reading philosophy.”

“Philosophy, is it now?” said the therapist, leaning forward slightly. “A noble pursuit. Was there any particular concept that caught your attention today?”

Arya nodded, speaking in that same polite, subdued tone. “Yes... ethnocentrism.”

The therapist raised a brow. “A theory?”

“Not exactly,” Arya replied. “It’s more of a concept than a structured theory. It refers to the belief that one’s own culture, caste, religion or group is superior to others.”

The therapist tilted his head. “Interesting indeed. And do you hold any particular opinion on it?”

Arya looked at him, the faint lamplight catching his expression calm, yet threaded with something darker.

“I do, Doctor. I believe... the evolution of humankind may be the worst thing that ever happened to this planet. We are a species that perhaps should not exist for the earth’s own sake.”

There was no anger in his voice, only a weary kind of certainty. "The culture I see around me," he continued, "is nothing but a competition. Everyone is trying to be better than someone else. Caste, class, borders all imaginary lines we drew ourselves. We still fight. We still compete. We justify, we divide. Even after walking on the moon, we've not walked past our oldest shadows."

The therapist observed him in silence, the quiet hum of the room stretching between them like a taut string.

"So you believe... others are better than us?" he asked gently.

Arya shook his head. "No, Doctor. I don't believe anyone is better than anyone. That's precisely the problem. We're all caught in this illusion of difference, of superiority. All of it caste, countries, pride it means nothing to me."

The therapist leaned back, reflecting. "Then tell me... what should human beings pursue?"

Arya was quiet for a long moment, his voice finally emerging from the stillness like something ancient and tired.

"Nothing," he said. "Perhaps we deserve it all the punishment, the cruelty. Perhaps we've brought it upon ourselves. We chase progress and forget purpose. We name ourselves holy, and forget how to be human."

"So, you've got a problem with the other castes?" the therapist asked quietly.

Arya leaned forward. "I've a problem with every cultural belief that separates us. Are you even listening to me, Doc?"

"I am," replied the therapist, "but I want to understand... all of us, and the people fighting for these divisions. You don't think history holds any value?"

"I think history is a waste," Arya muttered. "A subject that spreads more hate than wisdom. It's no longer inspiring generations, Doc. It's just repeating mistakes. Humans aren't unique or noble we're animals. We've merely grown too self-aware for our own good. That awareness became arrogance."

He spoke with a quiet fury. "We feel no sympathy for a frog, dissected and pinned open in a lab. We cut open rats to teach anatomy. We torture to learn. And we call it progress. That's our legacy."

The therapist nodded slowly, a weight in his voice. "I know your pain. And the hatred. It comes from your trauma."

"Don't compare me to other humans," Arya said, sharply. "I'm not one of them. I've always believed that everything around me this life, this species is an illusion crafted by them. Even the so-called strength of humanity. Lies."

He drew a breath. "My whole life I've tried to blend in attend family events, talk to relatives, make friends. I failed every time. Because of this my face."

The therapist's tone shifted. Gentle, cautious. "Arya... we agreed not to bring up that particular body image... at least for some time."

Arya snapped. "You want me to escape reality, Doc? You don't want to see it, do you? You want me to speak like a man you'd speak to on the street, without ever looking at what I am!"

Then came the sound: a slow movement, the creak of the couch, footsteps in the dark.

The therapist's nerves tensed, but he remained seated, waiting.

And then for the first time he saw it.

Arya stepped into the circle of light, the shadows peeling back like a curtain. The upper half of his face bore a crude, leather cowl, but even that could not hide what lay beneath. His left eye was nearly melted shut, the brow warped from old burns. The nose had been partially sliced, just enough to allow breath, just enough to keep function. His forehead was hairless, half the scalp scarred and shiny, the aftermath of an unspeakable incident.

The therapist froze.

It was as if the ugliest memory he'd never known had just stepped into his life.

And then Arya sat. Calm, deliberate, with only one eye fixed on him.

"Look at me, Doc. Look at my eye," he whispered.

The therapist couldn't speak.

"I'm a worthless piece of junk," Arya said, his voice void of pity. "Ugly people like me shouldn't exist. I wasn't made for this world."

His mouth curled into a disturbing smile. "Do we even have a purpose? Or is that just another story humans tell to sleep at night?"

He stood, turning back toward the dark side of the room.

As he walked away, he muttered, "Well, I guess this is it. Thanks for this last week. But now that you've seen my face, I suppose it's best that I don't return."

Arya paused at the door, his hand on the frame, already half-lost to shadow. He hadn't expected a word more from the man behind him.

But then came the voice quiet, firm.

"Seven minutes still remain."

He stopped.

The silence thickened.

Slowly, almost uncertainly, Arya turned his head. His voice, for once, carried no defiance only disbelief.

"...It isn't a final appointment, Doc?"

The therapist didn't rise. He remained in his armchair, bathed in the faint halo of the lamp, gazing calmly into the dark where Arya stood. He didn't speak.

But he smiled.

And in that smile steady, undeterred was something Arya had rarely known: the quiet proof that he was not being abandoned. Not this time.

Arya drove home in silence, the hum of the engine a steady murmur in the thickening dusk. His car, a polished black sedan that shimmered like oil under fading light, glided through the quiet streets toward the far end of the city. That part of town felt detached, like a forgotten verse in a poem no longer read. The land was sparse, untouched by commerce or chatter, barely within reach of a reliable internet signal. And amid this solitude stood the estate, a shadowed mansion behind wrought iron gates, surrounded by trees that bent as if whispering secrets to its walls.

It was not merely a house. It was inheritance grand and cold, echoing with the absence of a family that once lived and no longer spoke.

He parked before the carved stone steps and stepped out, the gravel crunching softly beneath his shoes. The silence was unbroken as he entered. Inside, chandeliers hung like sleeping ghosts, untouched. He moved past the drawing rooms, the libraries, and into the heart of the house toward the narrow stairwell that spiraled down into the earth.

Just as his hand touched the rail, a voice came from the shadows behind.

"Mr. Kumar," said the clerk, his tone respectful yet weighted with familiarity. "Forgive me... but I must ask that you lock the basement tonight."

Arya turned, slowly.

"That room," the clerk continued, "with two keys yours and mine it should stay sealed. You've been going down there every night. Training without pause. I've kept track. Ten nights without rest. Your muscles show it. Your bones show it."

Arya gave a small, dismissive glance.

"My body can rest," he said coolly, "but not my intellect."

The old man white-haired, solemn, the only servant who still remained loyal to the Kumar family took a step forward. He had

once raised Arya when the rest of the family grew too busy to care. And though the mansion felt hollow, this man had never left.

"Son, please," he pleaded. "You're not wearing your usual formal suit today. Why? Because your body rejected it. You're not well. Your sleep cycle is breaking. The very rhythm of your being is off-balance. Just tonight. Just this once."

Arya's expression sharpened, the flame behind his eyes hardening.

"There is no rest for me in this world," he muttered. "Perhaps in the next."

He descended the stairs, shadows swallowing him step by step.

What he did in that basement was not sport. It was not mastery. It was a ritual. Self-made purgatory. Seven forms of martial arts, fourteen types of custom-made punching bags, each weighted and designed to test different parts of the human body. The swimming pool deep, still, and freezing was his sanctuary and his sentence. He stayed submerged until his body begged for breath. He ran until collapse. He shocked his body with electric currents, as though punishing it for being alive.

The world above, to him, was a place for others. For families. For strangers with smiles. He had not smiled in years. He rarely spoke to relatives. They, too, had stopped calling. Those who remembered his name did so only in whispers, uncomfortable at its mention.

Just as he began unlocking the cold metal vault of the lower chamber, the clerk's voice returned calm but tremulous.

"There is something I must tell you."

Arya paused, the key halfway turned.

"You might want to hear it. It's... good news."

Arya scoffed under his breath.

"There is no good or bad in this hollow world," he said, not turning. "Only survival. Only tools."

The clerk stepped closer.

"It's about your sister, master Arya."

That stopped him.

"She's back in town. She completed her education. She's returned. It's been years since you've seen her."

Arya stared at the door. The silence in the space around him grew thick.

"I verified it this morning," the clerk added. "She's excited. She asked about you."

Arya didn't move. His voice, when it came, was quiet.

"Thank you... for the information. I will surely consider the given circumstances. You may go now."

But the old man didn't leave.

"You can pretend all you want," he said gently, "but I know what lives behind that face. You're glad, Arya. You want to see her."

He took a slow breath.

"She is the only one left who loves you for who you are. Every scar. Every silence. She doesn't see what you see when you look in the mirror. To her, you matter more than you'll ever understand."

Arya remained frozen.

Beneath his stillness, something flickered. Not joy, not relief something older. A small, forgotten warmth buried beneath years of ash. He clenched the key in his hand. But his gaze drifted not to the vault, but toward the dim stairwell above.

A sister.

The only memory that didn't feel like a weapon.

He closed his eyes. And for the first time in years, he didn't turn the key.

Chapter 2: Vermin

The First Crack:

The curtains were drawn. Only a single thread of light escaped from the hallway, spilling faintly across the wooden floor. The room was still, almost sacred in its silence. On the carpet, a boy sat with legs folded, a book resting heavy in his lap.

It was Metamorphosis.

He couldn't understand half the words, but he liked the weight of them. They felt too big for a five-year-old and somehow, that made him feel braver.

Across the room, in a smaller bed lined with soft pink sheets, lay his sister fast asleep, her small hand curled near her cheek. She breathed with the rhythm of peace, her world still untouched by the storm gathering beyond the walls.

And then came the sound.

First a hush barely a murmur behind the door. A sharp intake of breath. A voice not meant to be heard, rising slowly. Then like a match striking wood it cracked open.

"You think I don't know what you've done?" came their mother's voice, sharp but trembling.

A pause. A silence pregnant with danger.

Then came the answer.

Not with words.

With rage.

The crash of something glass shattering.

Then the thud.

Then the scream.

And again.

Arya froze.

The book slipped from his lap. His hands gripped the carpet. Every nerve in his small body seemed to curl inward.

From the other side of the door, their mother's cries pierced the quiet like knives. She pleaded, screamed, broke apart in pieces Arya didn't yet have words for.

He didn't run.

He didn't hide.

He just sat there.

Eyes wide. Breath shallow. The world he believed in shrinking by the second.

His mind, too young to understand, began to imagine things instead. Was she bleeding? Was she hurt? Was she?

The shadows in the room seemed to shift. The walls bent inward.

His little sister turned in her sleep, murmured softly, unaware.

He watched her, terrified she might wake. Terrified she might hear.

And terrified of what he would do if the door ever opened.

Arya rose slowly from the carpet, the way ghosts must rise quiet, cautious, and not fully belonging to the world anymore. His bare feet padded against the cold floor as he moved through the dim corridor, past the shadows, past the sliver of light that bled from beneath the door like something leaking out of a wound.

Inside his head, the noise had begun.

Not from the outside.

From within.

Questions he couldn't understand. Images he couldn't unsee. Thoughts that didn't belong to a child.

And yet he walked slow, uncertain, toward the place where love had once lived but no longer dared to breathe.

He reached the door and stopped.

His hand trembled above the knob.

There was a scream inside him loud, pure, desperate but it never reached his lips.

He turned the handle.

A low creak escaped from the rusted hinge a sound that would lodge itself into his memory like a curse. It echoed into his skull, crawling, clinging, amplifying the dread already rooted in his chest.

The door opened.

And he saw her.

His mother collapsed on the marble floor, tears streaking down her face, arms trembling as she struggled to lift herself. The silk of her saree was stained, her breath coming in broken waves. She turned slowly to him, eyes full of pain, but more than that: love. A final flicker of strength ignited in her gaze, and she reached out her hand extending toward her son, as if to say, "I stayed for you."

Behind her, in the half-darkness, came the sound of drawers opening. A belt being unfastened.

His father emerged.

Tall. Calm. Silent.

The kind of silence that preceded storms.

Arya froze. He didn't speak. Didn't run. The war inside him was greater than any child should carry. Fear and fury. Shame and sorrow. Justice and helplessness all roaring, colliding, suffocating.

His father didn't see him at first. He walked straight to her, yanked her by the hair. She gasped, clawing at the ground.

"You don't question me in this house," the man hissed. "You stay out of my business, or I'll beat you dead. And if that doesn't finish you, your kids will go with you."

And there stood Arya five years old, skin pale, lips sealed, eyes wide with a kind of pain that could split a lifetime.

He wanted to speak.

He wanted to scream.

He wanted to run at the monster with fists raised like those heroes in stories.

But he didn't move.

Because something inside him died in that moment something tender and human and what remained was something else. Something forged not in fire, but in silence.

And in that silence, his mother bled.

He stood near the door like a shadow that didn't belong to either side.

His father roared.

His mother wept.

And from behind him, like the softest shiver in a winter wind his little sister began to cry.

At first, Arya didn't react. His mind was drowning in the surge paradoxes, questions, fears that had no names. But then something inside him snapped back to clarity not strength, not logic, just something human.

He turned.

And ran.

Back into the room they shared. The quiet womb of childhood.

She was sitting up in bed now, eyes glassy, her cheeks wet. Frightened beyond understanding, she looked at him as if the entire world had narrowed to just one person: her brother.

He climbed onto the bed, gathered her small body in his arms, and kissed her gently on the forehead.

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to feel.

But he knew she needed him.

He held her close, whispering in a voice barely holding itself together, "I love you, sweetheart... everything will go fine. Don't you dare cry. Your brother is here. Always."

The words broke as they came, cracked by fear but held together by something stronger: love born in ruin.

She reached up with her tiny hand, wrapping it around his finger a silent trust. A signal of surrender. A child's instinct that if she held on, the monsters wouldn't come.

Arya kissed her again and pulled the blanket around them both.

Then, in panic, he ran to the door, slammed it shut, locked it, and hurried back to the far corner.

Far from the sound. Far from the screams.

But the world was not done with them yet.

Outside, the voices rose again. Louder. Sicker.

"My son? My kids? You talk about them now?"

"That's why you stayed, huh?"

"Let's ask them instead. Who do they love more your bitch of a mother or their father?"

"Please... please stay away from them..." their mother begged.

"They're my fucking kids too!" came the answer, acidic and monstrous.

"Don't do this... please..."

The belt snapped in the air.

Arya held his sister tighter. Her whimpers growing again.

Then came the sound.

Footsteps toward their door.

And then, the banging.

"HEY ARYA!" the father screamed.

"OPEN THE GODDAMN DOOR!"

Arya couldn't move.

Couldn't speak.

Just sat there, heart racing like a trapped bird, holding his sister, his eyes wide in the dark.

The door trembled under the weight of rage.

The knob twisted. The frame rattled.

"OPEN THE DOOR!"

He didn't.

Or maybe...

He couldn't.

And then came the thud his mother thrown against the wall behind.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” the monster snarled.

And yet, through it all, Arya stayed frozen silent in a room that was no longer a room, but a cave, a tomb, a battlefield inside his young, breaking mind.

He didn’t cry.

He just held her.

Like a soldier holding onto the last sacred thing he had left.

The banging stopped.

For a moment, silence returned but not peace.

And then it came.

The voice of the monster returned not as a father, but as a curse.

“You motherfucker. You little bitch.”

His words were slurred with rage, the air itself bending under the weight of each insult.

“You won’t be worth shit in your whole fucking life if you can’t listen to your father!”

The sound of his boots taking a step back for momentum. And then CRASH he threw himself into the door. The wood splintered, cracking like bones under pressure. It didn’t break completely, but it groaned, broken in spirit like the child behind it.

Arya held his sister tighter.

He stared at the jagged fracture on the surface, now permanently etched like the one splitting open inside him. The shouting, the pounding, the language none of it belonged in the world he thought he lived in. And yet, it was real. As real as her tiny fingers still curled around his.

Then came the sound of the key.

The door opened.

He didn’t cry. He didn’t run. He didn’t beg.

He just shut his eyes.

Ready to be taken.

His father stormed in, grabbed his wrist, yanked him away from his sister like a ragdoll, and dragged him across the room. One slap. Then another.

“Why can’t you just listen to me?” the man shouted, not with control but with a pain twisted into rage. His voice cracked not with sadness, but the breakdown of something diseased.

Then he grabbed Arya’s chin, forced his eyes open, and growled:

“You’re a fucking disappointment.”

And the belt came.

One lash. Two. Three.

Arya recoiled not out of sorrow, but confusion.

His tears were not of fear, but of something more terrifying not understanding why this was happening.

Then suddenly, a different sound.

A thud.

His mother was broken, crawling had come from behind.

With a steel pipe.

She swung.

The metal cracked against the back of the man’s head.

Blood. It spilled just above the temple. A thick line tracing down his face like truth leaking from a lie.

Arya watched his father stagger.

He did not fall.

He turned.

The beast, even injured, still breathing hate.

He lunged, not at Arya, but at the woman behind him.

He grabbed her leg, dragged her by the ankle across the floor like discarded furniture.

> “You think you can beat me, you whore?”

“You ugly piece of shit!”

“I’ll make you fucking pay.”

Arya’s heart pounded but he couldn’t move.

The scene blurred.

Noise. Fury. A mother screaming. A child silent.

A father bleeding and yet still monstrous.

The man disappeared into the bathroom.

The door slammed shut behind him.

And the silence returned not peace.

Not ever again.

The night bled silence until pain began to speak.

His mother lay collapsed on the floor, her breath shallow, sobs rising in broken gasps. Her body trembled with old bruises and new ones still forming. But her spirit though buried had not yet shattered.

Then, from the basement door, he emerged.

Their father.

Drunk. Slurred. Eyes wild.

In his right hand, he held a glass bottle the kind used in industrial cleansing, but here, it was more sinister. Sulphuric acid.

And worse, intent.

He staggered forward with a twisted smile, venom dripping from his tongue before the acid could:

“You don’t deserve my wealth.”

“You don’t deserve the kids I gave you.”

“You don’t deserve a goddamn thing, you reckless piece of garbage.”

His thumb twisted the cap open, the fumes alone stinging the air.

He raised the bottle, tilted it toward her

when Arya stepped from the shadows.

No hesitation.

No fear.

Only instinct.

He threw himself between them just as the liquid arced through the air.

And time stopped.

The acid caught the right side of his face, splashing across cheek, jaw, ear, and neck like liquid fire. A scream tore through the room not from the father, not from the mother, but from Arya himself. A scream the world hadn't yet earned.

The bottle slipped from the father's hands, smashing on the marble with a sickening hiss.

The silence roared.

His mother crawled forward, clutching her son in horror.

"Arya... Arya... ARYA...!"

Her voice broke as she held his burning body, her tears now indistinguishable from his wounds.

"You bastard!" she cried to the stunned man.

"LOOK WHAT YOU DID TO MY SON!"

Arya didn't hear her.

He convulsed in her arms, his limbs moving in spasms, his voice twisted into a wail that sounded not human but something ripped from another world.

It was the first time he had ever screamed like that.

And the last time he ever would.

In the chaos, the front door burst open.

It was the clerk a younger man then, barely in his thirties. He froze at the sight:

Arya, half his face peeling, shaking in agony.

The mother, cradling her boy, stained with both love and acid.

The father, frozen in disbelief, as if shocked by his own capacity for destruction.

The room held no words.

Only the scent of burning flesh.

And a silence that would haunt all who heard it.

Chapter 3: The Reunion

Present Again:

The café sat on a quiet corner like a forgotten book old and warm, surrounded by glass windows that reflected the orange glint of dusk. Inside, the scent of roasted beans and old pages lingered, merging with the low hum of violin-filled ambiance. Arya entered with a heavy gait, his long coat fluttering faintly behind him. Behind the leather cowl, his red eyes searched until they found her.

Vanshika.

She was seated near the window, her smile illuminating the room like the first sunray on snow. Her hair tied back in casual elegance, her eyes dancing with excitement. She rose instantly, her voice chirping like a bell, "So here it is... Brother, mine. How are you doin'?"

"I'm good," Arya said his tone flat, but in that flatness lived a thousand unspoken waves. Behind the mask was a man who once kissed her photo every morning. His phone, his laptop each carried her memory like sacred scriptures. She was the only love he could name.

Vanshika sat back, full of light and color. "So, do you know I'm learning Italian? Isn't it gorgeous! Let me order something for you, *Fratello*."

Arya simply nodded, unsure how to respond.

Vanshika waved to the waitress. "*Posso avere due cappuccini, per favore?*"

Arya tilted his head. "What did you just say to the waiter?"

"Oh, never mind," she laughed, "It's just basic Italian... Feels good to learn something new! Do you know what *caffè* means, Arya bhaiya?"

"I don't think so... Cafeteria?" he guessed.

"Oh lord! It means *coffee* in Italian," she grinned.

"Of course, my Pineapple," Arya replied dryly, yet fondly.

Vanshika's eyes widened. "Oh my god! Arya, I missed this so much my nickname! You gave me that because of the pineapple keychain I got you for your 7th birthday. I needed this."

As the waitress returned with their drinks, she smiled awkwardly, placing the cappuccinos. "Let me know if you need anything, lovers."

Arya, momentarily pulled from his haze, responded, "She is my sister, miss."

"Oh I'm sorry!" the waitress gasped.

Vanshika waved it off with a smirk. "Don't be sorry. Who said siblings can't be lovers? In this fake world, only a sister can love her brother more than anyone, anybody! Arya, *Ti Amo*."

"Wait what did you just say?" Arya blinked.

"Oh Bhaiya... Just say 'I love you too.'"

Arya sat stunned. It had been years since he'd heard those words years since he believed anyone would say them to him again. Vanshika reached across the table, holding his hand. Her eyes met his red ones, and for her, they weren't danger. They were warmth.

"Just be there when I ask you to say, okay? Can you promise me?"

He hesitated. "I don't know. I'm not what I was. There was some fire left in me... but now I'm just cold."

"Oh please, stop that delusion," Vanshika said. "I'm here. Just promise me, Arya. Promise me that when I need you you'll be there."

His grip tightened slightly. "I promise... my Pineapple. I promise."

Vanshika beamed. "Okay, so my Batman rich, muscle man now we go to my new apartment. I would like you to take a look! Just finish your cappuccino first."

Arya blinked. "Vanshika, you bought an apartment? Wow. I can't wait to see it."

"The coffee, please! Don't disrespect Italian culture," she teased.

"Oh yes, my Honeypie," Arya mocked playfully, sipping the drink.

"Oh my lord! How come you're discovering all my beautiful nicknames, Bhaiya!"

And just like that, for the first time in years, Arya smiled.

It was a rare occasion.

A haunting man, with a haunted past, briefly reminded what warmth feels like.

And somewhere deep inside the walls of him...

A forgotten brother remembered who he once was.

As they drove to the new apartment together.

The door clicked open.

"So, this is my palace," Vanshika beamed, stepping aside to let Arya in. "Back during my internship, I realised something we are rich. We've always been rich. We can buy what we want... can't we?"

Arya stepped into the apartment quietly. His boots echoed softly against the wooden flooring. It was modern, pristine, with sunlight pouring through large arched windows. He looked around plants by the balcony, books arranged with precision, and the smell of fresh coffee in the air.

"Oh well... this thing is truly nice," Arya muttered. He wasn't one for compliments, but there was pride in his voice.

Vanshika smiled and caught his hand. "Bhaiya," she said, gently. "I know. I know our father was hard on us. Rich by money, not by heart. But it's okay now, he's gone."

"What about mom?" He said. "That car accident also took away our mom."

Arya's eyes darkened.

“I may never forgive him,” he said, low and firm. “I tried. I tried to prove something. Anything. But he only ever looked at the scars... the ones he gave me.”

Vanshika didn’t speak. She just pulled him close and hugged him tightly, protectively. Her eyes shimmered, and for a moment, Arya felt like he was hugging not his sister, but a piece of childhood he thought he lost forever.

“You like real music, na?” she whispered, releasing him. “I have something that will surprise you.”

She guided him down the hallway into the living room.

And there it was.

A grand piano, shining beneath the glow of the golden chandelier. A classic piece elegant, old, and soulful. Arya’s breath caught for a second.

“This... this is beautiful,” he whispered. “This isn’t a piano... this is a cathedral.”

Vanshika laughed, brushing her fingers over the keys. “I had it shipped from Florence. Cost more than my journalism degree. Worth it though. For this moment.”

She sat gracefully at the bench, stretched her fingers, and began to play.

“Soviet Connection.”

That theme. That haunting tune. Arya froze.

The chords, slow and deliberate, began crawling across the room like smoke.

And suddenly, time bled.

The walls disappeared.

His vision turned red.

Not blood red.

Memory red.

The kind of red that only a haunted mind sees.

He stood there still as stone as the music filled the air and his soul. The apartment vanished. The light dimmed. He saw his

sister, still playing the piano but in a space that was infinite and hollow. Everything else around her... crimson.

He took a step back in his mind. Then another.

She kept playing. Her back to him.

He kept drifting further and further into the void.

Until the last note faded...

And Arya's eyes opened.

Silence.

Vanshika looked up and saw the tears in his eyes.

She didn't ask. She didn't need to.

Arya stepped forward, his voice soft, cracking just slightly.

"That was... something else," he said. "You still surprise me, Honeypie."

She smiled. "I remembered you always played that tune on loop while reading Nietzsche... or Kafka. You'd lose yourself. I used to watch you and wonder, what is he chasing?"

Arya didn't reply. But in that moment, if he had a soul left, it was hers.

Chapter 4: The Two Faces

The room was dark.

Arya didn't like lights. He preferred the shadows silent, uninterrupted, and honest. The only source of glow was the rainfall's reflection against the window, as the heavy July storm poured outside like heaven was weeping.

He sat on the cold floor, back to the wall, staring at the rain-streaked glass. His thoughts weren't simple. No child's ever were when trauma aged them too early.

It was his seventh birthday.

A knock came on the door. Arya knew who it was the old clerk.

"Don't come in here," Arya muttered, his voice low. "I'm thinking."

Still, the door creaked open. The clerk entered, quiet but resolute.

"Pardon me, sir," he said gently. "I know what happened this morning was unfortunate. But please... you're just a kid. It's your birthday. Just forget it. Some bad things happen to us. That's what makes us who we are."

Arya didn't even turn. "That's exactly why I told you not to come near me. You know, I read somewhere in a book don't give advice unless asked. So leave me alone. I don't need anyone."

The clerk sighed but replied with warmth, "You're not seven today. You know what they say? You Grow not by age but by Damage."

Arya snapped. "Leave me alone, will you? Don't try to play my father."

"Exactly," the clerk said, disappointment in his voice. "I'm not your father."

Arya finally turned, rain reflected in his eyes, red from years of silent battles. He understood something in that moment. The clerk wasn't family but he was the only man who ever came back.

"As for today," the clerk said, slowly approaching. "I've brought you this. A leather cowl. I'll refine it each year. Wear it for occasions when you must leave the house. To help... prevent what happened today."

Arya tilted his head, finally glancing at the gift. The cowl lay there silent, black, soft. He said nothing.

"I must leave. Pardon me," the old man whispered and quietly left the room.

Alone again, Arya walked slowly toward the mirror. He switched on the small lamp beside it. The dim orange light flickered, revealing the young boy's scarred and confused face.

He lifted the cowl and placed it over his head.

A reflection stared back.

Not of Arya.

Of something else.

"Oh," he whispered, tilting his head as if speaking to the reflection. "So the Devil is hideous among us."

He touched the leather softly, almost lovingly.

"Or maybe the Devil was never meant to hide... Maybe... he just needed a face."

Then a soft knock again.

He turned, already annoyed. "Now what do you want, Mr "

A soft, tiny voice came from the door.

"Bhaiyu... it's me. Happy Birthday."

His tone changed completely. "Honeypie? Is that you? Come here, please."

The door creaked open wider and in walked Vanshika tiny, innocent, glowing. She saw her brother, struggling to stand, bruised and broken in posture. Still, she came close. Arya knelt, hugging her tight, like she was the only warmth in the cold world.

"What can your brother do for you, love?" he asked gently.

Vanshika replied with her small hands clutching a tiny object. "See what I got you for your birthday? This pineapple."

"Oh," Arya said, eyebrows raising. "A pineapple. Do you know what this is actually called, my girl?"

"No," she replied innocently.

"It's a keychain," he said softly.

"What's a keychain?" she asked, curious.

Arya smiled. "Where'd you steal it from, you thief?" he teased.

"I didn't steal it! I got it when mom and dad took me to the fair. I asked for it. Now it's yours."

"Is that so, my pineapple?"

"My new nickname?" she beamed.

She looked at the cowl on his head. "Where did you get that thing? Why does it hide your face?"

Arya didn't answer. Instead, he kissed her forehead.

They sat there, wrapped in each other's silence. The kind of silence that doesn't scream for attention but gives peace.

Then she said, smiling:

"Promise me, Bhaiyu, no matter what mask you wear... you'll always be my brother."

Arya nodded slowly, the weight of that promise unknown to both.

"I promise, Pineapple."

The rain continued outside. The Devil had found his face. But that night, he also found his reason not to lose it entirely.

Chapter 5: The Seventh Appointment

Arya sipped water, his fingers steady despite the cold sharpness of the tailored suit he wore. The dark room was quiet. A soft hum of the air conditioning was the only sound aside from the slow, calculated rhythm of their breathing.

"You know," Arya began calmly, "I only remove my leather cowl here. That's why you can't see me. And it won't bother your professionalism."

"It will not, sir," the therapist replied with professional detachment. "Welcome back. Our 7th session. It's good to see you again. Your behavior it has changed, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," Arya nodded, then added, "My little sister is back in town."

"You never told me you had a sister," the therapist said.

"You never asked," Arya replied, his voice barely above a whisper from the darkness.

"Understandable," the therapist acknowledged.

Arya shifted. "She's the only one who prefers me without the mask... my true face. Not like here. Here, I have to sit in the dark."

"That was your request for the arrangement, sir," the therapist reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah," Arya murmured. "It's for your own safety."

"Would you like to talk about her?" asked the therapist.

Arya's tone lightened slightly. "Yeah, why not? She's the most important person in my life. If anything were to happen to her... I'd become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds."

"Let's not go negative," the therapist cautioned. "Instead, tell me when she came, how you interacted. You don't seem like a social guy. We've seen that."

"Oh yeah," Arya said. "We met at a coffee shop. She was happy. She made me happy. We talked about the pineapple keychain. Her nickname."

"Pineapple?" the therapist inquired.

"Yes, sir. She gave it to me on my seventh birthday. I nicknamed her after that. That day... it was painful. But she made it worth something."

"Painful? You were only seven."

Arya's voice turned darker. "At a young age, I saw the ruthlessness of society. I tasted the hatred that hides in human eyes."

"What happened?"

Arya paused. "You really want to know? Aren't you just another average human?"

"I am," the therapist admitted. "But your story matters. Please... cooperate."

Arya took a breath. "Fine. It was my birthday. I was just another kid, but half my face was burned. The clerk took me to another hospital. The staff wasn't responsive until they saw the money understood my family background. Then they compromised. Taped something light across my face. I don't remember much.

"I was waiting outside while the clerk went to get a ride. But I couldn't stand anymore. So I walked. No destination. Just moving. I wasn't familiar with anything. Then I saw a little girl. She reminded me of Vanshika. She held her mother's hand, and I stood there, watching from afar, admiring the peace.

"Then suddenly... she let go. Her mother wasn't looking. A car was coming. I reacted, instinctive, fast beyond what my body should allow. My face bandages were coming off, peeling in the rain. I caught the girl. Rolled over. Saved her.

"I felt proud. Like I mattered. But then I noticed... a cut on her right hand. Just a small one. I tried to comfort her, but she cried. And then her mother ran over, snatched her away.

"They saw my face. They saw my red eyes. And they screamed.

"I wasn't the boy who saved them I was the monster. People gathered. They beat me. Kicked me. I reached out to the girl... but not to plead. Just to understand.

"And in that moment, I realized... she wasn't crying because she was hurt. She cried because of my face."

Silence.

The therapist sat frozen, stunned by the rawness.

Arya leaned forward slightly from the darkness.

"That's when I understood," he said coldly. "Even heroes are monsters in the wrong skin, I'm no hero anymore."

The therapist nodded slowly. He had no words for the cruelty of society. It was hard to believe the man sitting before him muscles, sharp suit, aura of danger had once been so shattered.

Arya leaned forward, his voice calm but broken.

"I somehow managed to get up and run. I didn't know where... I just knew I had to move.

The people... they weren't even angry. They were excited. It was fun being part of something cruel. They didn't know why they were doing it. That's what humans do. They don't know.

They love without knowing. They hate without knowing. They destroy without knowing."

He paused. Water sat still in his glass.

"The immaturity of Mom still ran through my veins. That blind innocence. But everything else? It was gone. I ran... and I ran... daylight burning outside, but for me it was all dark."

"I ended up miles away... sat down near a garbage stand. Beside filth, where I probably belonged."

His eyes dimmed in memory.

"I kept thinking about the mother. How could she do that? Then... hours passed. And slowly, I started blaming myself. Maybe she didn't see. Maybe I was terrifying. Maybe I scared her.

She was just saving her kid.

I respect that now. I admire her. She stood up for her child... like a real mother would."

The therapist leaned forward gently.

"She wouldn't have had a child to stand up for if you hadn't saved her, Arya. You did nothing wrong. You have to stop blaming yourself."

Arya stared from the darkness.

"Wish someone said that earlier. It's been years... no one ever did."

"You had your sister," the therapist offered.

Arya clenched his fists.

"She was a baby. Couldn't even speak. You want me to taint her with my filth? You want me to infect her with this?"

Silence.

"...I'm sorry," the therapist whispered. "What about the clerk?"

Arya looked down, scoffing.

"I don't know. I don't know where he was. Probably left. Everyone does."

Then his voice shifted softer, confused.

"There was a biscuit. Just there. In front of me. Don't know where it came from... maybe near the dumpster.

And then, a little puppy came by. Cute thing. Starving. I picked it up and offered him the biscuit.

He didn't flinch. Didn't run. Just stared. Curious."

He paused.

"But then... came a growl from behind. Another dog. Bigger. Maybe a brother. Maybe protecting him like that mother protected her girl. And just like that..."

Arya looked up, emotionless.

"...it lunged."
The therapist sat frozen.
"I ran again. No thinking. Just instinct.
Ran from dogs. From people. From shadows. From myself.
And that's when I realised it wasn't just humans.
Every creature... every mirror... every universe hates me."
A long silence fell.
"And I... I don't forgive myself either."
He closed his eyes.
"Next thing I knew... I was home.
Bandaged. Quiet.
Lying on the cold floor.
Watching the rain hit the big glass window like before... and
I thought to myself "
The therapist completed the thought in a whisper:
" That's why there's so much pain behind those terrifying red
eyes."

Chapter 6: Wanderer's Spark

"I'm done... practicing all this much."

The inner monologue of a 14-year-old Arya spilled through the silence. He sat at the edge of his bed, surrounded by dusk and the cold air pressing against the windowpane. Shadows framed the corners of his room like silent judges.

"I want to see the world," he thought aloud, staring at the map pinned loosely above his desk. "I'm sure it's beautiful... somewhere. I'd like to go alone."

Despite the hatred, the scars, and the weight in his chest, there was still fire a fragile little spark of hope that hadn't been extinguished. That stubborn flame spoke now.

He stood up. Tossed open the closet. Pulled out a duffel bag.

"Got all the money in the world," he murmured, half-joking, half-bitter. "What to do with it? Just suffer in isolation? I'm not. I need some air."

He began folding clothes with robotic precision. Tossed in essentials. Gloves. A book. A tiny black notebook. A few tapes. A photograph. His sister's pineapple keychain.

As the night rolled on, he planned and scheduled the journey he'd face alone. And before anyone would even realise it, he'd be gone no letter, no goodbye. Not even the clerk would know.

"Sir... Mr. Arya?"

The whisper brought him back.

Arya blinked. The therapist sat opposite him again. Same cold, dimly lit room. Same boundary of shadow and light. The leather cowl rested at his side.

"What are you thinking about?" the therapist asked gently.

Arya wiped a bead of sweat from his temple. "Oh... nothing. Nothing."

"You think a lot, I presume. It's not a bad thing how others see it. Don't stop thinking. Just start planning. Think about good things, optimistic things."

Arya exhaled, leaning forward slightly. "There's a fine line between good and bad, doc. I can't see the difference anymore."

"Then let's leave that for another day," the therapist said with tired patience. He glanced at his notes. "It says here you're trained in martial arts. Are you an official martial artist, Mr. Arya?"

Arya chuckled dryly. "Official? No."

"Then how come a realist like you decided to train in such physical arts?"

Arya's red eyes glowed slightly in the dark. "Sometimes, doc... in a rare case like mine, you don't need purpose. Sometimes, the only thing you need is hatred."

The therapist tilted his head. "Hatred? That's what drove you to train?"

"This isn't discipline," Arya continued. "It's not about power. It's about hatred. Hatred to humanity the fake humans. Society the delusional system. And oneself... self-hatred. It's an escape from reality. You fight shadows of yourself. You want them to bleed and suffer, you want fate to crack open. You want to break the mirror... just to feel real."

The therapist sat still.

Arya clenched the glass in his hand.

"You want it to get better," he whispered. "But does it ever?"

He tightened his grip and crack. The glass shattered in his hand.

The therapist froze.

Blood trickled from Arya's palm onto the floor.

"I'm fucking relaxed," Arya hissed, his tone deadly.

He placed the broken shards gently on the table beside him, as if putting them to rest. The therapist, shaken, kept his voice level.

"How many martial arts can you perform, Mr. Arya? Can you name them?"

Arya calmed his breath. His voice returned to a steady, haunting whisper.

"Sure. Boxing. Kickboxing. Muay Thai. Taekwondo. Judo. Aikido. Kalaripayattu."

"That's impressive. You're a very talented individual."

Arya looked up, eyes unreadable. "Talent? I built this. Myself. Me. Even though none of it matters. A man trains ten years in boxing... and on the day of the fight, he gets shot. The world is unfair, doc. You know that."

The therapist's voice softened. "No. The world is a very beautiful place. Very much so. You should tour it one day. See it with your own eyes."

Arya fell into silence.

Minutes passed.

Still nothing.

"Mr. Arya?" the therapist called. "Arya..."

"Yes," Arya finally said. "I'm listening, doc. Deeply, indeed."

"Have you ever considered traveling, my friend?"

"You're not my friend, doctor," Arya replied coldly.

"Pardon me."

Arya shifted. "Traveling... I don't know what to say."

"Which means you have something to say," the therapist pressed. "Tell me."

Arya looked up. "How did you conclude that, doc?"

"Call it a therapist's instinct," the man replied. "Tell me if something happened."

Arya stared at the shadow of himself on the wall.

And he began to remember.

Arya looked away, not out of disrespect, but as though something far away had tapped his thoughts again. Maybe a memory. Maybe something unsaid.

He leaned back, still tense, but his voice softer.

"Yes... something happened."

The therapist straightened a little in his chair, attentive.

"You see, I was only fourteen," Arya continued. "I had mastered what people call discipline martial arts, silence, solitude. But I was suffocating in that house. I wanted to breathe. To know if there was any other sky than the one above that cursed mansion."

He took a sip of water again.

"I didn't plan on telling anyone. Not the clerk, not... anyone. I just packed a bag, took some money, and left."

"You ran away?" asked the therapist softly.

Arya nodded.

"To where?"

"Nowhere in particular. The world," he said. "I had maps in my head and hatred in my heart. I wanted to see if people outside were as cruel as those inside. If the roads would break me, or if I could finally break the voice inside me that kept whispering: You don't belong anywhere."

The therapist listened without interrupting. This wasn't a monologue. This was a release.

"I still remember the morning train. I sat beside a man who kept asking me where I was headed. I said 'Freedom.' He laughed and told me freedom isn't a place. I ignored him, but those words... they stuck with me."

Arya's eyes were fixed on a distant point, as though watching that same sunrise again from the train window.

"And did you find it?" the therapist finally asked.

Arya blinked once, slowly.

"No. But I found something else. I found silence... not the one I chose, but the one the world gave me. Every station, every hotel, every road, reminded me I was still alone. That people smile until

they see your face. That humanity is fragile, and it fears what it doesn't understand."

There was a pause.

"And yet," Arya continued, "I still travelled for weeks. Through rain. Through cold. I slept on benches, in trains, under roofs of strangers... I saw sunsets that should've healed me but didn't. I met beggars with more warmth than my own bloodline."

Therapist adjusted himself in the chair. "What made you come back?"

Arya leaned forward slightly, his voice low but deliberate.

"I appeared at a station. A new district. I wanted to explore much more. The world felt vast, unfamiliar, and possibly forgiving. As I stepped off the train, my bag slung behind me, leather cowl shielding half my face, I passed through the station pullover near the elevator."

He paused, then continued.

"There was a T.T. standing there. He stopped me. Out of all the people walking past, only me. Dozens passed, none checked, none questioned. Just me. I knew it was because of the cowl. I'm observant, always have been. Even at that age, I could see the subtle expressions. The twitch in his brow, the narrowing of his eyes. He was already irritated before I said a word."

Arya's tone dropped, darker now.

"He asked for my ticket. I reached into my pockets. Empty. Another pocket. Nothing. I said, 'Sir, wait please,' as politely as I could. Like a polite gentleman. But that just made him angrier. His words sharpened. I could feel the crowd watching. I searched harder, retracing every compartment. Frustration started to rise, but then I remembered. The last pocket. The hidden zip on the back of my backpack. I reached in and there it was. The ticket. Legitimate. Paid for. Still, it didn't matter."

He clenched his jaw, fingers tensing in his lap.

"I handed it to him, gently, with respect. But something in his eyes told me he wanted more. He didn't want my ticket. He wanted to make an example of me. I could feel it. The way he stared at my red eyes. Like I was something unnatural."

Arya looked down.

"He asked for ID. I gave him my Aadhar card. But it was the photo from before the accident. The skin was clear then. The eyes not yet cursed. He didn't believe it was me. He called over the railway authorities."

The therapist stayed silent, still.

"They dragged me down the elevator. Past the passengers. Past the platforms. Into some dark alley near the railway lines. A place civilians don't often come. It smelled like rust and old rain. I was surrounded. Their eyes weren't questioning. They were condemning. They didn't want justice. They wanted a target. I realized then Law isn't Justice. It's a tool. A delusion crafted by men who like control."

He exhaled heavily.

"The T.T. stepped forward, torchlight blazing into my eyes. 'Remove the mask,' he said. 'Let's see who you really are.' I begged, told him I was just a kid. That I didn't mean any harm. That I was real. But his reply? 'Then take it off, you little shit.'"

The memory swelled.

"People laughed. They jeered. One held my ID like a prize. And there I stood, silent, trembling. Tears climbed to my throat but I held them back. Slowly, I reached up... and removed the mask."

A hush fell across the room.

"The laughter stopped instantly. It was like someone had killed the sound. The air changed. Faces paled. But not his. The T.T. looked furious. Why? I'll never know. Maybe disgust. Maybe guilt. Maybe I reflected something inside him he couldn't handle. He slapped me hard. For what? I don't know. And then they all

joined in. Boots. Fists. Kicks. I fell to the ground like trash. Fourteen years old. Being beaten under the torchlight, beside the tracks."

Arya's voice trembled now, but not weakly furiously.

"My tears finally fell. And I remember thinking, 'You are the smartest person we know, can't you see? He made up his mind minutes ago.' And I realized cruelty doesn't need logic. Just permission."

And as the blows landed fists, kicks, a boot to the ribs the world didn't stop.

Somewhere above, through the loudspeakers of the deserted railway platform, the old hymn echoed with calm detachment:

"Vaishnav jan toh tene kahiye je peed parayi jaane re..."

the hymn echoed ironically through the station, a song praising those who feel the pain of others.

"Par dukh upkaar karein toh yeh mann abhiman na aane re..."

and yet, the beatings continued, while the song spoke of helping the suffering without pride.

Arya lay curled on the wet gravel, the hymn crawling into his ears like betrayal.

His fists clenched.

"Maybe I deserved it. Maybe not. But in that moment... I started to believe I did. Funny, isn't it? Justice doesn't always align with Law. And sometimes... vengeance is the only fair play."

His voice went cold.

"I wish better for no one. My pain is constant. And now, I've become the kind of person who'd let that baby on the road get hurt. Because maybe then... people would understand what they've created. All Humans must suffer the consequences of their destruction upon nature."

He fell silent.

The therapist looked at him not as a doctor now, but as a witness to something unbearably human. And deeply broken.

Chapter 7: A Boy Named Vansh

“Hello, you. My name is Vansh Vedansh. Just another kid from town.”

He wrote the words slowly, as if carving them into time itself.

A boy of seventeen, seated in the furthest corner of the public library, where dust danced in filtered sunbeams and silence felt sacred. He hunched over a cheap, worn diary with a blue cover curling at its corners. There were scribbles from old entries, crossed-out declarations of self-hate, half-dreams, and unfinished thoughts.

“I like to journal... from time to time,” he continued.

“But I’m sorry I’ve been gone. It’s been a while.”

His pen stopped. He stared blankly at the page.

There was something about writing to oneself that was harder than speaking to another. A stranger could misunderstand you but paper? It never lies. It just reflects.

“I really like isolation,” he wrote next.

“Talking about me... with me. My subconscious I should name you. A friend in all this quiet.”

He smiled faintly, bitterly.

“Let’s keep it simple. SUB. Hello, Sub. How’s it goin’?”

The smile collapsed.

“What the fuck...” he muttered under his breath, quietly raging.

He slammed the pen against the desk, eyes twitching.

“I’m in a library, surrounded by greatness, and this is what I write? Fuck me.”

He exhaled, tried again.

“Well... I’m here now. Sitting alone in a quiet library. Books everywhere. Their weight, their greatness, their judgment.”

His gaze wandered to the nearest shelf.

“The Bhagavad Gita rests in a special chamber... maybe because truth deserves glass between it and people.”

He looked around, lips moving slowly as he listed the titles near him.

“The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes... The 48 Laws of Power... Crime and Punishment... The Prince... 13 Reasons Why... No Longer Human...”

He paused.

“They call them classics. Maybe they are. Maybe I just like them because they feel like people who suffered, too. People like me.”

A pause. He crossed his arms. His throat tightened.

“My life? It’s a burning repetition of suffering. That’s all. My family recently moved again... another town, another beginning built on old ruins. We live in a 1RK room. One Room. One Kitchen. No walls for sorrow, no doors for dignity.”

He scribbled harder now.

“On paper, we aren’t poor. But reality doesn’t read papers. My father the so-called ‘provider’ he gambled away more than money. He gambled our future. And we lost.”

A drop of sweat, or maybe a tear, landed on the page.

“My friends? Big homes. Phones. Gyms. Skin-care routines. Fucking bikes.

Me? I don’t even have a room to cry in silence. I piss in a shared bathroom stall. That’s the legacy of my father. His success story.”

He stopped writing. Closed his eyes.

“And I... I haven’t achieved anything either. So I can’t even scream at him.”

His pen moved slower now.

“I’ve thought about dying, Sub. But I’m too much of a coward. Even death feels expensive.”

His hand shook.

"But there's one thing. One person. Vanshu."

The name softened the page.

"She's... my best friend. My light. The only good thing left.

I love her, I think. Or something deeper. I care for her more than I care for myself. Does she care about me?"

A hollow chuckle.

"Probably not. Why would she?"

He scratched the pen against the margin.

"She's rich. Elegant. Good-hearted. Everything I'm not. I gave her gifts once a golden ring. A moon-shaped crystal. Small things, but I gave them all I had.

And this year, on her birthday... I had nothing. No money. So I wrote her a letter. Spent all evening perfecting it. Every word was stitched with sincerity."

His fingers pressed hard into the page.

"I slept before midnight. Couldn't send it at 12AM sharp like I wanted.

But the next morning, I did. I sent it."

He remembered the reply.

"She said... 'Thank you.' Just that. A simple 'thank you.' No emotion. No warmth.

It felt... cold. Like I didn't matter. Maybe I don't."

The sentence lingered.

"Maybe I'm just a low-standard, background character in her glamorous life.

But damn it, I still love her. Not because she gives me anything.

Because I don't have anyone else to give my love to."

Vansh Vedansh sat alone another soul breaking quietly in a loud, uncaring world.

Well, if she's the only one in my life who brings warmth to the ink, then let me write only of her. Let these pages become

scripture, not of gods or prophets, but of a girl named Vanshika my silent muse and maybe my only reason for hope.

I can never persuade her. To understand the mind of a girl... even the great Oppenheimer failed. She confuses me no, she doesn't just confuse me, she plays me like a violin, pulling every string of emotion, unknowingly or not. I swear to myself that I will not make a goddamn fool of myself again, and yet, I know I shall.

Those lines written in my own trembling hand felt like staring into a mirror and seeing myself vanish. My chest tightened as if each word carved a little more distance between us. I stared at them, ink still wet, heart still heavy.

Okay... breathe.

Let's not fall into sorrow again. Not tonight. Why not remember the good times? Yeah let's write about the origin of it all. Of us. About how I met Vanshika for the first time.

Back before we moved before I was reduced to this one-room shadow life back when I was still a naive early teen with dust on my shoes and not yet on my soul... it was a regular evening. Nothing grand. No fate-changing prophecy. Just a knock on the door from a childhood friend who wanted to drag me to the playground to spy on his crush.

At first, I refused. Lazy. Disinterested. But he insisted, pleaded, even bribed me with samosas. So I went. On the walk there, I remember silently mocking him wondering how anyone could be so desperate to just look at a girl. How silly. How desperate. What a waste of time and energy.

Fool.

We reached the field, and he nudged me toward a certain pair of girls playing football near the goalpost. He whispered, "That's her."

I looked.

She was pretty. Not in the glamour-filter kind of way. But in the kind of beauty that doesn't scream it whispers. Just her presence in casual clothes, hair tied in a messy ponytail, cheeks slightly red from running.

Wait... before I could sink into admiration, my inner voice snapped at me: "You fool, don't start simping. Don't you dare tell me this whole field trip was to make me see her. She's mine."

Then came the clarity.

Oh. There were two girls.

One was his crush. And the other... the one that caught my attention like dusk catching the moonlight... was Vanshika.

My Vanshika.

Not mine, really. But I'd come to think of her that way silently, tenderly.

It wasn't love at first sight. At least, I don't think it was. Or maybe it was something rarer. Something more quiet. Like destiny whispering rather than shouting.

That day, I learned her name.

Nothing more.

But it was enough.

From that day forward, I found myself walking to that same playground again and again. Not to admire her like some hopeless romantic, but to witness something pure. Watching her play football. Or maybe I was watching the way her laughter softened the sky. Who knows.

Alright, maybe I was simping. Crying out loud. Hehe... sarcasm.

And then came the day.

I gathered every ounce of bravery and all the accumulated teenage wisdom I could fake. After one of their games, as the girls packed up to leave, I walked up to her.

Not with roses. Not with poetry. Just a soft, calm confidence that surprised even me.

“Hey,” I said. “Your name’s Vanshika, right?”

She looked at me with the kind of smile that could make a lonely boy believe in miracles.

“Yes,” she answered.

“I’m Vansh.”

There was a short pause. Just enough to feel the moment wrap around us like a soft breeze.

“Do you like making friends?” I asked.

“I do,” she said.

I smiled. “Would you like to be my friend?”

And her answer oh, her answer it didn’t come like thunder or lightning. It came like a soft wave on a quiet shore.

“Why not?”

Three syllables.

They’ve never left me.

Sometimes I think I’ve forgotten a lot in life. Forgotten dreams. Forgotten prayers. But that line... it’s carved in my memory. In ink. In marrow. In moments.

Those were the real good days.

And in this dusty library, beneath this flickering light, I remember them not just with words, but with something deeper.

Gratitude.

Maybe even love.

But I’m not sure what to call it.

All I know is, if I ever lose everything I’ll still have that moment.

“Why not?”

And that, somehow... feels like enough.

I spend most of my time thinking about things no one else around me cares about systems, codes, encryption. The kind of stuff that’s invisible to most people, but not to me. I notice patterns. I question firewalls. I like... breaking into things. Not physically, no digitally.

Tech isn't just a hobby for me. It's a way of seeing the world. I love the idea that behind every lock, every wall, every secure network, there's a flaw a way in. Some call it hacking. I call it curiosity.

I'm not some keyboard warrior. I study hard. I read about ethical hacking, breach protocols, and real-time surveillance flaws. I don't want to destroy anything not really. I just want to know how it all works. And maybe one day, when the world breaks something important... I'll be the one who knows how to fix it or control it.

That's the thing about systems. If you understand them well enough, you don't follow the rules. You write them.

Chapter 8: The Midnight Three

“The person you are calling is currently busy...”

Arya lowered the phone slowly, confused.

Busy?

His breath stilled. With someone else? At midnight?

It was 12:02.

Only two minutes late and yet, not the first this year either.
Again.

“Useless,” he muttered to himself. I couldn’t even wish her first... not even this year.

Elsewhere, in a quieter dimension of joy and comfort, Vanshika was already on a call with Vansh.

He had called her at exactly 11:59.

Sixty seconds of silence.

Then

“Hello, you,” Vansh’s voice slipped through like a breeze.

“Still awake, Lady?”

“Not yet, Mister,” Vanshika replied with a teasing grin.

“Happy Birthday, my chipmunk-looking cutie,” said Vansh, almost singing.

“Ugh! I hate that nickname,” Vanshika groaned, laughing.
“You’re horrible at names, you know that?”

“So... you were waiting for my call all along?”

“Nope,” she replied, sarcastically but not convincingly.

Then suddenly, her eyes widened.

“Oh God! It’s my brother he’s calling!”

“Mute! Mute your call!” she whispered in panic.

“What? Why is a guy calling you at midnight, huh?” Vansh teased again.

“Same reason you did, stupid!” she whispered. “And he’s my brother, he has every damn right!”

“Relax, Vanshu...” said Vansh, softly. “I’m just joking.”

“Fine! I’ll put us on conference. Don’t say a word!” she hissed. A moment later, Arya’s call was accepted. He had no idea he was now speaking to both of them.

“Hello, love,” Arya’s voice came in warm and calm. “How’s my little pineapple?”

“Yes, love,” Vanshika replied in an angelic tone. “Your pineapple is just fine.”

“Happy birthday, my twenty-one-year-old lady,” Arya continued, his tone a mixture of pride and nostalgia.

“Not my little cuteness anymore.”

“I’ll always be your little girl... brother mine,” Vanshika whispered, almost sacredly.

“Tell me when you’re free today,” Arya said. “We’ll dine somewhere high-end.”

“I will, Bhaiyu,” she smiled.

There was a pause. A soft stillness between them.

“Tell me,” Arya asked, “how may I make this more epic?”

Vanshika thought for a moment and then replied with a giggle.

“Well, we already go out once or twice a week. So... it wouldn’t be much special now, would it?”

“Then how should I make it better?” Arya asked sincerely.

“You don’t, brother,” she answered playfully. “It’s my birthday. I’ll make it special myself.”

“Oh? How’s that, my babygirl?”

“I’ll cook,” she declared. “7 PM sharp. My Italian cuisine. You’ll love it.”

“Much better, love,” Arya replied with a gentle grin. “See you soon.”

“Ciao,” Vanshika sang.

“Okay now,” Arya added protectively. “No more talking. Your friends are important but sleep is sacred.”

She fell quiet.

“Get those beautiful eyes some rest, honey pie,” Arya whispered warmly.

“Yes, brother.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

And the call ended.

On the other side, Vansh, still on the line, let out a breath.

“Damn,” he said. “I didn’t know your brother was that chill.”

“Certainly, to me,” Vanshika replied.

“What do you mean?”

She exhaled slowly.

“My brother... he’s a diamond. But not everyone will ever understand that.”

Vansh smiled faintly, humbled.

“Anyways,” he said, changing the subject, “you two are gonna have a good time.”

“What do you mean you two?” she asked.

“You and your brother... dinner, right?”

She laughed lightly. “You’re coming too.”

“Me?” Vansh blinked.

“Yes. I barely see you these days. You’re working day and night. This is my birthday. You’re going to be there. It’s an order.”

Vansh sighed, surrendering to her force of will.

“Alright, my dear. I shall be there. No worries.”

“You better,” Vanshika smiled through the phone.

The evening glow had dimmed, and candles flickered faintly on the dining table.

Three plates, three souls bound by blood, by care, by unspoken battles.

Vanshika sat in the middle, smiling like a child caught between two suns. Her joy, genuine. Her ignorance, delicate.

She loved them both one was her sanctuary, the other her storm. One a brother, one a best friend.

What more could a heart ask for?

“So... how’s the spaghetti, gentlemen?” she asked, her eyes dancing with simple happiness.

“Very delicious,” stammered Vansh. His fork shook just slightly.

He wasn’t afraid of food he was afraid of the pair of crimson eyes across from him. The ones that hadn’t blinked since the meal began.

Eyes that spoke louder than words.

Eyes that dissected him.

Eyes that said: You don’t belong here.

“How about you, brother?” Vanshika turned.

Arya didn’t blink. He didn’t need to.

“I find it... quite delightful,” Arya replied but he wasn’t looking at her. He was staring into the marrow of Vansh’s being.

Vansh tried to hold his ground.

“I’m glad to meet your brother finally,” Vansh offered, a polite smile trembling on his lips. “Didn’t think I’d get the chance.”

“Me too,” Arya replied, cold.

He didn’t say it like it was a pleasure.

He said it like: You weren’t supposed to be here.

Silence.

Cutlery moved. Wine glasses stayed untouched.

“Well, I’ve got to say... your brother’s got quite the eyes,” Vansh attempted grasping at anything. “They’re... they’re...”

Arya raised a brow.

“They are?” he asked, softly. The words were gentle. The tone was not.

“Rare,” Vansh exhaled. “Red. Haven’t seen that before. You see blue, green, maybe even amber. But red... now that’s... terrifying.”

A pause.

“And amazing too,” he added quickly like a man tossing sugar over broken glass.

Vanshika, still unaware of the silent war waging between the two corners of the table, tried to reset the mood.

“How’s the wine, my friends?”

Arya finally broke gaze and turned to his sister, smiling that unnerving smile that made warmth feel cold.

“So... this job of yours?” he asked. “We’ve got all the money in the world, sis. Why even work?”

Vanshika’s smile faded to sincerity.

“Money isn’t everything, brother,” she said softly. “Every man must have a purpose. Without it, wealth is just silence wrapped in gold.”

Vansh and Arya both listened now.

“It’s a journal company,” she explained. “Affiliated with a government initiative. We inform, we research, we reach the public through social media, networks, web content.”

“Isn’t that a controversial platform?” Vansh interrupted, cautiously.

Arya’s eyes turned again blood-red daggers locking onto him.

“I mean... just saying,” Vansh added, shrinking slightly.

“You don’t have to worry,” Vanshika assured them both. “I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure you can,” Arya said, with a calm that felt more like a warning than a blessing.

Another pause.

Vansh, trying to reclaim footing, gestured vaguely toward Arya.

“So... the cowl?” he asked.

Vanshika shifted uncomfortably. “Oh Vansh ”

“Shh.” Arya gently raised his hand, his finger pressing the air like sealing a secret. “Let me answer.”

He turned.

“It’s none of your business, Vansh,” he said. Kindly. Sharply. Completely.

A silence hung over the table like fog.

Until Vanshika, breaking the air with her smile, spoke again.
A soft, genuine joy lit her face she was still happy. Happy they were both here.

The dinner had faded into low echoes. Forks had stilled, glasses drained. But none of them stood.

They remained seated like actors after a performance, unsure whether the curtain had truly fallen.

The silence now wasn't awkward. It was charged.

Vanshika leaned back in her chair, her voice soft like dusk:

"It's strange how three people can sit at the same table... and yet feel like they're miles apart."

Arya didn't look at her. He was still watching Vansh.

"That's because miles exist in the mind," he replied. "Not in the room."

Vansh looked away, swallowing what felt like fire.

"And some distances are chosen," he said carefully. "Not created."

Arya raised an eyebrow like a blade being unsheathed.

Vanshika interjected, trying to bridge the quiet:

"But some bridges are worth building. Even if no one walks on them right away."

Arya finally looked at her. His red eyes softened just slightly.

"You always believed in bridges."

She smiled. "Because I've lived on one my whole life between people who mean everything to me."

Vansh placed his palm on the table, slowly, deliberately.

"I don't know who I am to her yet. But I do know who she is to me."

Arya's gaze turned inward for a moment a rare thing.

Vanshika smiled genuinely.

Arya smiled terrifyingly.

Vansh smiled nervously.

Chapter 9: The Hall of Echoes

Back again, Sub. How's the white page treating you today? Yeah yeah, I know still white. Still blank. Just like me sometimes. I just came back from that horrible dining experience at Vanshika's apartment, and damn, I don't even know what I was dealing with. I swear I wouldn't like to be near her brother within three thousand meters. Oh man, how can a guy be so... horrible?

Anyway, let me be honest with you today. I'm not trying to sound poetic or smart, but here it goes: I like orange juice. I don't smoke. I don't drink. Uhh... something like that. Just thought I'd put that out there before diving deep into the real mess.

SUB, I know my terrible writing probably screws you up. But I gotta confess what happened before that so-called dinner I had at Vanshika's place. I'm twenty-two. Yeah, just a number, but behind that number is a whole damn childhood of force-fed education. My dad wanted me to become something he couldn't. So, I didn't disappoint him. But I did disappoint myself. Completely.

All my life, I've had a fire for computers, for tech, for code. You know? Don't judge, man. I'm just another underconfident, depressed soul walking through the world but inside... inside, I'm more. There's some eternal fire, or maybe it's just a delusion I've grown too fond of. I really liked this tech company my dream one. But I couldn't get a placement there. Why? Because all the stupid, worthless diplomas I had weren't even mine in spirit. They were my father's dreams. Not mine.

So, officially, I couldn't grab a seat there. But unofficially? Well... lean in close, SUB. I shouldn't even be whispering this, but I could make myself a seat. With my skills. Yeah, those ones I never talk about publicly.

First, I started researching. Dug through the town's tech companies. Looked for ones with vulnerable systems, less security breaches and weak protocols. You know how bad our country is with cyber safety? Man, laughable. Anyway, I scoped a few. My skills? I won't flex, but let's just say in our world the coding world they're high tier. Better than the other black-hatters I've hated around here. Those guys? Yeah, they need schooling.

Eventually, I found a company. Solid one. Would pay well. Sure, their system wasn't great, but the people were chill. I could compromise with that. I studied the company's core its entire structure, inside and out for hours. Like seven, maybe more. I learned their routines, their physical stats, even how their in-house culture works. Then I aligned their servers with my own Linux machine, hacked into the data they reserved for the privileged ones people with degrees and stars on their collar.

And then? I made myself a profile. Gave myself all the top-tier achievements. But not too perfect I ain't stupid. Read the 48 Laws of Power. You gotta seem competent but never intimidating. Appear useful, not dangerous. Blend in.

And boom within days, I got a call. The assistant from the company. And god, that girl was more polite than all my interactions with women put together. Soft voice, gentle questions. She asked about my schedule and what arrangements would suit me. At first, I acted disinterested and cut the call. Classic move. Then, a minute later, I called back.

"Well, I think I should consider this great opportunity," I told her. Smiled through the phone. Gave her my 'interview talk' and all. We both knew it was just for formality. I mean, with my skillset and background, only a moron wouldn't hire me.

So yeah, I took advantage of my skills. But then reality hit me hard. I had no suit. No formal shoes. No look to match the role I'd forced my way into.

That's when I texted Vanshika:

Need help. Urgent.

She replied instantly. That girl's a savior. She invited me to her apartment. So I went. In a cab. Why are you making that face? You know I'm not rich. I can't just walk into a top-tier tech company the one I just hacked, mind you violating every code of conduct in the book, in a ragged T-shirt and lowers. I needed to look the part.

When I showed up at her apartment, I looked like a damn homeless guy. But that's poverty for you. It doesn't ask permission before sticking to your skin like secondhand clothes. The nobility of poverty it's a cruel, silent badge we wear.

I'll stop here, Sub, for now. Because what happened next... that deserves its own page.

So, the thing about help yeah, the real matter began like this:

"Vanshu," I said, "I've got this tech company offering me a... delicate position at their place."

She blinked. "Oh wow! Congratulations, buddy!" A radiant smile unfolded across her face, lighting it up like Diwali night. "I'm so happy for ya."

I nodded slowly. "Now, for the first social impression... I need a suit. A good one. I've got some savings I know my finances are always tight but I'm ready to get tailored up. I've never worn suits before. It's my time."

She paused for a moment, scanning me like I was some diamond in the dust. "Let me tell you something," she said. "You are a diamond. You deserve the best. And we won't go cheap."

But what I was doing beneath the mask of ambition was evil. I was hiding the truth. A truth coded in deception.

"Uhh, what?" I mumbled. "I don't have much."

"You don't have much," she repeated with her classic smirk, her charm radiating with an assertive grace. "But we do. Now come on, follow me."

She sprang up and got ready with the swiftness of a force of nature. Moments later, we were outside, headed straight to the largest mall in the city a steel-and-glass empire of excess. The mall's lights glistened like a diamond ring under fluorescent sun, mocking my existence.

We entered an Italian clothing boutique too rich for my pocket, too dazzling for my eyes. As soon as I stepped inside, my scuffed boots met a marble floor that could've been mistaken for polished heaven. Rows of suits lined the walls like noblemen waiting for coronation.

Everything I ever desired was here. The rich man's wardrobe, the smell of imported fabric, the velvet under the fingers. It was aspiration sculpted into cotton and wool.

I hesitated.

"Hey, what are we doing here, Vanshu?" I muttered, panic crawling over my words. "This... this is too much. I haven't got that much "

"Shut up," she interrupted, not even looking my way, already scanning the racks of suits. "Just choose whatever you want from here. I'm gonna get you."

My heart leaped. Ecstasy rose up like a balloon tied to guilt. But I still refused.

"It's just... it's just not me," I whispered, half to myself.

"It's not how you appear to the world," she said, now holding up a fine charcoal suit with satin lapels, "but how you perceive the world that defines your soul."

Poetic. Wise. Movie-line-inverted. And true.

"We'll tailor and measure up later," she added, "but first... see that? Try it. Mr. Techman."

She handed it to me like a coronation robe.

My eyes lit up. Hope tiptoed back into my chest like a childhood memory. I thought I could never achieve this just like

a kid failing his first driving lesson, thinking he'll never ride again. But he does. Me too. About to.

She even covered the price tags with her fingers, just so I wouldn't think of backing out. I entered the changing room heaven's antechamber.

I took off my old clothes, the poor fashion of a poorer life. I slid the trousers on, then the shirt, then finally... the jacket.

When I stood before the mirror, buttoning the last piece of that suit, something happened.

Tears.

Tears rolled down not of sadness, not of guilt. But of presence. Of achievement. Of finally seeing a version of myself that wasn't broken, wasn't poor, wasn't less.

A man who had never worn a suit before was now seeing himself in one.

I opened the door gently. There she was. Vanshika.

She looked me up and down, then smiled with that glow that could blind the doubts out of anyone.

"That's what I call," she said, "a Polite Gentleman."

She noticed my eyes. Watery. Soft. Unfamiliar.

"Not tears of pain," she whispered. "They're of hope, aren't they?"

I nodded. She hugged me.

And I let go for once. I relaxed. I let someone hold me.

After the fittings and measurements, we wandered through the mall like two best friends disguised as royalty. Pizza for her, black coffee for me. She teased me about being too 'formal.' I teased her about being half-Italian, half-nutcase.

Then she convinced me to watch a movie *A Man Called Otto*. A soft, quiet film. Painful. Human.

We returned to Apartment 777 like tired travellers back from war.

She collapsed on the couch first. Her body drained. The burden of her media job the endless grind of clickbait headlines and deadlines was now visible on her frame.

I helped her up, guiding her like a drunk soldier to the bedroom.

She hummed something half lullaby, half sentence. I didn't ask. She lay on the bed, and I made her comfortable, pulling the sheets over her.

"Hey," she whispered, barely audible. Her eyes flickered like dying lanterns.

"Yeah?"

"Don't go... stay here... with me."

I hesitated. "I'm sorry, I have to... something with the computer."

She smiled, exhausted. "Oh you... and your computer... Techman."

She didn't even have energy to argue.

Her eyes closed.

She was finally at peace.

I sat beside her, just watching. Just breathing with her. Hoping she was dreaming of good things. Us.

They say your mind knows when someone stares at you while you sleep. I hoped she did.

Before leaving, I bent low and pressed a soft kiss on her forehead. She didn't know. She couldn't.

"Goodbye," I whispered.

It was the word she always hated. So I apologized too.

Then I left. Alone again.

The apartment stood behind me. The candles inside flickered one last time and then, blew out.

Chapter 10: The Ghost Town

There was something wrong with the air.

It wasn't just silent it was void. Like the town had forgotten how to breathe.

Arya walked through the deserted lanes like a memory someone tried to erase. The streetlights flickered not because of power cuts, but hesitation like even light was unsure it belonged here. Every shop was shut. Every door bolted. Even the wind refused to howl.

He didn't know how he got here.

But something inside whispered: You've always been here.

The sky loomed in a shade between dusk and dream. Not night. Not morning. A timeless prison. His boots tapped the ground, but the echo felt delayed like the town had to remember how to respond.

Then came the footsteps.

Not his.

Delayed. Off-beat.

Mocking.

He turned.

Nothing.

He moved again.

So did they.

There was no one yet someone.

A presence without form.

A watcher behind his spine.

An observer he could feel but not see.

That's when the guilt began.

Not from any recent act... but from something much older.

Buried deeper than thought.

The kind of guilt that predates words.

Suddenly, he wasn't walking through streets anymore.
He was walking through regret.
Each alleyway was a memory.
Each boarded shopfront a closed opportunity.
Each step a sin he'd forgotten to confess.
The scenery began to bleed.
The tea stall where his father once smiled now shattered glass.
The school gate he once skipped through now chained shut.
A dog, the one he'd fed as a child now skeletal, gnawing on a shadow.

Then he saw the bicycle.
His bicycle.
Rustless. Timeless. Waiting.
As if it had been untouched by time... untouched by guilt.
He climbed. He rode. Faster than thought. Faster than shame.
The town blurred into a scream. Windows shattered on their own. Signs collapsed without wind.

Something was chasing him.

Not a creature. A concept.

Abandonment?

Punishment?

God?

No... himself.

He turned a sharp corner, and she was there.

Seated.

Unmoving.

An old woman her eyes hollow, like someone who had stared too long into truths men weren't meant to bear. Dressed in layers of black cloth that flowed like smoke, she didn't blink. Didn't breathe. Her mouth slightly open, as if to whisper something ancient, something final.

She just stared, nothing else. Just Staring Arya without any remorse, any action, any purpose that he could think of. Arya got

confused why was it happening what was happening to him? The
Stare Scared Him.

His bicycle vanished beneath him.

He fell.

But never hit the ground.

He woke up.

No gasp. Just... silence.

The kind that weighs heavier than noise. He sat upright in bed, drenched in sweat. The mirror across the room showed a version of him he didn't recognize. Something older. Something hunted. His chest heaved but he felt no oxygen. Only dread.

That woman.

That town.

That emptiness.

It wasn't a dream.

It was a reminder.

Arya descended into the basement. No training today. No war dance. No vengeance rehearsal.

Just silence.

He dropped to his knees. Pressed his forehead to the cold cement floor. The same floor where he'd planned so many revenges. So many rescues. So many cleansings of a rotting world.

But today... he didn't feel righteous.

Today... he felt small.

And then came the whisper. From inside. From that dark part of the soul that never lies.

"Did I deserve all this?"

A pause.

A silence so long, it was its own answer.

Then his own voice barely above a breath replied:

"Maybe... maybe I still do."

In the silent void of the underground basement, where light dared not trespass beyond a flickering overhead bulb, Arya's

breath echoed louder than his heartbeat. The stale air clung to him like memory. This was his ritual space the only place left in the world where he didn't have to pretend he was human.

Sweat clung to his chest as he finished his fifth rep, the second heaviest weight he ever dared push. His bones trembled under its pressure, yet his soul stayed still, tired of carrying heavier things guilt, rage, memory.

Then it came.

A sound. A faint, foreign shift in air. It wasn't the echo of iron. Not the moaning steel beams, nor the usual creak of a neglected pipe.

It was a footstep.

Too light to be the clerk. Too quiet to be careless.

Arya's instincts didn't wait for permission. He dropped the weights with a thud that reverberated like gunfire and ducked behind the shadow of his lat machine. His breaths now were trained controlled, measured. The same breath he used to calm himself before a kill.

"No one comes down here unannounced," he thought. "Not unless they want to leave in pieces."

His hand found the hidden click behind the dusty smith machine an opening disguised between steel and sweat. Out came the cold whisper of polished metal: his pistol.

It wasn't just a weapon it was memory forged in rage, engraved with every failure of society, every betrayal, every "You'll be fine" lie he'd ever been fed. This basement wasn't a gym. It was a graveyard of former selves.

The darkness welcomed him. He didn't mind it. Darkness didn't judge. It was home.

While the world above screamed for dopamine, for sunlit selfies and filtered joy, Arya bled quietly into shadow, where he could finally think. In the dark, there was no reflection. Only reckoning.

He stayed low. Listened. The sounds crept closer. Footsteps. Deliberate. Calculated. Unafraid.

“This ain’t no junkie,” he thought.

The air changed. The temperature dropped.

Something was wrong.

He moved like he was born in the shadows. Past the punching bags and the electric shockers yes, those too were his. Not for torture. For penance. For answers. He punished his skin because his soul never bled enough.

Then came silence.

Too silent.

He burst from behind the equipment, pistol raised. Finger curled. The gun’s muzzle pressed directly against a head the intruder.

But it wasn’t just a head. It was his.

Arya froze.

The figure turned slowly. The exact same face stared back. Not as it once was. Not as it could’ve been. But the disfigured one. The one that had become legend in whispers. The one even monsters pitied.

It wasn’t possible.

It shouldn’t be.

But there it was him.

Arya’s hand trembled. The gun slipped from his grip and hit the floor like a truth long buried. His knees felt hollow.

Then the voice came. Familiar yet soaked in something older.

“Oh... Who is he?” the creature said, tilting its broken head.

“I’m Misty Memory.”

Arya couldn’t breathe. His mind blurred.

“What... what do you want from me?” he whispered.

The figure smiled his smile, before he learned to fake it. Before life carved sarcasm into his cheekbones.

“Want?” it replied. “I am what you want to forget.”

His legs gave out. The concrete kissed his knees as he collapsed.

This wasn't just a dream.

This was punishment. An old self clawing out of his subconscious.

The gym had been his chapel of discipline. But even here... he wasn't safe.

He looked up, trembling. The lights above flickered once more like judgment blinking.

"Did I deserve all this?" he muttered under his breath.

The figure knelt beside him, pressing its cold hand on Arya's shoulder like a brother... like a demon.

And then from Arya's own mouth, barely audible came the answer:

"Maybe... maybe I still do."

Chapter 11: Orange Juice

There was pain, but it was quiet.

When Arya opened his eyes, the cement beneath him was colder than usual. Familiar, but unfriendly. Like waking up in the arms of an old lover you no longer trust.

“Hey, Mr. Kumar,” a voice called out light, surprised. “What happened? What's all this inconvenience in the morning?”

Arya blinked. The fluorescent bulb above his head flickered with reluctant life. The ceiling never looked this far. His head ached, but it wasn't from injury. It was from dreams.

As he tried to push himself up, a hand reached beneath his shoulder, helping him rise with practised ease. It was the clerk.

“Nah, nothing,” Arya mumbled. “Just a little accident last night.”

The clerk sighed. “How many times have I told you not to train alone down here after midnight? It's not safe. This place isn't kind after dark.”

“Never mind,” Arya replied, brushing off the dust and last night's nightmare with equal disregard.

But then, another voice.

Lighter. Playful. Foreign.

“Well, look what we have here,” the voice said. “This is like a Batcave. My god.”

Arya's eyes narrowed.

Standing near the workbench casually sipping orange juice was a young man dressed in denim confidence and untamed curiosity.

Vansh.

Arya's head snapped toward the clerk, fury cracking beneath his voice. “What the hell is he doing here?”

The clerk raised his palms, already defensive. "He came early this morning. Said he knew Vanshika. Said he's a friend. Just showed up and asked for orange juice."

"This place is great, Mr. Arya," Vansh added, walking toward him with a grin that belonged in sunlight, not this tomb of steel and silence. "I love what you've done here."

Arya stood fully now, with the clerk's arm steadying him. His voice low. Lethal. "This is the first and last time you see a place like this."

Vansh tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

Arya turned to the clerk again. "How could you let him in here?"

"I didn't," the clerk insisted. "He found it on his own."

"Nobody finds this place. It's not on maps. Not in whispers."

"But he did."

They both turned to Vansh, who was now admiring the punching bag, poking it like a child tapping a sleeping lion.

"I gotta say," Vansh grinned, "the orange juice is excellent. So refreshing."

Arya stepped toward him, his cowl shadowing half his face.

"Who exactly are you?" he asked. "Why did you come here?"

"Oh... it's just..." Vansh chuckled nervously, rubbing the back of his head. "I couldn't stop thinking about you, honestly. After that dinner... something about you, this place, I had to know. I guess I have OCD for people who live like urban myths."

Arya's voice cracked through the air like a bullet. "What the fuck is he talking about?" His words were meant for the clerk, but his eyes never left Vansh.

"Hey, man," Vansh said, raising his palms. "Relax. I just want to be friends. That's all."

The word "friend" landed like a bomb in the basement.

Friend.

Arya had heard it. Long ago. It wasn't a word he used. It wasn't a word used on him. It felt too soft, too warm for a life like his. The last person who said that word now existed only in memories and charred letters.

"What is your deal?" he asked, softer now, but darker.

"Be cool, man," Vansh smiled. "Let me explain."

Earlier:

The walls of the tech company's office were made of glass, ambition, and sterilized air. Vansh sat across the hiring manager, perfectly poised, his resume forged with the precision of a conman and the brilliance of a bored genius.

"So," the director asked, "Tea or coffee? Or something else?"

Vansh smiled with deliberate charm. "Orange juice."

The man blinked, confused. But hid it behind hospitality. "Sure. Why not."

"We're thrilled to have someone like you," the director continued. "Your skills... your aptitude... they're remarkable."

"Glad to be here," Vansh said, checking his watch theatrically. "Mornings to early afternoons are ideal. My presence is... merely beneficial during those hours."

It was perfect. The con. The hack. The application portal didn't even know he existed a day ago.

But now, he was an employee.

Later that day, he ran to the small café they used to frequent, heart lighter than it had ever been. Vanshika was already waiting, and the second he entered, she jumped to her feet.

They hugged.

"I knew you'd get it!" she beamed.

"I did. Thanks to you, my Bestie."

"Thanks to me? Are you nuts? It was all your hard work."

Vansh's smile dipped for a moment. The guilt of rewriting code and planting fake credentials flashed like a siren. But he shrugged it off.

"I prefer to call it smart work."

They laughed, sat.

"What coffee do you want?" she asked.

"No coffee," Vansh said. "You know me. Orange juice."

"Ugh, not again," Vanshika groaned. "This is an Italian café. Not a breakfast buffet."

"Dare me."

"Fine," she said, leaning closer. "If you're really smart... find out about my brother."

Vansh paused. "Isn't he your brother? What do you mean?"

Vanshika's face turned somber. "He's... different now. Distant. Always busy. Always somewhere else. I have to make appointments just to see him. I miss him. He's slipping away from me."

She choked on a silence, and Vansh reached for her hand.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Find him. Talk to him. Remind him he has people who care."

Vansh nodded. "I will. I'll be his friend. Make us a trio. That sound good, Lil Dumbo?"

"I hate that nickname," she smiled through her tears.

"You know I never lose, right?"

"Then if you can't do it," she smirked, "you drink the strongest coffee here."

Now:

Back in the basement, Vansh placed the empty glass on the table.

"And here I am," he said.

"I think I won. Not gonna drink that stupid coffee now."

Arya turned, jaw clenched. "You think this is a fucking joke? You break into someone's private space?"

"Relax," Vansh said coolly. "One click and I send a photo of this entire Batcave to Vanshika. She'd love it. She'd also hate it."

Arya's silence roared. Then he turned and started climbing the stairs.

"Clerk," he said. "Give him whatever he wants."

"This isn't about money," Vansh called out. "It's about a message. Your sister wants you back. She loves you. She misses you. She wants you in her life."

Arya stopped on the stairwell. That silence again the one with shape and weight.

"She'd love for you to be happy again. To have a friend. To be... around. Just give me a Week, only seven days."

After a pause, Arya turned. His face unreadable.

"A friend?" he said. "I don't know about that. An acquaintance... maybe."

He looked at the clerk. "He can come. Starting tomorrow. Ask you whatever he wants."

Then he vanished up the stairs.

Vansh sat down, finally exhaling.

"Was he always like this?" he asked.

The clerk didn't answer immediately. His eyes were fogged with memory.

"No," he said softly. "He used to be the happiest person I knew. The loudest. He made me laugh more than anyone. He..."

"Can I get another glass of orange juice?" Vansh interrupted, gently.

Chapter 12: The Sixth Attempt

The air behind him was thick.

Too thick to be real.

"Why are you so ugly?"

The voice didn't come from a person.

It came from somewhere deeper like an echo rising out of his own marrow.

Arya was fourteen.

Knees drawn in. Back against the wall. Concrete cold biting through his skin.

The basement smelled of rust and stale rainwater.

"How are you so weak? Physically... and emotionally?"

His throat tightened.

"I... I don't know," he answered, voice barely more than breath.

"You are so ugly!" The whisper came again, closer this time like someone's lips brushing the shell of his ear.

"I know," Arya said, eyes fixed on the ground. The concrete was cracked and pitted, small grey valleys where his gaze could hide.

"You are so weak! How?" The voice wasn't asking for truth it was demanding surrender.

"I don't know," he murmured. "There's no reason. It's just... I am. I am ugly. Maybe that's what the world wanted."

"Don't blame the world," the voice spat. It had teeth now jagged and yellow in his mind's eye.

"Take responsibility for yourself. The world is beautiful... you aren't. Acknowledge it."

Arya swallowed against the acid in his throat. "I'm ugly," he said, forcing the words like nails through his lips. "And I'm weak. And... I shouldn't be here."

The shadow behind him leaned closer hot breath he couldn't feel but somehow tasted.

"So. It's the sixth attempt? You coward. You stupid coward... You can't even take your own life? You aren't brave."

Arya's fingers twitched around nothing.

"I know... I'm a coward," he admitted. "But... not anymore. Let's do it. Let's finish it. I won't die a coward."

The basement's silence shifted. It began to listen.

He picked up the knife. Right hand gripping the handle until his knuckles whitened, the skin straining over young bones. The blade was dull at the edges, but sharp enough where it counted.

The plan was simple: slice deep into the soft meat of his left wrist and let the blood leak until there was nothing left.

"It's time," the voice whispered, and now it sounded like it was smiling.

"It's time to die. End the curse. Forever. There will never be a seventh attempt. Make it... this is the end. Let the sky fall."

The steel hovered over his skin. The world narrowed to that single, shimmering line between living and not.

Then

A voice broke through.

Not the whisper. Not the shadow.

A sound so familiar it felt like sunlight forcing its way into a locked room.

"Bhaiya... Arya... Arya..."

The voice was warm, young, impossibly alive. Vanshika's voice. It filled the basement like a wave crashing against fire. It roared in its gentleness. It dissolved the shadow.

"Arya. Arya. Are you listening to me?"

His eyes snapped open.

The knife was gone. The basement was gone.

He was sitting in the therapist's chair. The soft hum of a heater replaced the basement's stillness. Across from him sat the therapist, pen in hand, brow furrowed.

"Where were you, Arya? Daydreaming?" questioned the Therapist.

"I have another question," Arya said, refusing to answer. "How does it feel to be beautiful?"

He paused between the words. "How does it feel?"

"To be beautiful? Am I the right person to ask?" the Therapist replied.

"I don't know," Arya continued. "I just want the answer, that's all."

"I just want the answer. I just want the answer that's all..." Arya's voice cracked, almost breaking under its own weight.

And with those words, the sterile silence of the therapist's room dissolved into another reality. The walls faded, and he was suddenly back in the basement the black, hollow place he called both prison and sanctuary. A teenage boy sat there, knees drawn to his chest. Tears slid down his face, but not the tears of weakness; they were the tears of someone who had carried strength for far too long. The body can resist, the mind can endure, but eventually, even strength shatters into sobs.

The cracked floor below him seemed to whisper his brokenness back to him. The smell of damp concrete was heavy. The faint lightbulb swayed above, flickering as though it, too, was exhausted of holding itself together.

From the shadows, the clerk's voice emerged steady, old, roughened with time.

"Mr. Kumar... this was your choice. You wanted somewhere alone, and I obeyed. I've tried I gave you what you asked for. A mansion of stone and silence in the middle of nowhere. A place no one could find you. And yet you " his voice tightened with reproach and care at once, "you spend eighty percent of your time

down here, in this black basement. Tell me, Arya, what is this? What are you doing? What answer are you trying to dig out of the dark walls? What happened... has already happened. Live. Love what remains of your life. Your mother loved you. Your sister loves you. Even your assistant cares for you. The only one who hates you... is yourself. Don't do this. Please."

Arya didn't lift his head. His swollen red eyes stayed fixed on the cracked flooring, as though it had carved truth into it. He whispered back, voice rough with tears.

"I don't think you were appointed here as my therapist... were you?"

The old man did not flinch. "I have every right to say what must be said."

A silence. Then Arya asked, sharper this time:

"What more do you have to say?"

The old man stepped closer, his cane tapping lightly against the cold floor. His gaze shifted toward the wall where a massive painting hung its frame black, its canvas severe. He raised a thin, trembling finger toward it.

"Look, Mr. Kumar. There."

Arya turned, reluctantly.

"This portrait," the old man continued, "is a copy. The second copy of an original long lost. They call it The Devil's Checkmate. Look carefully."

Arya's eyes, tired yet unwilling, focused on the painting. At first glance it was suffocating black and red clashing over a chessboard frozen mid-game. He could almost hear the devil's grin. A painting that reeked of defeat.

"This," the clerk's voice grew softer, steadier, "is greatness itself. A work that feels like despair, yes but look closer. Look at the board. Do you see it? The king isn't toppled. The pieces aren't gone. It isn't over. There's still one move left. A move the devil

never saw coming. This painting... it is not a story of despair, Arya."

The boy blinked, leaned forward. His mind sharpened on the details he had ignored. The clerk's voice, deep and unwavering, carried him further:

"It is about stillness. About the kind of strength that remains even when the world insists it's finished. Even when every voice tells you it's over, you still have a choice. You can still move. Still win."

Arya's lips parted, but words didn't come. The air was heavy, caught between them. His chest shook once, and he finally muttered:

"You are... a good man. For what you did for me. For what you still do. Helping me live alone... making my family leave me be, and still being here when no one else would. You deserve someone better, someone good in your own life. I, his voice broke "I never even said thank you."

The old man, his eyes glistening beneath the flicker of the basement bulb, turned from the painting to Arya. He studied the boy's red, broken eyes with the care of someone who had been watching over him for far too long. His reply was simple, steady:

"And you will never have to."

Arya flinched at those words as if they were too heavy to hold. He turned, shoulders trembling, and began walking away into the shadows. His voice came faintly, trailing:

"If I still have a move left... I won't forgive myself for anything. Not for any of it."

The clerk's voice, urgent now, cut through the thick silence.

"Stop, Arya. Sit. Let me tell you something else."

Hesitant, Arya paused. Slowly, he sat back down across from the man, both facing the painting like disciples before scripture.

The clerk began again, his voice worn but alive with memory.

“Do you know what the historians say about our past, Arya? About the land we come from? Once there were warriors Kshatriya, Rajputs the great among the great, the mighty of the mightiest. Their name still echoes, though time has buried their bodies. But here is the strange thing: no one agrees where they came from. Their origin is mystery itself. Theories pile like stones some say from the flames of Agnikund, some from Brahmins, some claim they were foreigners, others say they were children of the Aryans. The Manusmriti even claims they came from the body of Brahma himself. A thousand stories, a thousand contradictions, and still... no origin.”

Arya listened in silence. His face was shadowed, but his eyes betrayed the quiet fire of curiosity.

“What does that mean?” he asked finally.

The old man’s voice deepened, steady as the earth.

“It means the origin does not matter. What mattered, Arya, was their legacy. Their courage. Their loyalty. Their will to fight even when outnumbered. It is that legacy which made historians dig, which made poets write, which made the world remember. Their beginning was unclear, but their end carved history. Legacy... is what defines them.”

Arya looked up at him now, red eyes burning into the old man’s face. It was rare so rare that Arya would meet another’s gaze.

The clerk held that gaze and said:

“You may not have a good origin, Arya. You may have nothing but pain, scars, and shadows behind you. But your legacy? That is still yours to shape.”

Arya closed his eyes, unable to hold the weight of those words. His breath trembled out, heavy, fragile, like someone both condemned and freed at once.

The basement was silent again, save for the old bulb flickering above.

Chapter 13: The Bet

The office was quiet. Too quiet for a man like Vansh.

He sat in the leather chair, suit pressed sharp in dark navy, tie slightly loosened from a long morning. Outside the tall windows nothing. No city hum, no neon glow. Just the endless silence of a mansion in the middle of nowhere.

He tapped his finger against the desk, restless.

"No cameras. No neighbors. No traffic. Nothing to trace this guy," he thought, leaning back. "I can't even hack him. How the hell am I supposed to know more about Arya Kumar? The only reason I'm near him is because of Vanshika... and I don't know how this is gonna end."

He smirked, half defeated. "Oh Lord. He seems like a reasonable guy. That's the problem."

The phone in front of him blinked. He dialed again. For the seventh time.

The line clicked open.

"Who's this?" came a steady, old voice.

Vansh almost jumped. "Finally! Man, I've been calling you for the seventh damn time. You don't have time to pick it up?"

The voice was firm, unshaken. "Who's this?"

Vansh leaned back, smiling crookedly. "Don't you remember me?"

A pause. Then the clerk's voice warmed just slightly. "Oh. Orange Juice."

Vansh rolled his eyes. "Finally. Why can't you just give me his number, huh? You're his personal assistant, aren't you?"

The clerk's answer was calm, absolute. "Mr. Kumar doesn't have a phone. He doesn't like the influence it has on human psychology."

Vansh whistled low. "Oh my guys... old school, huh? Doesn't even have time to wish his sister on her birthday?"

The clerk's voice grew sharper. "In that case, sir... he uses an old family telephone."

"A family telephone?" Vansh leaned forward, incredulous. "Does that even exist anymore?"

"I assure you, it does. A modern one."

"Whatever." Vansh pinched his nose, exhaling. "Where's Arya now?"

The old man's tone dipped, almost regretful. "In a place I wish he wouldn't be."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"The basement. All dark and dusty."

Vansh sat up, fixing his cufflinks. His voice steadied. "Is that so? And when may I come?"

"When you may, sir?"

"Thinking... in an hour."

"I'll inform Mr. Kumar, sir."

"Okay." Vansh ended the call.

The basement's stone corridors echoed with each step of his polished boots. The air grew colder, heavier.

Inside, Arya was crouched low, sweat dripping onto the cracked floor. His arms burned, lungs straining from another round of acrobatics and calisthenics. The dull thuds of his fists against the training bag still vibrated in the silence.

Then footsteps.

Heavy, patterned. Boots descending.

Arya froze, listening. His head lowered further, droplets of water running down his chest as he poured cold water over himself from the basin.

The boots stopped.

Arya spoke without looking up. His voice was sharp, but exhausted.

“So. It’s the bloody Techman, isn’t it?”

Vansh’s voice came cool, almost amused.

“Well, it is. Vanshika at least told you my nickname. She tells me nothing about you, though.”

Arya lifted his head, eyes dark, lips tight. “She doesn’t know anything.” He stood, crossing to the wash basin as Vansh followed.

“So, my friend,” Vansh prodded, “what were you doing just now?”

Arya stopped mid-step. His tone snapped. “I’m not your friend.”

Vansh shrugged, unbothered. “Well... Vanshika told me. For seven days, so.”

A pause. Arya’s shoulders dropped, the fight draining.

“Okay, fine.” He kept walking.

Vansh’s eyes lingered on the sweat, the glistening skin, the way Arya’s chest still heaved. “What’s the sweat all about?”

Arya didn’t look at him. “Do I have to tell you everything?”

“You haven’t told me anything, as far as I’m concerned. Mate.” Vansh smirked, leaning. “And about your sis ”

Arya cut him off, voice low, strained. “Yes. My sister. My sister.” He exhaled heavily, leaning against the basin.

Vansh stepped closer. “So?”

Arya turned, finally answering. “It’s just... I was performing acrobatics. And some calisthenics.”

Vansh’s eyes widened, genuine awe breaking through. “Oh Lord. You can do all that? Where do you even get the urge?”

“The urge?” Arya half-laughed, bitter. “I’m an unemployed wreck. What else do you expect me to do?”

“Besides learning martial arts, combat, acrobatics, calisthenics...” Vansh filled in, amused.

Arya splashed water on his face, rubbing it off with a towel.

Vansh tilted his head, studying him. "You are the most interesting nihilistic person I've ever seen."

Arya froze mid-motion. The towel dropped slightly. "How do you know... I'm a nihilist?"

Vansh grinned. "Elementary, my dear Arya. Elementary."

Arya scoffed. "You've seen too much Sherlock, haven't you?"

Vansh chuckled. "Not Sherlock. I like Professor Moriarty."

Arya's brows lifted. "I didn't believe her. When my sister said you were smart."

Vansh's smile dimmed into something incomplete.

Arya frowned. "How can you just come up with all this?"

"I can't tell you the method," Vansh replied lightly. "If I did, you'd think it was easy."

They moved toward the table at the corner of the basement. Vansh's eyes scanned the space.

A small glint caught his attention. Something yellow, lying near the corner.

He picked it up. "Oh, is it a mango? No... a pineapple. A pineapple keychain, without a key."

Arya's hand shot out, snatching it from his grip. His voice was calm but edged.

"Not everything here is for observation."

Vansh raised his hands. "Okay, buddy. Got it."

His tone shifted. "You ever think about why your sister wanted us to meet?"

Arya's eyes narrowed. "...Still searching for the answer."

"Well," Vansh continued, "she wants us both to be buddies for life. A fantasy of a loving girl her big brother and her best friend, both gifting her things at her birthday, competing for the prize."

Arya stared at him, disbelieving. "Is that what my sister wants?"

“We gotta ask her,” Vansh replied easily. “In the next ceremony when we all meet.”

Arya frowned. “What ceremony?”

Vansh reached into his coat, pulling out a card. He slid it across the table.

Arya picked it up. His face hardened.

India Info. Social Media Company. 7th Anniversary. Invitation.

Signed: Vanshika.

Arya’s voice snapped. “What even is this?”

“Oh... she didn’t tell you?” Vansh leaned back, smirking. “Guess I surprised you, then. My bad.”

“I can’t do this, man.” Arya’s voice was flat, final. “I’m not joining any of this stupid ceremony.”

Vansh leaned forward across the table, his tone coaxing. “You can’t just deny it. Your sister wants it.”

Arya shook his head. “Then I have to say no.”

Vansh’s lips tightened into something between a smile and a warning. “You really want that? You don’t even visit her to see how she’s doing, how much she’s working, what’s going on in her life. And the one time she requests something one little surprise you’re going to say no? For what? Your mask?”

Arya’s eyes burned. His voice rose, sharp and tired. “It’s not just my mask. I’m not into stupid people gatherings.”

Vansh shrugged, almost too casually. “This is nothing. Not everything matters. These people what are they going to do? Be scared of your mask? Some will laugh. Some will make stories. But how will it affect you? Huh? We’re just a microscopic tilt in the universe. Nobody cares.”

Arya’s jaw clenched. “Nobody cares, huh? Then why do you care? Why invite me into this bullshit?”

Vansh leaned in, his voice softer now, almost pleading. “Because your sister wants us together. She wants you with her

sharing fun, good times. And you? You just deny it... the same way you ignore her all year.”

Silence hung heavy. Then Vansh pulled his cellphone from his coat, slid it across the table. His voice was firm. “Okay then. Call her. Tell her yourself. Tell her you’re not coming because you’re afraid of people.”

Arya shot back, tone edged with defiance. “I’m not afraid of people. I just don’t like them around me.”

“Yeah? Whatever. Tell her that.” Vansh shoved the phone closer, disbelief dripping from his words. “Tell her you’d rather hide than show up when she asks you once.”

Arya’s gaze fell on the device. His brow furrowed. “Where’d you get a Nokia?”

Vansh smirked, defensive. “Oh, it can’t be traced. That’s all. Doesn’t mean a damn thing. Just call her.”

Arya leaned back in his chair, head tilted upward. He closed his eyes, defeated, shoulders sinking under the weight of everything unspoken.

The basement door creaked.

The clerk stepped in, balancing a tray. “Sir, I’ve got your orange juice.” He set it gently on the table before turning to Arya. “Mr. Kumar, would you like any coffee?”

Arya stood without a word, his movements clipped with passive aggression. He brushed past them both, making space empty in his absence.

The clerk looked after him, then turned toward Vansh, confusion etched in his wrinkled face. “Seems like you two had a debate?”

Vansh leaned back, picking up the glass of juice. His smirk returned, half-hearted. “Oh no... it’s just his little naughty sister.”

Chapter 14: Before the Party

Bentley Flying Spur! That's what I'm choosing. Yep. Vansh's voice carried the kind of boyish excitement he rarely allowed himself to show. His eyes almost sparkled at the car, as if the machine itself was a work of art.

Arya, half-distracted, replied flatly: "Okay. You got that... wait outside, I'll round it up." His tone was calm, almost indifferent, yet not dismissive.

It was nighttime. The air outside was thick, almost too still, and inside the garage lined with sleek machines gleaming under expensive white lights they were deciding which car would carry them to the ceremony.

Vansh's eyes darted from one vehicle to another, unable to contain his disbelief. "How come you didn't tell me? You had heaven here, right under your feet! I'm not even a car guy, but as far as I can see BMWs, Audis, SUVs stacked with luxury. The most expensive ones lined like soldiers! How come anyone gets depressed with all this?" His voice was half awe, half scolding, like he couldn't reconcile Arya's world of wealth with his own perception of him.

Arya's eyes, as always, held that cold stillness. His reply was almost philosophical: "There aren't just cars in the world. There's more sorrow than pleasure."

The words landed, but Vansh wasn't going to sit in silence. He tilted his head, half-smirking, and chose to steer the conversation away. "You don't have a sports car?"

"Never," Arya replied without hesitation.

"Why?" Vansh pressed, genuinely curious now.

Arya's voice sharpened slightly, cutting with logic: "I don't really like sports cars. Less of the seats. No use other than speeding. A bad economy and average performance. They

manipulate rich people into believing it's their dream car. And you know this is India sports cars can't even pass a speed breaker."

Vansh blinked, then burst into laughter, caught off-guard by the meticulous answer. "Oh my goodness... I didn't expect you to answer like that." He leaned back in his seat, still grinning. "But you know, Arya..."

Arya's hands gripped the wheel, his red eyes catching a faint reflection of the dashboard lights. "What?"

The Flying Spur purred to life as they settled into the plush leather seats, both of them suited up, men wrapped in wealth and shadows, ready for a night that wasn't theirs.

"Not everything has to make sense. Not everything needs logic," Vansh continued, his voice softer now. "Some things... like the desire to drive a sports car, or whatever else... they don't need reasons. They just need to exist." He paused, watching Arya's profile, the sharp jaw outlined in the dim glow of the dash. "You know what they say? While searching for meaning in life... you became meaningless."

Arya finally turned, his gaze cutting into Vansh, holding it just long enough. A faint smirk broke the mask. "You're just sounding like my clerk now." He pressed the accelerator lightly, and the car began to glide.

That was enough to make them both laugh an odd, genuine moment in the quiet night.

"My sister surely tried to make you spend time with me, not the old man." Arya muttered, but even he couldn't hide the amusement.

The laughter lingered, warm for once.

Six days. Six whole days had passed since Vansh had entered Arya's strange, haunted orbit. Vansh, reflecting quietly, almost smiled to himself. This guy... maybe he's not that bad after all.

"First day, we just talked. Second day... God, we planned a movie together that was horrible. He liked it though." Vansh's

inner voice mocked itself. "Then he challenged me to some martial art nearly broke my jaw. And for revenge, I challenged him to chess. We both know who won."

The Bentley moved through the dim streets, the city stretching endlessly ahead. Arya broke the silence. "We've got a long way ahead of us. An hour, maybe. You can turn on some music... or a song. Whatever you like."

Vansh cocked his head. "Are those different things?"

"Yes." Arya didn't even flinch. "I don't like songs. They influence your mind into believing in something that doesn't exist. They can make you sad. Angry. Proud of nothing. Just dumb. Lyrics stupid words."

Vansh tilted forward, intrigued now.

Arya's voice grew softer, deeper, the tone of a man who spent years alone in thought. "Music, though... that's different. That's like a world you enter. Every beat, every string like you can feel it in your veins. You think. You conclude. Whatever your wisdom or intellect can reach... it meets you there. Isn't that astonishing?"

For once, Vansh didn't have a quick answer. He just stared, moved by the strange beauty in Arya's words. "That is... truly bewildering," he admitted. "But you don't have to study the composition every time. Sometimes you just... listen."

He clicked the luxury media player. A random track began, filling the silence with something soft and foreign. Neither spoke. They both just listened.

Minutes later, Vansh reached into a bag by his side. Arya's eyes caught the glimmer.

A treasure of gold. A cowl exactly his size but gold-plated.

For a man who owned countless masks, black, white, red, even purple... this was something else. Arya's eyes lit up not extravagantly, but with a rare flicker of raw awe.

Before Arya could even speak, Vansh grinned. "This is for you. Your sister told me to give it to you."

The car swerved slightly as Arya pulled it to the side. He sat there, silent, overwhelmed in a way he couldn't articulate. "I'm not really the exaggerating type of guy," he muttered, his voice low.

Vansh lifted the mask, holding it so Arya could see the intricate carving. "Look closely. Right here on the forehead a V."

Arya's red eyes narrowed. "V stands for... Vengeance." His tone was sharp, serious.

Vansh rolled his eyes. "No, you dumbass. It's for Vanshika."

For a moment, Arya just stared. The golden mask gleamed in the dark, the shine soft but commanding.

"C'mon," Vansh said, sliding into the driver's seat. "Let me handle the wheels. You sit back, praise the present your sister gave you."

Arya frowned but let him take the steering. Vansh drove with unexpected precision, smooth, confident.

"Hey! Who told you to drive? You don't socialize with people and yet you've got driving skills?" Arya teased.

Arya's voice softened. "The old man. Since my face got ruined, he cared for me... more than my own family. One day, I realized he is my family."

Vansh nodded slowly. "Yeah. You love the guy. Who wouldn't?"

"The clerk fed me protein, taught me exercise, calisthenics, acrobatics. He made me study. He turned me into a philosopher. But still I chose to be a nihilist."

"Hey, that's not a bad thing," Vansh replied. "We're all unique in our own ways."

Then Arya's voice hardened, quieter, almost breaking the space between them. "You know... my father did this. To my face."

Vansh froze. "What? Your father? How could a father do that to his son?"

Arya didn't stop. "Yet I still tried to impress him. My whole teen life."

Arya started telling another tale.

The road to the examination centre felt longer than it was. He took the BMW because it was the one that started without argument; the engine's low growl was the only thing that didn't look at him like a question. He parked a little away from the main gate, under a sagging neem tree where dusty leaves tapped the hood. When he stepped out Armani suit, gloved hands, the familiar cowl shadowing his ruined face the morning air was filled with the smells of ink, dust, and hot steel benches.

And then the eyes.

Every poor man, every struggling boy, every middle-class father with a plastic folder heads turned as if pulled by a wire. Conversations thinned. He could feel the math of their thoughts: Who's the man with a crore-car and a mask? To buy the school, perhaps?

No. He was just there like them to give his examination.

The courtyard was loud with hurried feet. Notices curled on the board like shed skin, roll numbers pinned with rusted drawing pins. He moved toward the crowd pressing around the lists. He tried finding his roll no. in the rush that swelled and folded in waves. The bodies were impatient; elbows were language. He asked a couple of people quiet, polite but nobody answered. They just looked at him, at the suit, at the cowl, like he was a spectacle dragged in from the wrong world. A fucking tart, some gaze seemed to say without words.

He found it. The number. A small island of certainty. He tracked the arrows down chipped corridors, climbed a staircase that smelled of chalk and damp, and reached the room.

Inside: iron frames, wooden tops scarred by compasses; fans that stuttered like they were thinking of quitting; windows that let in light like a reluctant favor. He sat where the roll number

said to sit. He sited on the roll-no desk. He placed his pen precisely. He held his breath and tried to disappear inside his stillness.

But everyone watched him. Because of what? His cowl. His masquerade.

The door banged. The invigilator entered: a fatty, hairy man with a belt too tight and suspicion for a face. He carried answer sheets like a judge carries sentences. He started verification of all the students, moving row by row, calling names, checking IDs with the tiredness of routine.

When he reached Arya's row, he stopped. Looked once. Twice. The suspicion sharpened. He called two other teachers over, and they had a small committee right there in the aisle their voices a low, urgent swarm. Arya couldn't hear the words, but he knew the subject. It was him. It was always him.

They looked up at him.

The invigilator came up to his desk and made him stand. The metal legs scraped; the room flinched. "I need your ID," the man said, in a voice that tried to sound official but came out hungry. "I couldn't verify your."

"I already gave it to the committee beforehand entering, sir," Arya said, polite, controlled. "Fingerprint. Iris."

"Oh, you did?" The man's eyebrows tried to meet his hairline. "And they didn't have any objection?"

"I'm sure not," Arya replied. "That's why they let me enter here. If I'm not wrong."

"How do we know you are the same person from the identity?" The invigilator's frustration showed its teeth now. He glanced at the suit, then at the mask, then back to the suit. "Why would a man in a suit of Armani need to give a small grade level government job examination?"

"Perhaps," Arya said, voice steady, "it's not your job to question my purpose and my job to answer you."

The room, which had been pretending not to listen, listened harder.

The man got angry. Loudness became his logic. He started yelling something about rules, about fairness, about procedure. The whole class enjoyed the show. Heads turned like sunflowers tracking heat. A few smirks, a few pity-frowns, mostly the keen excitement of a disruption that wasn't theirs.

The head of the county head-sir, principal, whatever rank the badge meant entered the room, heavy with authority and impatience. "What are you doing?" he shot at the invigilator. "It's about time you give papers to the class. You can't be making mistakes. It's life-settling themes for these people."

"I'm sorry, sir," the invigilator replied, chest heaving in self-important panic. "But I couldn't verify this man in front of me."

The head-sir came near and looked at the chaos the way a man looks at a spilled curry: annoyed that it happened, more annoyed that it's his to clean. "What's up with you? How couldn't you verify him?"

Arya looked at the floor: angry and sad, the old double-knot of being the victim and the witness at once.

"The identity face and him doesn't match, I believe," the invigilator declared, relieved to have a line that sounded like policy. "As he refused to show me his face."

Arya looked up, quick, surgical. "I don't need to show you my face," he said. "I'm already verified with fingerprints and eyes."

The invigilator, now wrapped in his own righteousness, appealed to the gallery. "It's like all the scam prior these days," he announced. "And all others have to suffer the poor people. The middle class."

A few nods. A few grunts. The room loved a villain. And if it didn't have one, it would make one.

"I don't have to do anything with this people," Arya said, struggling to keep his voice even. "I'm just here to give my exam."

That's all, sir." He was trying to convince the room while knowing it was impossible like arguing with a verdict already read.

The bell rang sharp, impatient.

"Where is our paper? We are here for our job, not for these clashes," someone said from the back. Others echoed it, courage multiplied by numbers.

"I apologize," the head-sir said to the class, palms out, trying to shepherd the rage back into order. "For the heat. The papers will be at your desk right in time."

"What's the reason for delay?" someone demanded.

"Just some verification problems," the invigilator replied, eyes locked on Arya like he'd found a convenient scapegoat to pin the schedule on.

"Then kick him out of the class!" a voice snapped. "We won't have to suffer and get delayed for this masked man."

"Kick him out!" another joined. "Kick him out!"

The room shouted. Protest turned into rhythm. It wasn't personal; it rarely is. It was momentum. It was relief at finding a pressure valve that looked like a person.

Arya tried one last time, softer now, as if talking to the part of the room that still had a human ear left. "But I didn't do anything. I'm just here for my "

The sentence died in the crowd. There's no need to justify yourself to people who already have an answer in their head.

The head-sir exhaled his decision. He asked Arya to get out. Polite words dressed a dismissal. The invigilator's eyes sparkled with petty triumph. Two peons hovered near the door in case politeness needed muscle.

They kicked him out disrespectfully no hands, no shove, just that collective tilting of the room that pushes you without touching. "We won't call the authorities about your possible scam if you just get out from here," the invigilator added, gracious in his threat. "We're giving you an opportunity to run."

Opportunity. Run.

He picked up his pen. Slid it into his pocket like it mattered. Straightened the pages he hadn't been given. And walked. Not quickly slowly. Because dignity sometimes is nothing but the pace at which you accept defeat.

The corridor swallowed him. The stairwell smelled of old rain. Outside, the sun had climbed a little higher, uninterested in the theatre inside. He crossed the courtyard where boys with plastic folders were already hunting for answers they hadn't yet been asked. The neem leaves tapped the BMW again, the same rhythm as before, like time hadn't noticed what had happened to him inside.

He sat behind the wheel but didn't start the car. He stared at his hands, at the leather seam under his thumb, at the reflection of his own red eyes in the black gloss of the dash.

"I slowly walked out of the exam centre," he would tell Vansh later, voice low and flat. "Lost. Defeated. The man not respected by society. Hated by his own father. A man born in fire of unfortune. I don't know what desire keeps me alive anymore."

He turned the key. The engine answered. He drove away with a silence that sounded like a verdict.

Arya's voice broke slightly: "I walked out, lost. Defeated. Hated by society. Hated by my own father. A man born in fire... of misfortune. I don't know what desire keeps me alive anymore."

The silence in the Bentley was deafening.

Finally, Vansh pulled the car into the zone. His words were quiet, almost tender. "Maybe it's the love of your sister."

Arya's red eyes glistened. He turned away, unable to respond.

"I'll wait while you try on the golden present." Vansh slipped out.

Inside the car, Arya pulled the black windows up. Alone now, he lifted the golden cowl. The reflection in the rear-view mirror

was almost surreal: the shine of the gold, the carved V, the glowing red eyes behind it.

A song drifted softly from the radio:

“You think you know me? What’s right and what’s wrong... when I feel lonely.

I like to hide away... behind my masquerade.

You wouldn’t know I’m insane... behind my masquerade.”

Arya closed his eyes. Took a deep breath. Prepared himself for the gathering, for the world outside, for whatever came next.

Chapter 15: Hope

I feel like... I'm cursed. That I can never be happy,

said Arya softly, his voice heavy like the weight of a stone. The sun was melting into the horizon, casting an orange haze over the café terrace. He sat across from Vanshika, his hands loosely folded, eyes fixed on the table, but his mind far away. The silence between them was louder than any words. Grief clung to him like the dusk, thick and suffocating. It wasn't just sadness it was a quiet despair, as if a thousand unsaid sorrows pressed against his chest.

"I'm cursed," Arya chuckled dryly, almost like mocking his own misfortune. His eyes, red and wide, suddenly lifted toward Vanshika, as if pleading for an answer, for meaning.

C'mon Arya Bhaiya, you're my big brother... be hopeful!

Vanshika's voice, gentle but firm, broke the silence. She leaned forward, her eyes full of concern, trying to reach him across the void.

"The world is dark," Arya whispered, his gaze falling once more to the table. "The future is bleak..." He closed his eyes tightly, as if to block out reality. He knew, deep down, he wasn't supposed to speak like this in front of Vanshika. She always saw him as strong, as someone who could carry his burdens silently. But this was one of those rare moments when the walls crumbled. The grief inside him spilled out, unguarded.

"That isn't true!" Vanshika protested quickly, her tone soft but desperate. She reached across the table, brushing his hand with hers. "The world is not a dark place! That's a lie people tell themselves. Be hopeful, Arya Bhaiya."

Arya's eyes, still heavy with pain, looked up at her. For a brief second, the red faded into a softer glow, as if hope might just touch him. "Really?" he asked, his voice fragile. His eyes, pleading

now, locked onto the clear blue depths of Vanshika's eyes, searching for comfort, for reassurance.

"Yes, tomorrow will be a good day, brother," she said, smiling with a quiet, beautiful charm that made the air between them feel lighter. Her words were like sunlight breaking through clouds. There was no force, no lecture just pure sincerity wrapped in warmth.

Arya stared at her for a moment, as if trying to absorb her belief through her eyes. The café around them, the setting sun, the soft rustle of leaves all blurred at the edges. For that moment, her faith was all he could see, all he could hold on to.

And in that silence, hope returned not in grand declarations, but in the small, tender connection between brother and sister.

Chapter 16: Blue blood

As the girl wakes up in the bed, looks at the bright windows sun glazing.

Hiii my beautiful Squirrel, Said her man, I'm making Omellete for you. Wouldn't you like it?

I surely will, said her, well it's not Squirrel, It's Chavi.

Well, You're Chavi to the world, the name your parents gave you. Continued her husband. That's your identity, but for me, You're my Squirrel, all way long, you got that? Detective Chavi.

As Chavi started seeing the man of the eyes, the beautiful ocean felt to her.

The man kissed her on the Forehead. Said: get ready you got a Job to do, There's some chaos around the city.

Chavi replying on the Kiss said; Oh That felt Hard, falling and feeling Deeply.

Chavi sat on the Dining Table, as he served her the breakfast, taste it and tell me! As she started to do the brakefast with her spoon but just looking at the man sitting in front of her. Saying: It's always more delicious.

While the notification rang on the mobile, Seeing a lot's of messages of emergence from the colleague.

Oh Lord, There's literally a chaos in the city, why wouldn't you tell me? As she was shocked and started rushing.

If I'd have told you, you wouldn't have even time to get some brakefast. Replied the husband.

I can get it later, got some fire to fight out there.

Detective Chavi looked up a Graffiti on the Big monument saying! In the middle of the crowded street. People going to their works and all, as some crowd that had to be separated; Popping out their Phones camera while posting it on social medias! The Big Text that terrified everybody;

THE MONSTER IS OUT TO EXPLODE

"What do you think it is, Ms. Chavi?"

The question came from one of the officers standing a step behind her, notebook half-open, pen hovering like it was afraid to touch the page.

Detective Chavi didn't answer immediately. She stood still, eyes tracing the violent lines carved across the wall. The graffiti wasn't random. It wanted to be read. It wanted to be felt.

"You can see how it's written," the officer continued, trying to keep up with her silence. "The strokes... they're aggressive. Angry. Whoever did this wasn't calm. It looks rushed like it came out of misery more than intent."

Chavi finally spoke, her voice low and controlled.

"Yes," she said. "It's not aligned. The words fight each other. The spacing collapses in places." She tilted her head slightly. "That happens when emotion overrides precision."

The officer nodded. "So... vandalism?"

"No," Chavi replied instantly. "A warning."

The word hung in the air, heavier than the smell of damp concrete.

She crouched slightly, inspecting the surface closer. The paint was thick. Too thick.

"What paint was used?" she asked. "This isn't ordinary spray."

The officer hesitated. "We're still checking."

"I want every store's receipt," Chavi said, standing again. "Every place that sells spray paint within a reasonable radius. Who bought it. When. And " her eyes narrowed, " whether this paint even exists in retail."

She ran a gloved finger just beside the graffiti, not touching it, but close enough to feel its presence.

"This thickness," she muttered. "This density. Is that a ray-based compound? Or something layered?"

A murmur rose from the small crowd that had gathered behind the tape.

"It's customised," a voice said.

Chavi turned sharply.

"Who said that?"

Officers parted the crowd and pulled a man forward mid-thirties, work-worn hands, paint stains buried into the creases of his fingers.

He looked startled. "I I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Oh no," Chavi said calmly. "That's alright."

She stepped closer, studying him the way one studies a crack before it spreads.

"I want you to repeat what you said," she continued. "You said it's customised?"

"Yes, ma'am," the man replied, voice steady but cautious.

"And how would you know that?" Chavi asked.

"I work at a spray paint manufacturing company," he said. "Have been for years."

Chavi folded her arms. "Go on."

"By just looking at this graffiti," the man continued, gaining confidence, "I can tell the boundary spread is far larger than any commercial spray paint allows. The pressure output alone exceeds standard cans. This isn't something you buy off a shelf."

He gestured toward the wall.

"It had to be customised. Modified. Probably assembled piece by piece. Whoever made this knew exactly what they were doing."

Silence followed.

Chavi turned back to the wall, absorbing his words.

Customised.

Not random. Not impulsive. Not cheap.

This wasn't vandalism.

It was preparation.

"There are some men at the hospital," said a nearby officer, lowering his voice. "Beaten very badly. Looks like a violent fight."

"Oh really?" Detective Chavi replied, her expression tightening but not surprised. Her mind moved faster than her face. "Then it could've been a mob conflict. A clash between groups. And in retaliation " she paused, glancing back at the image of the graffiti burned into her thoughts, " the opposition left their anger behind. The graffiti could be nothing more than a representation of collective rage."

She turned sharply to the officers around her.

"You analyse this scene. Every inch of it. Create a full report. I want timelines, patterns, motives." She adjusted her coat. "I'll go to the hospital. I want a deeper report."

Moments later, the police vehicle cut through traffic, siren silent but urgent.

The hospital was alive in the way suffering always is.

People sat on plastic chairs poor, tired, wounded by life more than illness. Their eyes followed her as she entered. Detective Chavi's coat clean, structured, elegant stood out violently against the cracked walls and flickering lights. Her presence felt unreal to them. Authority wrapped in beauty. Order walking into chaos.

She ignored the stares.

"Where are the people who were brought in last night?" Chavi asked a nurse at the counter.

"The ones who were beaten?" the nurse replied cautiously. "Are you family?"

"No," Chavi said flatly.

"Then what business do you have with them?" the nurse snapped, irritation slipping through. "You shouldn't see them. They're in terrible condition. You're a beautiful lady you don't need to see things like that."

Chavi slowly reached into her coat.

She pulled out her badge and held it up between them.

“Would you like to repeat that sentence?” she asked calmly.

The nurse froze.

“I I’m sorry, Detective,” she stammered instantly, guilt flooding her face. “They’re in Big Room Number Seven.”

She hesitated, then added softly, “There are fourteen of them. Severe condition. Severe pain. It couldn’t have been done by just a few people... I’d say more than twenty attackers.”

Fourteen.

Chavi nodded and turned away.

As she reached the room and pushed the door open

Blood.

Everywhere.

The floor was smeared, soaked, stained beyond recognition. It wasn’t a hospital room anymore it was a slaughterhouse. The smell hit her next. Iron. Sweat. Something rotten beneath antiseptic.

Her breath caught.

She froze.

This was her first time seeing something like this not in files, not in photos, not in reports. In reality. In flesh.

Fourteen men lay across hospital beds. Some motionless. Some moaning. Some staring at nothing. Hair ripped out. Eyes swollen shut. Clothes torn like paper. Blood dried and fresh, mixed together. Necks bruised. Bones bent wrong.

Her intellect screamed back at her the nurse’s warning echoing.

Too late.

Chavi stumbled backward and rushed into the washroom.

She locked the door.

Her reflection stared back at her pale, shaking, unfamiliar.

Her heart pounded like an explosion like something nuclear had detonated inside her chest. Her hands trembled. Her breath collapsed.

She reached for her phone.
She called her husband.
The number you are calling is not answering. Please try again later.
She called again.
No connection.
Her throat tightened.
Outside, footsteps approached.
Inside the washroom, the phone rang.
Connected.
At the same moment the washroom door rattled.
“Ah ” Chavi gasped in terror.
The phone slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor.
The screen cracked, spiderwebbed, filthy against the tiles.
“Detective?” a female officer called from outside. “Are you there? Are you coming to question one of them?”
Chavi swallowed hard.
“Oh yeah,” she said, forcing her voice steady. “I’m coming.”
She looked down at the broken phone.
Then at herself.
She stepped out, pulling her posture together like armor.
“I questioned one of them,” the officer said gently. “He’s conscious enough. I’ve set a chair near his bed. He might talk to you.”
Chavi met her eyes.
There was fear there. Bare. Unhidden.
She didn’t want to be here.
The blood.
The brutality.
It was eating her alive.
“What happened, Detective?” the officer asked.
“Oh uh thank you,” Chavi replied, fumbling. “I’ll take it from here.”

She walked slowly, dragging herself forward. Every step revealed more damage. More violence. Her inner fear clawed outward, begging to escape.

She reached the chair.

Sat.

The man on the bed looked at her.

Not like a criminal.

Like a child asking for help.

Her voice shook as her eyes caught the cut marks around his neck.

“Who were they?” she asked.

The man paused.

Then corrected her.

“No... not they,” he said weakly. “Him, Red Eyes”.

Chavi’s breath stopped.

One? Red Eyed?

Her heart and mind split, racing in opposite directions.

“Why did this happen?” she whispered. “Who are you people?”

The man swallowed painfully.

“We work for ”

Chavi collapsed.

Her body hit the floor before the sentence could finish.

Chapter 17: Back to the Party

The night hadn't fully settled yet, but it pretended it had.

Arya and Vansh stepped out together, the soft hum of the city brushing past them like an indifferent witness. Ahead stood the building tall, confident, lit in a way that demanded attention rather than respect.

A board hung above the entrance, pristine and deliberate.

INDIA INFO

A Social Media Company

Below it, engraved like a moral verdict:

"Truth is never meant to be hidden."

Vansh slowed his steps, craned his neck slightly, and read it twice. He let out a small breath through his nose.

"A news media quoting this?" he said, half-amused, half-curious. "How funny."

Arya didn't laugh.

His gaze stayed fixed on the sentence longer than necessary, his red eyes narrowing slightly as if the words had personally accused him.

"What a joke," he replied.

They walked in.

The first thing that greeted them was sound soft music, layered voices, glasses clinking, the curated comfort of people who had never questioned their safety in a room like this.

Then came the eyes.

Conversations thinned.

Laughter hesitated.

A few people went quiet without knowing why.

The golden cowl caught the chandelier light, scattering reflections across polished floors and curious faces. Arya felt it

instantly the familiar tightening in his chest. The same sensation he'd felt his whole life. Being noticed without being welcomed.

For a moment, the room held its breath.

Then it exhaled awkwardly and pretended nothing was wrong.

Across the hall, Detective Chavi stood alone near a tall table, wine glass already half empty. She squinted toward the entrance, annoyance flickering across her face.

"Who's that guy?" she muttered, leaning toward someone beside her who wasn't listening. "What's he even wearing? A golden... whatever."

She took another sip, lips curling.

"People these days. Their hobbies. Fucking ugly."

"Why are they staring at us?" Vansh asked under his breath, irritation creeping into his tone.

Arya didn't bother looking around. He already knew.

"Trust me," he said quietly. "I know why."

Before Vansh could respond, a woman began walking toward them measured steps, professional posture, polite smile rehearsed to perfection.

Arya's shoulders stiffened.

"Why the fuck is she coming here?" he whispered, exhaustion layered with irritation.

"Relax," Vansh replied calmly. "She works here."

Arya noticed immediately no drink in her hand. Everyone else had one.

"Hello, sir," she said politely. "I'm from India Info. May I see your invitation card, please?"

Arya let his head tilt back slightly.

"Fuck me," he muttered, tired rather than angry.

"Oh yes," Vansh said quickly, fishing the card out. "Here."

She scanned it, nodded, then smiled again.

"Would you like a tour? Or perhaps a brief description of what our company does?"

Vansh's smile softened, genuine. "We'd love to."

She walked alongside them as they moved further inside.

"India Info," she began, "is a social media company but not in the conventional sense. We deliver breaking news directly to phones, desktops, notifications instantly."

"There are thousands like that," Arya interrupted, his voice low, almost flat. "What makes you special?"

The assistant paused. The tone wasn't curious. It wasn't hostile either. It was... probing.

She glanced at Vansh.

"Be gentle, my friend," Vansh said lightly.

"I'm not your friend," Arya corrected without turning.

Vansh sighed quietly, then nodded toward the assistant. "Please. Continue."

Relieved, she straightened.

"What makes us unique is our access," she said. "Nearly seventy percent of verified information reaches us first news channels, articles, newspapers."

She gestured broadly.

"From there, we distribute it across cities, districts, states, union territories. This is the largest information network in India."

"Is that why so many powerful people are here tonight?" Vansh asked.

"Yes," she replied smoothly. "Would you like me to point them out?"

Her eyes lingered on Vansh just a fraction longer than professional courtesy required.

"I insist," he replied.

Crash.

The sharp sound of glass shattering cut through the room.

Heads turned. Conversations faltered.

The assistant flinched, then forced a laugh. "Oh well. Not the best start."

She leaned closer. "That's Detective Chavi. She's... new. A little drunk. Lives a happy life, I hear. Husband. Stability."

Vansh watched Chavi carefully now.

Arya felt something tighten in his chest.

"I want to leave," Arya said quietly. "This place doesn't feel right."

His red eyes didn't plead for fear but for rest.

The assistant continued, oblivious.

"That gentleman over there is Justice Suresh Bansal. Supreme Court."

Vansh followed her gaze.

"He carries authority well," Vansh said. "Even when he's silent."

"Fat authority," Arya added coldly.

Vansh exhaled. "We're standing on a very fine line of society."

"And that," she continued, "is Dr. Pooja Verma. Head of medical drug certification."

Vansh raised an eyebrow. "She decides what goes into people's bodies?"

"A system in itself," Arya murmured. "She looks arrogant enough to enjoy it."

"And her?" Vansh asked.

"Meera Iyer. She runs a call center."

"A scam center," Arya laughed suddenly.

The pause that followed was sharp, uncomfortable.

"And finally," the assistant said carefully, "Mr. Raghav Malhotra. CEO and co-owner of India Info. One of the richest men in the country."

Vansh studied him.

So this is Vanshika's boss.

"Nice coat," Vansh said softly. "Nice face."

“Oh, what a dickhead,” Arya whispered.

Vansh smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“And his partner?” Vansh asked.

“Kunal Mehra. Son of Ayush Mehra.”

Vansh stiffened. “The politician?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How does no one know this?”

“Privacy,” she replied smoothly. “We don’t reveal everything.”

Arya leaned closer to Vansh. “If this is his only business, how is he that rich?”

Vansh didn’t answer. He was thinking the same thing.

“And you?” Vansh asked, turning to her. “You haven’t introduced yourself.”

“Naina Kapoor,” she said. “Finance department.”

“Pleasure.”

“I was told to look after you.”

“Us?” Arya asked.

“Yes. Vanshika mentioned her brother would come. The one with the golden mask.”

Arya froze.

“Well,” Vansh said lightly, “she should’ve warned me you’d be flirting.”

Naina laughed.

“Where is she?” Vansh asked.

“I thought she’d arrive late,” Naina replied. “I was going to ask you.”

Arya’s chest tightened.

“When did you talk?” Vansh asked.

“I didn’t. I received a letter today.”

A letter.

Both men felt it.

Phones came out simultaneously.

The number you are calling is switched off.

Again.

Silence stretched.

"She might've left early," Vansh said, forcing logic. "We'll find her."

They split, scanning faces.

The party continued.

The world did not stop.

Arya moved faster now, thoughts splintering. He collided with someone.

Wine spilled.

"Fuck!" the man snapped. "Are you blind?"

Kunal Mehra.

Arya stared straight through him then walked away.

"What a golden dickhead," Kunal scoffed. "I'll wreck him if I see him again."

Arya didn't hear.

Parking lot. Phone again. Nothing.

Vansh burst out behind him.

"She's at home," Vansh said, breathless. "I could track her."

Arya started the car.

Paused.

Looked at Vansh.

"You could... what?"

Chapter 18: After the Party

Arya drove as if the road itself had wronged him.

The car tore through the night, headlights slashing the dark, tyres screaming against the asphalt as though protesting the violence they were being forced to commit. The city blurred into streaks of sodium lights and faceless silhouettes. A police officer stepped forward, arm raised, whistle piercing the air but Arya did not even register him.

The car did not slow.

It surged past, rage carrying it forward.

“Fuck all this,” Arya spat, his hands locked around the steering wheel as though it were the throat of fate itself. “How could you track her?”

Vansh sat rigid beside him, fingers clenched, jaw tight. “It’s just her phone,” he said, trying to sound composed, trying to sound reasonable. “Anybody can see where anyone is, right?”

Arya’s eyes flicked from the road for half a second just enough. Enough to make the question dangerous.

“Not when they’re switched off,” Arya said coldly. His red eyes turned toward Vansh, burning. “Who are you?”

The question landed heavier than it sounded.

Vansh swallowed. “I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “I’m not just... another ordinary guy. I’m a tech expert. I’m ”

“I’m what?” Arya cut him off. “A hacker?” He scoffed bitterly. “Fuck off then. You should’ve told me before.”

Silence swallowed the car again, broken only by the violent hum of speed.

Vansh tried calling her. Again. And again.

No answer.

The phone never rang.

“Why?” he whispered to himself, more than to Arya. “Why isn’t it reachable? Why ”

She invited us to the party, he thought. She wanted us there. So where is she? Why didn’t she come?

Arya’s thoughts were louder than the engine.

Vanshu... where are you, love?

Why is my pineapple not with us?

The nickname stabbed deeper than any truth.

It’s my fault.

I should’ve picked her up.

I shouldn’t have gone to that party.

His chest felt tight, as though something inside was folding in on itself.

I’m sorry.

I’m a terrible brother.

His heart thudded violently, each beat like a medical scan cold, mechanical, revealing something wrong.

Neither of them was stable.

But the car was.

It obeyed.

After tearing through a dozen turns, sliding, braking, roaring, they reached the society.

They abandoned the car without even locking it.

They ran.

“Stop stop the elevator!” Arya shouted as he saw it rising, carrying strangers upward.

It didn’t stop.

“Screw it,” Arya muttered, already moving. He took the stairs two at a time, then three, then four, legs burning, lungs screaming. “Seventh floor,” he whispered like a prayer.

Vansh stayed back, waiting.

He stared at his phone. The red dot flickered weakly.

“She’s here,” he told himself. “She has to be.”

He closed his eyes.

Above him, Arya was tearing through the stairwell, feet pounding against concrete.

Where are you, Vanshu?

He didn't stop. Not once.

The elevator finally descended.

Vansh stepped in slowly, the silence inside pressing against his ears. His hand shook as he pressed 7.

The doors closed with a soft, indifferent sound.

You're a disgrace of a brother, Arya thought as he climbed. Where were you when she needed you?

The elevator chimed.

Tinn.

The doors opened.

Vansh stepped into the corridor.

It was quiet. Too quiet.

"Vanshika?" he called softly. "Are you there?"

Nothing.

"Why did you abandon us?" His voice cracked. "Are you angry with us? With me?"

He approached the door.

"Just open it," he begged. "Please."

His hand touched the handle.

It moved.

The door was already open.

Confusion rippled through him as he stepped inside.

Music drifted from another room soft, looping, unaware.

I'll keep you safe in these arms of mine

Hold on to me, pretty baby, and you'll see...

Vansh walked slowly, each step heavier than the last.

Then he saw it.

And stopped.

He did not scream.

He did not move.
He became still.
A statue carved from disbelief.
Arya burst in seconds later, breathless, frantic.
His eyes found Vansh first then followed his gaze.
And something inside him shattered silently.
Vanshika.
Hanging.
The fan above creaked faintly, indifferent to the horror it carried.
The room was dark. Messy. Wrong.
What remained was Vanshika's body.
Her presence was gone.
Arya broke.
Vansh froze.
Their hearts had been racing moments ago.
Now they felt hollow.
Arya screamed a raw, animal sound and rushed forward, grabbing her legs, trying desperately to lift her, to undo the impossible.
"Please," he gasped. "Please..."
Vansh didn't move.
He already knew.
The apartment revealed itself slowly to him: broken glass, blood spots, a kitchen in chaos, a bed torn apart.
But none of it mattered.
There was a box.
A cardboard box.
A large V marked on its front.
Vansh approached it like a condemned man.
Inside an envelope.
His name.
VANSH.

His hands trembled.

The song continued. The song kept playing, long after she had stopped breathing.

I'll keep you safe in these arms of mine...

Arya collapsed.

When the police arrived, time lost meaning.

They wrapped her body in black polymer, efficient, professional.

Arya woke to noise and movement.

His golden cowl lay cracked, reflected in a nearby mirror.

He felt alone among people.

Vansh stood silently, staring at a painting Sherlock, Watson, Enola.

Three minds. One truth.

For the first time, Vansh felt human.

And Arya

Arya felt inhuman.

Chapter 19 : Repent

Vansh woke without knowing when sleep had found him.

The windows were shut.

The lights were dead.

Time had slipped past him like a thief who leaves no footprints.

For a moment, he did not move. His body lay stiff against the mattress, as if the night itself had pinned him down. Then his eyes shifted slowly toward the table.

The envelope.

"I took it from the crime scene," Vansh murmured to the darkness.

The words felt wrong in his mouth. Confessional. Almost sinful.

"I don't even feel bad about it," he admitted. "It was meant to be with me."

His throat tightened.

"It was written for me."

The room did not answer.

His eyes burned but refused to cry again. They felt swollen, heavy like grief had pressed its thumbs into them until they no longer obeyed.

"Why would you do this, Vanshika?" he whispered.

"I'm sorry."

He sat up.

The envelope lay there, silent and accusing. Across its face, written with deliberate care, were two words:

FOR VANSH

Nothing else.

He picked it up with trembling fingers.

"It specifically says my name," he muttered, trying to steady himself. "Not Arya. Not anyone else. Me."

A bitter breath escaped him.

"Great."

He tore the envelope open.

Nothing.

The paper inside was blank.

Vansh froze.

"Empty?" His voice cracked. "No no, that's not possible."

He stood abruptly, panic surging like static through his veins.

"You arranged this," he said aloud. "You planned it. You wouldn't leave it empty."

He lifted the sheet toward the dim light.

Nothing.

Then

A mark.

A faint smear of black near the edge. Almost invisible. Almost deliberate.

"Wait," he breathed. "This isn't empty."

The realization struck him with electric clarity.

"It only looks empty."

He rushed to the kitchen, nearly slipping on the tiles, fingers fumbling until he found a lighter. His hand shook as he flicked it alive.

He held the paper above the flame.

Slowly agonizingly letters began to surface. Pale shadows rising from the paper like ghosts remembering their names.

His heart hammered.

"It's there," he whispered. "I knew it."

He pulled the paper back, scanning it.

Still unreadable.

"This was found at the crime scene," he thought aloud. "Maybe she was going to mail it. Maybe she didn't want anyone else to read it. Not the police. Not anyone."

His breath hitched.

"And maybe... I'm the only one who's meant to understand it."

He rushed back to his room.

The computer sprang to life beneath his frantic hands.

"What is this?"

"What did you do?"

Hours passed unnoticed.

He copied every symbol, every line revealed by heat. His desk filled with scribbled notes. His fingers flew across the keyboard.

Then

"Pigpen Cipher."

His chest tightened.

"So this is it," he whispered. "You hid yourself inside code."

He worked relentlessly, decoding piece by piece, letter by letter, time dissolving around him. His stomach clenched with every word he uncovered.

"Yes," he gasped finally. "I've got it."

Tears blurred his vision as meaning emerged.

"I'll finish this," he promised the silence. "I swear I will."

At last, the final symbol cracked.

The last code dissolved.

He leaned back, exhausted.

"Let me read it," he said softly.

This is for Vansh.

Vansh read the line again.

Then again.

His lips twitched not a smile, not grief either. Something hollow lived between the two.

Hello my bestie, I'm here writing this letter for you. Hope you found my mail.

Mail?

Vansh let out a breath that almost sounded like a laugh.

"Mail?" he murmured to the empty apartment.

"What mail?"

The room did not answer him. It never did anymore.

You can find it in your Microsoft section. There are two copies. To open it, you'll need a password which you could obviously crack.

That line hurt more than it should have.

"I know who you are," she had written.

And she did.

But let me make it easy yet challenging. It's 777.

Vansh's jaw tightened.

The apartment number.

The floor.

The number that followed him like a shadow he never acknowledged.

I'll tell you there why I did what I did. That is my confession with no sin taken back.

His throat closed.

Confession.

And just take care of my brother. Promise me. You won't let anything happen to him. Don't let him drift far away.

Arya.

The word echoed louder than her death.

Bye.

That was all.

No "I love you."

No apology.

No softness.

Just Bye like she was stepping into another room, not out of life.

Vansh's fingers moved on instinct.

Microsoft.

Inbox.

Spam.

Archived.

Then

There it was.

An email.

Unread.

Sent seven hours ago.

Seven hours.

His breath hitched.

"Seven hours ago?" he whispered.

"It's scheduled... obviously scheduled."

He stared at the timestamp as if staring long enough could reverse it.

"Vanshika..."

His voice cracked, then steadied, then broke again.

"What are you getting me into?"

His chest tightened.

"Why?"

"Why are you not here with me?"

The apartment felt smaller suddenly. The walls leaned in. The ceiling pressed down.

He clicked.

Eight audio files.

Eight.

Not one explanation.

Not one goodbye.

His fingers hovered over the first recording.

Then

Hello you. It's me. Vanshika.
His entire body froze.
Not metaphorically.
Physically.
Live to you. And alive to myself.
His breath stopped halfway.
She sounded... calm.
Too calm.
If you're listening to this, I suggest you find some open ground.
His hand trembled.
And I warn you not a dark room. No lights. No one to look up to.
The room felt darker instantly, as if offended.
Vansh ripped the headphones off his ears.
"No," he whispered.
"No, no..."
He stared at the screen like it might explode.
"You?"
"Talking to me like this?"
His heart pounded violently. His vision blurred. His blood roared in his ears like a storm trapped inside his skull.
She was dead.
She was gone.
And yet she was giving instructions.
He looked around.
Dark room.
Curtains drawn.
No lights.
No one.
Exactly where she told him not to be.
His hands shook.
"Should I?" he asked the silence.

“No... no.”
But silence did not argue.
He opened the window.
Cold air rushed in like a witness.
The clock read 4:00 AM.
Of course it did.
He grabbed his coat. His headphones. His phone.
No hesitation left now only obedience.
Down the stairs.
Out of the building.
Into the open.
The ground was vast and empty. A place where joggers would
come later. A place meant for life but now vacant, waiting.
He stood in the middle of it.
Nowhere.
No walls.
No shadows.
No hiding.
Vansh took a breath that felt borrowed.
He put the headphones back on.
His thumb hovered.
Then
With courage that hurt,
and honesty that terrified him,
he pressed play.
“Hello... you.
It’s me. Vanshika.”
The voice was calm. Too calm.
Not theatrical. Not pleading.
Alive.
“Live to you... and alive to myself.”
Vansh stiffened. His fingers tightened around the recorder as
though it might slip away if he loosened his grip even slightly.

“If you are listening to this, I suggest you find some open ground.”

A pause.

A deliberate one.

“And I warn you do not choose a dark room.

No lights.

No one to look up to.”

His breath caught.

“If you are listening to this for the very first time after my death...”

The word death landed without mercy.

“...then congratulations.

You are lucky.”

Lucky.

“You are about to become part of something very... very great.”

Vansh exhaled a hollow laugh, disbelief crawling up his spine.

Great?

What did you do, Vanshika?

“You people stabbed me seven times.”

The voice did not tremble.

“Not with knives.”

“With intent.”

Silence. Then

“Each wound was precise.

Each one designed to disturb a mind.”

Vansh’s chest tightened.

“I took it.”

A quiet pride. Or resignation.

“But now this will stab you back.”

A breath.

“Don’t worry.”

That familiar gentleness returned.

"You are safe."

Another pause.

"But not for long."

Vansh swallowed.

"Some of you are very powerful."

A faint smile could be heard in her voice.

"But my death..."

Her voice softened.

"...my death will be much louder than my life ever was."

He could almost see her eyes now.

"I can already imagine the riots."

Vansh (internal)

Riots?

Part of something big?

He let out a breath that broke halfway.

What did I do?

"You are all guilty of something."

Her tone sharpened.

"All of you except one."

Vansh's spine went rigid.

"And he knows it."

His heart stuttered.

"But you will never know who he is."

Am I guilty?

Who is that one man?

"So listen."

Commanding now.

"And if you choose not to..."

A softer tone returned.

"Don't worry."

A breath.

"The world will listen."

Then, almost philosophically

"You cannot undo what is already written by God."

A pause.

"Can you?"

Silence.

"Neither could I."

The room felt smaller.

"Working for this company India Info was the biggest mistake of my life."

Her voice lowered, heavier now.

"I should have listened to my brother."

Vansh's jaw clenched.

"Or my best friend."

His chest burned.

"But I didn't."

A bitter laugh escaped her.

"Curiosity."

"Always curiosity."

She exhaled slowly.

"I was born rich."

A statement. Not pride.

"Money at my feet."

Another pause.

"And yet empty."

Her voice thinned.

"My family loved me."

"But they were distant."

A familiar ache crept into Vansh's bones.

"I wanted to help people."

"The poor."

"To travel."

"To live peacefully."

Then

"And then I saw the truth."

Silence stretched.
“The truth of the world.”
Her breath trembled for the first time.
“It haunted me.”
A whisper.
“Every day.”
“Every hour.”
“Every second.”
Vansh (aloud, broken)
“It haunted you?”
“But you were always smiling...”
“You were the light in every room...”
His voice collapsed.
“Why didn’t you tell me?”
“I know.”
Her reply was immediate. As if she’d anticipated him.
“I should have reached out.”
A breath.
“To my friends.”
“My familia.”
She paused, almost embarrassed.
“But I didn’t want to burden anyone.”
Her voice darkened.
“What I saw was filth.”
Vansh’s fingers trembled.
“And I could not let anyone else feel that pain.”
“Vanshika...”
“What filth?”
“I could have helped you...”
His voice cracked.
“You shouldn’t have left me.”
Barely audible
“I loved you.”

“I’m sorry.”
A softness only she had.
“To those who loved me this was never your fault.”
The words struck harder than blame.
“The burden was mine.”
She exhaled slowly.
“It was already too heavy.”
A pause.
“Trust me.”
Then
“I was already dead.”
Silence.
“I’ve only just left the room.”
“Vanshika...”
Her name trembled his entire body.
The sound of it had always been his relief.
“I was preserved.”
Her voice turned reflective.
“Sheltered.”
Then
“Like Siddharth Gautam.”
Vansh froze.
“Protected from the ugliness of the world.”
A breath.
“From corruption.”
“From broken systems.”
“From broken people.”
Her voice cracked.
“And then I saw it.”
A whisper.
“All of it.”
A pause long enough to hurt.
“I am not Buddha.”

A sad smile in her voice.
“Just another human who couldn’t survive the truth.”
The recorder clicked softly.
Vansh tried to stand.
His legs felt like they were stepping through a minefield.
Every movement demanded courage he no longer possessed.
And yet
He stood.
I could summarise the truth I saw
call it a trailer, a warning before the screen bleeds.
Fascists. Nepotists.
Never burdened by guilt,
because how do you pick a side
when filth surrounds you from every direction?
Hands meant to hold books now grip lathis and knives,
all of them masquerading in khakhis and whites,
uniforms stitched to sanctify violence.
They can’t bear resistance
they convulse like angry paraplegics
when your shots land clean,
accurate as Messi’s free kicks.
She laughed then.
Paused.
Like a ghost who remembers how she died.
And the normal people
the poor ones,
the sinless ones
they are slaves to a system that never needed chains.
It begins with shearing the wool,
parading blind sheep straight to the wolf’s plate,
teaching obedience before hunger.
Women stalked on vacant streets,
preyed upon by assailants,

guarded by cops crooked as Ajay Devgn's teeth,
smiling through rot.

Mascots of God,
fuelled by fraud,
beefing over temples,
going ham over mosques,
worshipping noise instead of mercy.

They find money to kill those eating in peace,
find cash for propaganda and ads,
but not for schools,
not for futures.

They drug the youth with confusion,
strip them of gumption,
seduce them with guns and lucid instructions,
recruit the poor,
manufacture goons in bulk,
call it order.

But no

I'm just another bitch,
armed with inconvenient observations,
and stupid assumptions.

Vanshika had so much left to say.

And Vansh cried silently, inwardly because her voice had not
died. It had merely changed its address.

This nation this great nation keeps asking who the nationalist
is.

And all Vansh could see were unequipped students and
unemployed graduates, standing in queues that never ended,
clutching degrees that had become polite lies.

Agenda-filled debates screamed from glowing panels
facts bent, twisted, reheated, and served inaccurate,
while dying farmers shouted louder than the panelists who
spoke over them.

Truth spun like a googly on a hostile pitch
but still, impossible to miss,
sharp and sudden like a Bruce Lee kick to the chest.
They engaged demographics with fictional news,
then enraged the masses with the diction they chose carefully
to hate, to discriminate, to turn vile, to brawl.
These tactics were smeared everywhere,
layer by layer,
until division became routine
and collapse felt natural.
A mild tweet could land you in jail.
An apocalypse could reign without apology.
And free speech lay buried
not dead, just fossilised,
dug up only when convenient.
Vansh stood there, motionless, as her voice continued
haunting him in the middle of that open ground.
His suit whipped in the western wind.
The headphones pressed against his ears did not play music.
They played vengeance.
“I know the world is heading for ashes and dust,” her voice
said.
“They sell unrest the way others sell products.
War has become a commodity.
Demand meets supply
and the currency is the bodies of martyrs.”
He shut his eyes.
“I believed tomorrow would be another day,” she whispered,
“and I hoped tomorrow would be better.
But I could not find the purpose anymore.”
A pause. Not silence acceptance.
“The only purpose left,” she continued,
“was my sacrifice.

To give someone else freedom.
To avenge myself.”
Vansh felt his throat tighten.
“I know I was depressed,” her voice admitted,
“but not always can a therapist help.
Sometimes they can’t.
Sometimes it is kinder to let go.”
Even if it is a life.
Her final words did not beg.
They did not apologise.
“You will all hear it,” she said.
“And you won’t be able to stop it
not until it reaches the world.”
A breath.
“Will I get justice?”
A faint, bitter smile in her tone.
“Let’s see.”

Chapter 20: Exhibition

A week had passed since Vanshika's grief.

Time had moved, but Arya had not.

He sat alone in the basement, motionless, staring at the still surface of the pool. The water reflected nothing no ceiling, no light, no self. Only a hollow depth that seemed to invite him in. Guilt gnawed at him, slow and relentless, like an infection that refused to heal.

Everything else was already dead.

The gym equipment lay twisted and broken, metal bent in unnatural angles. Electrical devices were smashed beyond recognition screens shattered, wires torn out like exposed nerves. Laptops lay cracked open, their insides burned and blackened. Paintings were reduced to scorched frames, wood-carved artifacts split apart and discarded like bones.

Destruction had come easily.

Peace had not.

Arya lowered himself into the chair again, his eyes fixed on the water as if it were waiting to answer him.

"Why couldn't you just leave me?" he said, his voice low, brittle.

The words were meant for the old man standing far away, half-consumed by shadows watching, guarding, waiting. Always there. Always silent.

"I can't let you stay alone," the old clerk replied calmly, his gaze sweeping over the ruined basement. "I don't think that needs any explanation now."

Arya let out a hollow breath, almost a laugh.

"What do you think," he asked without looking back, "I'm going to do?"

His voice sharpened.

“Hang myself? Shoot myself? Jump off a building?”

The old man didn’t move.

“I won’t say anything,” he said after a pause. “But you should see a therapist.”

Arya snapped.

“Fuck him. Fuck this world. Fuck all of it.”

His voice echoed through the broken space, raw and exhausted rather than loud.

“I don’t care anymore. Everything is nothing to me now. My only hope was her.”

His jaw tightened.

“And now that hope is gone.”

Silence followed thick, suffocating.

“But I won’t let anything happen to you, Arya,” the clerk said quietly. “I promise.”

Arya stood up abruptly, rage flaring like a match.

“Fucking why?” he shouted, kicking the chair aside as it skidded across the floor. He walked slowly toward the darkness where the old man stood, each step deliberate. “Why do I matter to you? Or to anyone?”

His voice cracked.

“I’m better off dead.”

He stopped a few feet away.

“But what did you do, huh?” Arya continued, his tone sharpening. “You threw out everything in this rich palace that could be used to hang myself. You disconnected every electrical device. You hid every gun I had.”

He stepped closer, his face barely visible now.

“So tell me what do you even want from me?”

The old man straightened, his voice firm but respectful.

“What do you want, sir?”

Arya blinked, momentarily caught off guard.

“...Excuse me?” he muttered.

“Well,” the clerk continued evenly, “what I did was protocol. But we both know there are other ways to die.”

He paused, letting the words settle.

“So why didn’t you?”

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“What are you planning?”

Arya froze.

The rage drained from his posture, leaving behind something colder something quieter.

Something forming.

He stood there in absolute stillness, surrounded by wreckage, shadow, and unanswered intent.

The exhibition had begun.

It had been a week.

A full week since the place had stopped resembling a building and started looking like a crime scene that had lost its purpose. Broken cars lay like carcasses in the parking lot, glass scattered like frozen rain. Mirrors every reflective surface had been shot, shattered, erased, as if someone had declared war on their own reflection.

The old clerk stood amid the ruin, his voice shaking not from fear, but from exhaustion.

“It’s been a week,” he said again, slower this time, as if repetition might finally pierce the silence. “A week, Arya. You could have done anything to yourself by now. Anything.”

Arya stood still. Too still.

“But no,” the old man continued, gesturing helplessly around them. “You chose this. Destroyed the place. Broke cars. Shot every mirror you could find.” His voice rose, cracked. “Why?”

No answer.

Arya’s face was blank, but inside him something was tearing itself apart. His intellect raged inwardly, folding over itself like a

collapsing star. Thought after thought burned and died before it could reach his mouth.

“What do you want to do?” the clerk asked, desperation now naked in his tone.

Silence.

The old man snapped.

“Tell me!” he shouted. “What do you want to do?!”

Arya’s lips parted slowly, as if the words had to crawl out of a grave.

“I want to,” he said quietly, “destroy the world...”

A pause.

“...before I end myself.”

The words didn’t echo. They sank.

The old man stared at him, disbelief hollowing his eyes. He didn’t speak, but his mind answered for him.

That’s what a man wants to do to the world... when his world has already been destroyed.

Then

Footsteps.

Slow. Measured. Deliberate.

Each step announced itself, stretching the tension until the air itself felt tight. A shadow entered first, followed by the faint sway of black fabric. A coat moved with him unbuttoned, loose, careless as if structure itself had stopped mattering.

The room changed.

Not louder.

Not violent.

Heavier.

It was him.

Vansh.

Hands in his pockets. Headphones resting at his neck like a forgotten habit from another lifetime. His eyes scanned the wreckage once only once but there was no surprise in them.

Something fundamental had shifted.
The humour was gone.
The jokes, dead.
The insecurity that once defined him buried.
What stood there now wasn't grief.
It was design.
Arya looked up at him. Their eyes met.
The old man felt it instantly the beauty of danger. Not the loud kind. The unspoken kind. The kind that didn't threaten... because it didn't need to.
Vansh spoke.
"We should talk."
His voice was calm. Composed. Nothing like before. No tremor. No hesitation.
They sat on broken chairs, facing each other like survivors of different wars. Arya's devastation was visible now not explosive, but hollow. He couldn't speak. He didn't need to.
Vansh's posture said everything.
"You may go," Vansh said, without looking away from Arya.
"I'll take it from here."
The old man hesitated, then nodded slowly. As he walked away, he forced a smile that didn't belong.
"I'll... I'll get your orange juice ready."
The door closed.
And the silence that followed was no longer empty.
It was intent.
"Don't worry, brother," Vansh said at last.
His voice was calm. Too calm. The kind of calm that doesn't soothe it decides.
"You won't die," he continued, eyes fixed ahead, unblinking.
"And I won't let you."
A pause. Deliberate.
"Before destroying the world."

The words didn't land like a threat.

They landed like a promise already fulfilled.

"And in that case," Vansh added softly, "I'll help you."

Arya's breath faltered. His chest rose and fell unevenly. Something inside him something long restrained pressed against his ribs, begging to be named.

"Someone promised me to take care of you," Vansh said, almost absent-mindedly, as if recalling an old debt.

"But I know..." his lips curved faintly, "...you can take care of just everything."

Arya turned toward him slowly, as though sudden movement might fracture whatever fragile restraint still existed between them.

"What do you mean?" Arya asked.

Vansh finally looked at him.

"Vengeance, my brother," he said.

"Vengeance."

Arya stared.

His red eyes no longer merely tired, no longer merely angry burned with something ancient. Something that had waited years for permission. The monster inside him was not screaming anymore.

It was listening.

This was what he had wanted all his life and never known how to ask for.

Not comfort.

Not therapy.

Not forgiveness.

Direction.

Vansh had spoken a sentence that no therapist, no priest, no lover ever could.

And he had done it without raising his voice.

Without mercy.

Without apology.

Vansh reached up and disconnected the Bluetooth from his headphones.

No announcement.

No explanation.

He pressed play.

“Hello... you.”

The voice filled the space not loudly, but completely.

“It’s me. Vanshika.”

Arya stiffened.

“Live to you... and alive to myself.”

The cadence was wrong.

Not broken.

Not emotional.

Controlled.

“If you are listening to this,” her voice continued, “I suggest you find some open ground.”

Arya’s fingers curled slowly into his palm.

“And I warn you do not choose a dark room.

No lights.”

A chill moved through him not fear exactly, but recognition.

This was not the voice he remembered.

Not the warmth.

Not the laughter.

This voice felt engineered.

Like a signal sent through hostile territory.

Like something meant to survive interception.

Arya listened, stunned shocked not by grief alone, but by the transformation.

Her voice no longer felt magical.

It felt industrial.

Cold.

Measured.

Almost... Soviet. Like intercepted transmissions meant to unsettle enemies.

Minutes passed. Or seconds. He couldn't tell.

Then

Vansh paused the tape.

The silence was violent.

He leaned slightly forward, eyes burning through Arya.

"Riddle me this, man," Vansh said.

The words were casual.

The intent was not.

"It can be cruel, poetic, or blind," Vansh continued.

"But when it's denied
it's violence you may find."

Arya closed his eyes.

His head felt heavy. Crowded.

Thoughts collided memories, rage, guilt, fragments of her smile, fragments of her absence.

What was it?

Before he could speak

Vansh pressed play again.

Vanshika's presence returned.

Stronger now.

"You will all hear it," she said.

"And you won't be able to stop it
not until it reaches the world."

Arya's throat tightened.

"Will I get justice?" her voice asked.

A pause long enough to hurt.

"Let's see."

The tape ended.

But nothing else did.

Not the confusion tightening around Arya's mind.

Not the rage crawling up his spine.

Not the thing inside him that was no longer human enough to cry.

Arya opened his eyes.

One word rose above everything else above grief, above guilt, above the devil stirring awake.

“Justice,” he said.

Not a question.

An answer.

Vansh stood by the pool, unmoving.

His posture was calm almost unnervingly so. One hand rested inside his coat pocket, the other hung loose by his side. His eyes were fixed on the water, watching the distorted reflection of his own face tremble with every slight ripple. It felt as though the pool was answering questions he no longer asked aloud.

Behind him, Arya waited. He didn’t interrupt. He had learned that Vansh spoke only when the words had already burned him enough.

“How many recordings is it again?” Arya finally asked, his voice low, restrained, as if any rise in volume might fracture something fragile between them.

“Seven,” Vansh replied without turning.

“Seven?” Arya echoed. The number didn’t feel like information. It felt like a verdict.

Vansh exhaled slowly, deliberately as though releasing a weight he had been carrying inside his chest for weeks.

“In this week,” he said, “I listened to all of her.”

He paused.

“I listened to her voice in places where voices aren’t meant to exist anymore.”

Arya’s jaw tightened.

“I sat in a garden facing the ocean,” Vansh continued, his eyes still locked on the water. “The waves kept moving like nothing had changed. I listened to her there. Then in a dead park one of

those abandoned ones in the middle of nowhere, where even children don't play anymore."

He swallowed.

"She was with me the entire day. And at night... only her voice followed me into my dreams. Into my nightmares."

The pool shimmered faintly as a breeze passed.

"I asked questions," Vansh said. "Not just to people."

Arya shifted slightly. "To whom, then?"

"To the superficial," Vansh answered. "And to the supernatural."

That made Arya look up.

"I went to a temple," Vansh went on. "I stood there and talked to God. I asked why it happened. I asked what the solution was supposed to be."

A faint, humourless smile crossed his lips.

"Then I went to a church. I spoke to a priest. He told me about sins."

Arya frowned. "Sins?"

"Greed. Gluttony. Lust. Pride. Sloth. Envy." Vansh paused. "I couldn't even remember all of them at first."

His voice dipped lower.

"I looked at Jesus hung there. That wasn't new to me. Seeing someone like that. But this time... I still didn't get an answer."

Arya felt something cold stir inside his chest.

"And then," Vansh said, "I went to a Gurudwara."

He finally turned his head slightly, just enough for Arya to see his profile.

"All they spoke about there was control. Intellect. Discipline."

A beat.

"But none of them could answer me. None of them. Not one place. Not one god."

Arya stepped closer. "What did you ask them?"

Vansh turned fully now. His eyes were steady but hollow.

“What is justice?” he asked. “Is it real?”

Arya didn’t respond.

“Or is it just a construction?” Vansh continued. “A story humans tell themselves so they can sleep at night.”

Silence pressed between them.

“So I went to the court.”

Arya’s breath caught.

“I sat there. I watched trials. I watched them give ten years to a man who raped a three-year-old girl.”

Vansh laughed softly. It wasn’t humour. It was corrosion.

“I smiled,” he said. “And I asked myself so this is justice.”

Arya felt the devil inside him stir.

“One lawyer noticed me,” Vansh said. “He asked why I was there all day. Asked if I wanted to discuss something.”

“And?” Arya asked.

“I asked him the same question I asked the gods,” Vansh replied. “What is justice?”

Arya waited.

“He couldn’t answer. Not honestly.”

A pause.

“After a while, he said something else.”

Vansh’s voice sharpened.

‘I may not answer you about justice,’ he told me. ‘But I can tell you about law.’

Arya frowned. “Law?”

“I asked him if law was justice,” Vansh said.

“And?”

“He said No. Never.”

The pool rippled again.

“Law,” Vansh finished, “is a tool. Something we use to try to discover justice.”

Arya’s lips parted slightly.

“And that’s where my search stopped,” Vansh said quietly.
“Because maybe... that was the answer.”

A slow smile spread across Arya’s face. It wasn’t relief.

“Me too,” he said.

The devil inside him spoke not loudly, but clearly.

Vansh straightened. For the first time, there was certainty in his posture.

“We are going to avenge all of them,” he said. “One by one. Piece by piece.”

Arya stepped closer to the edge of the pool.

“I will get the justice done,” he said. “What my sister asked for.”

Then something shifted in him.

“Tell me one thing,” Arya said, his voice tightening. “Why didn’t you do what Vanshika wanted?”

Vansh didn’t answer immediately.

“Why didn’t you leak the recordings?” Arya pressed. “Send them to everyone. Let them feel the guilt. That’s what she wanted.”

Vansh finally looked away from the water.

“I couldn’t,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t trust society.”

Arya’s eyes narrowed.

“The crowd riots for a day,” Vansh continued. “They burn buses of the poor. March with candles for a few nights. Argue politics. Blame opposition.”

His voice hardened.

“And the guilty?”

“They survive. Their power is never meant to be hidden.”

Arya clenched his fists.

“They’ll find a way,” Vansh said. “And even if they don’t ten years, twenty years does that feel like justice to you?”

He turned sharply.

"Does it?"

Arya didn't answer.

"We can't force them to feel guilt," Vansh said.

Arya stepped forward, eyes burning.

"But we can force them to feel pain."

The water fell silent.

Arya stood in the centre of it, unmoving.

"What exactly is the plan?" he asked at last.

His voice was low, scraped raw, as if each word had been dragged up from somewhere beneath his ribs. He was not looking at Vansh only at the empty space ahead, as though the room itself might answer.

Vansh did not rush to reply. He remained still, hands loosely clasped behind his back, eyes fixed not on Arya, but on the machinery as a doctor might look upon instruments meant for a necessary amputation.

"We transform this place," he said finally, "into something else."

Arya turned slowly.

"Something else?"

"Yes," Vansh continued, calm to the point of cruelty. "What you already destroyed tables, chairs, expensive systems, clean intentions we rebuild them into purpose. Linux machines. Cameras. Transmitters. Microphones. Earphones. Every object here will listen. Every wall will watch."

Arya's jaw tightened.

"The thing is," Vansh added, quieter now, "you will not listen to all the recordings in one night."

That did it.

"What?" Arya snapped, turning fully now. "It's my sister."

“I know it’s your sister,” Vansh replied sharply, the first crack in his composure. His eyes met Arya’s red meeting steel. “And you know I know it.”

Silence pressed down between them, heavy as dust in a sealed room.

“Listen to me,” Vansh said, lowering his voice again, forcing control back into it. “The rules are simple. You listen to the first recording. Only the first. We identify the guilty. We punish them. Justice is done.”

Arya laughed once short, hollow.

“And then?”

“Then,” Vansh continued, “we play the next. And it continues. One truth. One punishment. Until all seven are done.”

Arya stepped back as though struck.

“You’ve... listened to them?” he asked.

Vansh hesitated. Just for a moment.

“Yes,” he said. “All of them.”

“And you expect me not to be distracted?” Arya whispered.

“I expect you to survive,” Vansh replied. “I don’t want you broken before the end.”

Arya’s fists clenched. His breathing grew uneven.

“What exactly am I supposed to do?” he asked, wrath seeping through the words like poison.

Vansh took a step closer.

“You,” he said softly, “are going to let your monster out.”

Arya looked at him then really looked.

“How?”

A thin, terrible smile crossed Vansh’s face.

“I am the intellect,” he said. “The architect. The one who sees patterns, breaches systems, bends machines. I guide. I lead. I speak in your ear when the world goes dark.”

He paused.

“And you,” he continued, “are the one who steps into the field.”

Arya said nothing.

“You move like a body that refuses to break,” Vansh went on, his tone almost clinical now. “Gymnastics. Calisthenics. Pain tolerance far beyond reason electric shock, blunt force, exhaustion. Seven martial disciplines embedded into muscle memory.”

He leaned closer.

“You will fight. And you will punish.”

The room seemed to shrink.

Arya’s eyes fixed on nothing again. The plan settled into him not like an idea, but like a verdict.

“Tell me,” Vansh said quietly, almost pleading now, “you don’t want her death to be wasted.”

Arya’s lips trembled.

Before he could answer, the room filled with a sound.

A child’s voice.

Soft. Broken. Familiar.

“Arya bhaiya... Arya bhaiya...”

The recording cut abrupt, violent, final.

Arya screamed.

Not a word. Not a sentence. A sound raw, animal, ripped straight from the place where grief curdles into rage.

“I’m vengeance,” he said hoarsely.

Vansh’s composure shattered. Tears broke free, unrestrained.

“Yes,” he sobbed. “Yes. We’ll avenge her.”

He wiped his face, breathing hard.

“We’ll tailor your suit,” he continued, voice trembling but determined. “Protection for your head, your torso, your legs. A mask to hide what you are becoming. Eyes that glow so they know they’re seen.”

He straightened.

“From this moment,” he said, “I am no longer Vansh.”

Arya looked at him.

“I am Techman.”

A pause.

“And you,” Vansh whispered, “are no longer Arya.”

The room held its breath.

“You are a vigilante.”

Chapter 21: Mr. Techman and The Vigilante

The basement was called to be cleaned.

Not emptied purged.

The old equipment was dragged out like corpses from a forgotten war: tangled wires, obsolete CPUs, dust-choked monitors that once glowed with purpose. Men worked silently, wiping the floor, scraping the past off the walls. Buckets of murky water were emptied again and again, as if stains could be erased by repetition.

Outside, a truck waited with its mouth open.

Inside, a long table was dragged into place heavy, deliberate.

Computers were brought in one by one.

Screens aligned.

Keyboards tested.

Speakers thudded softly as they were placed.

Headphones checked.

Microphones tapped check, check each sound echoing slightly longer than it should have.

This was no workspace.

It was a control room.

At the far corner of the basement, Arya trained.

Not practiced trained.

The boxing bag screamed every time his fist connected.

Leather groaned. Chains rattled.

The sound wasn't rhythmic it was violent, uneven, uncontrolled. Each punch carried something unfinished. Something poisonous.

Rage poured out of him in bursts.

His breathing was ragged.

His knuckles burned.

He stopped suddenly.

Sweat slid down his jaw. His chest rose and fell like it was fighting itself.

Arya turned.

Vansh was bent over the computers, fingers moving with precision, cables slipping into ports as if they belonged there. Calm. Focused. Terrifyingly composed for a man who had buried his sister.

Arya walked toward him.

Slowly.

"Why did she send you the letter?" he asked.

His voice was low but not steady.

"The recordings... the instructions..."

A pause. A crack.

"Was her brother already dead to her?"

He swallowed.

"She never trusted me, did she?"

Vansh didn't answer immediately.

He finished connecting one last wire. The screen flickered to life. Only then did he turn around.

"No," he said quietly.

"She wasn't like that."

Arya scoffed, but Vansh continued.

"She was happy with you. Genuinely."

A breath.

"But she didn't want to make you afraid. She didn't want to become a weight you'd carry."

He stepped closer not invading, just present.

"That's why she wrote to me. Even after... even after her death she was still taking care of you."

Arya's jaw tightened.

"If she truly cared," he snapped, "she wouldn't have done this. She would have told me. Everything. She would've trusted me enough to stay."

Silence stretched.

Then Vansh spoke again, softer this time but sharper.

"Brother... look at your cowl."

Arya froze.

"Were you ever ready to listen to her?" Vansh asked.

"Really listen?"

Arya's eyes flickered.

"You were always hidden," Vansh continued. "Always behind something. A mask. A silence. A wall."

He looked away for a moment.

"She loved you. And love does strange things it builds walls so the other person doesn't have to suffer. She didn't want you worrying. She didn't want you breaking."

A pause.

"Independence isn't absence," Vansh added. "Sometimes it's sacrifice."

Arya exhaled slowly.

Not a sigh an unloading.

He didn't respond.

He turned back.

The boxing bag waited.

And when his fist connected again, the basement echoed not with anger this time but with grief that had learned how to hit back.

The basement hummed with a low mechanical breath screens blinking, cables breathing faint heat, processors updating themselves in silent obedience. Vansh sat at the central desk, sleeves rolled, fingers moving across the keyboard as lines of code patched, repaired, fortified. Arya sat opposite him, slouched,

elbows on his knees, the golden cowl resting beside him like a discarded confession.

For a long while, neither spoke.

The machines filled the silence where words hesitated.

Vansh finally broke it, without looking up.

"Tell me," he asked quietly, almost carefully, "what did you do... in these days?"

His fingers slowed.

"How were you?"

A pause.

Then softer, almost afraid

"How did you feel?"

Arya didn't answer immediately.

When he did, his voice didn't rise. It fractured.

"When I saw her," he said, staring at nothing, "hanging there... it didn't end that day."

He swallowed.

"That image follows me. Every night. Every second the lights go out. Darkness doesn't arrive alone anymore it brings her with it."

His fingers curled into fists.

"I kept asking myself why me? Why always me?"

A bitter laugh escaped him. "There are monsters out there. Real ones. And still, God chooses this."

He leaned forward, elbows trembling.

"I was depressed before. You know that. But this this pushed me past the edge. When the police report came..."

His jaw tightened.

"When they called it a suicide..."

Arya's voice sharpened.

"I burned it. Every page. Every word. Ash."

He looked up at the ceiling, eyes glassed.

“Why am I so unlucky, Vansh? I always was. My luck doesn’t break things it destroys them.”

His breathing grew uneven.

“I destroyed the basement too. After that.”

“The lamps. The woodwork. The paintings.”

“Everything.”

His voice cracked.

“Why?”

A whisper.

“Why?”

Silence fell again but this time it was heavy, suffocating.

Arya continued, slower now, as if each sentence weighed more than the last.

“After hours of rage... after tearing myself apart... I realised something.”

He lifted his head, eyes darker than before.

“I was staring at nothing but nothing isn’t empty. It’s invisible. And it’s always there.”

He turned toward Vansh.

“Every suicide has a killer.”

The sentence landed like a verdict.

“I cried at nights,” Arya admitted, shame and fury tangled together. “Sometimes I hurt myself without meaning to. Blamed myself for everything.”

His voice dropped.

“Why am I like this? Why was I made this way?”

He exhaled shakily.

“And then you came.”

Vansh finally looked at him.

“When you came in clutch,” Arya said, “I understood something.”

His eyes hardened not with madness, but with purpose.

“I can avenge them.”

A beat.

“And that would be my last purpose.”

A pause.

“Because before that I had none.”

The echo of tyres grinding outside cut through the moment.

“Another truck arrived!” shouted the old man from above, his voice carrying down the concrete throat of the basement.

Arya didn’t flinch.

Vansh stood, slowly, walking toward the stacked crates now being unloaded black, reinforced, sealed with precision.

“So,” Vansh said quietly, “this is it.”

He gestured toward the boxes.

“What’s in these?”

Then, sharper

“Where is all my money going?”

The old man stepped aside as Vansh opened one.

Inside: order. Intention. Violence, refined.

“Each box,” Vansh explained, his voice clinical now, controlled, “contains a different configuration.”

He lifted a piece of armor dark, matte, precise.

“A professionally tailored combat suit. Weighted for endurance.”

“Russian military boots shock-absorbent, silent.”

“Devil gloves with embedded electrical tasers. Close-range advantage.”

“Knives. Micro-tools. Utility blades.”

He opened another crate.

“Each set varies in weight, mobility, and tactical use.”

Arya stood slowly, staring.

This wasn’t chaos.

This was architecture.

He reached out, touching the edge of a glove.

His voice was low.

“You planned everything... didn’t you?”

Vansh didn’t answer immediately.

And that silence

that silence was the most terrifying part.

The lid of the box creaked softly as Vansh opened it, as if even the hinges understood the gravity of what was being born here.

Inside lay black.

Not the cheap black of fabric, but a dense, engineered darkness a solid bandana, heavy in Arya’s hands when Vansh lifted it out. It didn’t flutter. It didn’t fold easily. It held its shape like intention.

“This,” Vansh said quietly, “is not cloth.”

Arya took it from him, rolling it between his fingers, feeling the resistance beneath the surface.

“Defensive polymers,” Vansh continued. “Layered. Heat-resistant. Cut-resistant. Fire won’t kiss your skin. Dust won’t choke you. Even blunt impact disperses across the mesh.”

Arya smirked faintly. “So I won’t die like a street idiot.”

“No,” Vansh replied, adjusting the table light. “You won’t die accidentally.”

Arya glanced at him but said nothing.

Vansh reached back into the box and lifted out a small neon case, its edges pulsing softly like a heartbeat. He opened it with care.

Inside lay the eye protectors.

Sleek. Minimal. Almost elegant.

“These,” Vansh said, his voice lowering, “are where everything begins.”

Arya leaned closer.

“They’ll protect your eyes flash, debris, chemical exposure. But that’s secondary.” Vansh tapped the frame gently. “They record your POV. Every blink. Every breath. Every hesitation.”

Arya’s eyebrow twitched. “So you’ll be watching me breathe.”

"I'll be watching you decide," Vansh corrected.

He held them up. The lenses caught the light and for a brief moment, reflected Arya's face back at him.

"They glow according to neural stress and retinal heat," Vansh added. "Your natural aggression spikes adrenaline faster than average."

He paused.

"In your case... they'll glow red."

Arya took them slowly, slipping them on.

The lenses flickered.

Then

Red.

Not bright. Not theatrical.

A restrained, dangerous crimson.

Vansh exhaled, almost imperceptibly. "Perfect."

"And don't worry," Vansh continued, moving now, more animated. "Everything is custom-fitted. Measurements were done weeks ago."

Arya turned sharply. "Weeks?"

Vansh met his stare. Didn't blink.

"I don't improvise grief."

Silence followed that.

Vansh gestured toward the far wall, where a screen lit up schematics unfolding.

"There are drones," he said. "Micro-transmitters. Silent rotors. I'll have eyes above you, behind you, ahead of you."

He zoomed in.

"I'll know where you are at all times. If something moves wrong I warn you. If something breathes wrong I redirect you."

Arya chuckled under his breath. "You sound like God."

Vansh didn't smile.

"No," he said. "God watches. I interfere."

Arya began strapping on the remaining gear, methodical now, almost ritualistic. For the first time truly the corners of his mouth twitched with something close to admiration.

"You never told me," Arya said casually, as he checked a drone's balance, "where your parents are."

Vansh froze.

Just for a fraction of a second.

"They died," Arya continued, his tone flat. "When Vanshika was in twelfth. Car accident. Mountain road. Slipped. Flipped."

He tightened a strap. No pause. No tremor.

Vansh stared at him.

"You say that," Vansh said slowly, "like you're describing the weather."

Arya didn't look up. "Because it was."

Vansh swallowed. "And... what do you feel about them?"

Arya finally turned.

The red glow met Vansh's eyes.

"I never cared."

The words didn't echo. They didn't shake.

They landed.

Vansh leaned back, processing not judging.

"...Okay," he murmured. "If that's your psychology."

Arya stepped closer.

"My family is dead," he said. "Everyone."

Then, softer but heavier:

"Including me."

The room felt smaller.

Vansh straightened, his voice shifting no longer brotherly, no longer gentle.

"Then we work off calendars," he said. "Schedules. Timelines."

He pulled up a digital board dates, names, locations.

“Rage is not chaos,” Vansh continued. “Rage is fuel. And fuel must be rationed.”

Arya stared at the board.

“Each move is planned,” Vansh said. “Each encounter calculated. You don’t act when you feel angry.”

He looked directly at Arya.

“You act when I say now.”

Arya nodded slowly.

Not submission.

Alignment.

“Good,” Vansh said. “Because what we’re doing isn’t revenge.”

He shut the box.

“It’s architecture.”

And somewhere in the quiet hum of machines, the plan stopped being an idea and became a system.

“What are you two doing here?”

The voice came suddenly old, brittle, but sharp enough to cut through the air.

The man had not raised his voice, yet it carried authority born of decades, not rank.

Vansh looked up first. His eyes narrowed not in fear, but calculation.

Arya did not turn immediately.

“We are doing,” Arya said slowly, his voice calm in a way that did not belong to calm men,

“something you will not intervene in.”

The old man stepped closer. His shoes echoed against the marble floor, each step measured, cautious.

“If this involves violence,” he said, adjusting his spectacles,

“or trouble that will stain this institution

I cannot let you proceed.”

Arya turned then.

Not fully just enough for the man to see his face.

“Who are you,” Arya asked, his tone sharpening,

“to tell me what we are supposed to do?”

The question was not angry.

That made it worse.

The old man swallowed. His eyes drifted briefly towards files, towards ledgers, towards figures that did not belong on paper meant for truth.

“I can see the bills,” he said quietly.

“The money. The investments. The channels through which it flows.”

He hesitated.

“I cannot let this happen.”

Vansh exhaled through his nose almost a laugh.

“Well,” Vansh said, stepping forward, his voice smooth, almost polite,

“I’ve already arranged a cheque.”

He paused, letting the silence stretch.

“Seven crores.”

The old man stiffened.

“It’s in your room,” Vansh continued, as if discussing the weather.

“Available. Signed. Clean.”

Arya’s voice cut in low, absolute.

“Now you have two choices.”

He stepped closer. Not threateningly. Decisively.

“Take it.

Disappear.

Live the rest of your life in a village, or a farmhouse, or wherever men go to forget what they once allowed.”

A pause.

“Or never disturb us again.”

The old man looked at Arya then really looked.

And for the first time, he understood this was not bargaining.

“Don’t ask questions,” Arya said.

“Don’t interfere.”

His voice trembled not with doubt, but conviction.

“What I’m doing,” he finished,

“is what Vanshika needed.”

The room felt smaller.

“If this world couldn’t give her justice,” Arya said softly,

“I will.”

The old man removed his spectacles. His hands shook not from fear, but from recognition.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last.

“That you feel this way.”

He turned away.

As he walked out, he made a silent promise not to stop them, but to remember what he had seen.

Vansh waited until the door closed.

Then he spoke.

He explained everything.

The systems.

The surveillance.

The networks hidden beneath ordinary infrastructure.

The training Arya would need not just physical, but psychological.

Pain tolerance.

Isolation.

Control.

“We won’t let them waste this society,” Vansh said finally.

His voice held no anger only clarity.

“I’ve prepared the recordings,” he continued.

“Seven files. Seven names.”

He looked at Arya.

“Each one a sin.”

Then Vansh did something no one had ever done.
He placed both hands on Arya's shoulders.
Not commanding.
Not restraining.
Grounding.
"Will you avenge her?" Vansh asked quietly.
"Are you sure?"
Arya did not answer.
He didn't need to.
His eyes red, hollow, burning answered for him.
They did not blink.
They did not waver.
Vansh smiled.
Not warmly.
Not proudly.
Devilishly.
"Then," he said, almost to himself,
"the first chapter begins."
A pause.
"Executing Greed."

Chapter 22: Greed

“Are you ready?” Vansh asked.

His voice was controlled too controlled like a man who had already rehearsed the end of the world and found no reason to raise his tone for it.

Before him stood the man with the red, flickering eyes.

Arya.

The glow wasn't just rage anymore. It was something steadier, heavier like molten metal settling into shape. A weapon that had accepted what it was meant to become.

“Yes,” Arya said.

One word. No hesitation.

As if the answer had been waiting for this moment for a very long time.

He lifted the headphones slowly, deliberately, and placed them over his ears. The world outside dimmed. The basement its concrete walls, its cables, its blinking monitors fell away into a distant echo.

Vansh leaned toward the system.

His fingers moved across the keyboard with familiarity, adjusting the audio levels, stabilising the feed, isolating the voice. A technician preparing not for sound but for truth.

He glanced once at Arya.

Not to ask permission.

To confirm resolve.

Then he pressed play.

“Hello...

You... it's me.”

Vanshika's voice filled Arya's ears.

Not an echo.

Not a memory.

Alive.

“Vanshika.

Live for you.

Alive for myself.”

Arya did not move.

He did not breathe properly either.

The sound struck him somewhere behind the ribs, where instinct lived where grief had been caged but never silenced. His fists tightened unconsciously. The muscles in his jaw locked.

He listened.

Quietly.

Violently.

Afraid not of what he would hear, but of how much it would change him.

The voice continued, steady but weighted, like someone speaking while standing on the edge of something irreversible.

“I’m the head journalist.

I certify all the newly covered reports before they are announced to the media... before people are allowed to know.”

Her professionalism was intact even here. Even now.

“That’s my job at India Info.”

A pause.

Not silence.

Reflection.

“But did I fail... terribly?”

Arya’s eyes shut for a brief second.

“It’s unfortunate to say yes.”

The word yes landed heavier than any scream could have.

“While I was certifying one report... I found a strange document at my desk.”

Arya’s breathing grew uneven.

“It was already certified.

Already sectioned.

And classified to ensure that no one would ever know it existed.”

Vansh’s fingers curled slightly beside the console.

He had suspected this.

But suspicion is painless compared to confirmation.

“At first, I thought maybe I missed it.”

A small, bitter laugh in her voice.

“But that is my job, isn’t it?”

Arya’s head tilted forward just a fraction.

“I do all the work here.”

The words were not arrogant.

They were tired.

“So how could something be completed...

approved...

and buried

without ever passing through me?”

Silence followed.

Not because the recording ended.

But because Vanshika had allowed the truth to breathe.

Arya’s eyes opened slowly.

The red within them no longer flickered.

It burned focused now, sharpened, educated.

This wasn’t rage anymore.

This was Greed being named.

And somewhere in that basement, beneath concrete and circuitry, a man who had lost everything finally understood:

This wasn’t just about her death.

It was about who decided what the world was allowed to know and what it was trained to ignore.

Oh I’m sorry,” Naina Kapoor said softly, almost rehearsed. “It came through an anonymous post. I placed it here so you could sign it, and then I kept it in the classified room. But now I’ve been told... it isn’t required anymore.”

Her voice trailed off, as though the sentence itself had second thoughts.

I looked up.

“Who told you?” I asked.

The words left my mouth colder than I expected. Controlled. Sharp.

“Without my approval without my signature, without my verification nothing goes into classified. You know that.” I paused. “Don’t you?”

“Yes... I know, Vanshika,” Naina replied, a little too quickly. “But the Chief Executive called me personally. He instructed me to do it.”

My pulse shifted.

“What even is it?” I asked, standing now. “I didn’t sign anything. So you can’t file it. Not yet.”

She frowned. Truly frowned this time.

“What are you saying?” she asked, disbelief breaking through her professional calm. “It is signed. Already. By you.”

The room tilted just slightly. The kind of tilt you feel before a fall, not after.

My mind stalled.

I blamed myself first. Fatigue. Overwork. Missed memory. That was easier than the alternative.

“I... signed it?” I whispered.

I took the file from her hands and looked at the front page.

And then

It felt like a ghost had leaned over my shoulder.

My signature.

Perfect. Exact. The curve of the V, the pressure of the pen, the thickness of the stroke every unconscious habit I’d developed over years was there. Not copied. Replicated.

I had never seen this document before.

I had never received it.

And yet

“What is this?” I asked, my voice barely holding.

“Oh, you must be tired,” Naina said gently. Too gently.
“You’ve been under a lot of pressure.”

“What are you even saying?” I snapped.

I looked at her now really looked.

“You just told me it came from somewhere anonymous. You said you were going to place it in classified. So tell me how does my signature appear on something I never touched?”

Silence.

The kind that answers without speaking.

My hands trembled as I checked again. Slowly. Carefully.

It was flawless.

It couldn’t be me.

And yet it was entirely me.

When Naina reached forward to pull the file away, I reacted without thinking caught her wrist mid-motion.

“Don’t,” I said.

The word was quiet. Final.

“Get lost from here.”

She didn’t argue. She didn’t protest.

But her eyes

They hardened.

She left without another word, but the silence she carried out with her stayed behind.

I couldn’t tell if she was part of it.

Or just another piece being moved.

I sat down.

Slowly.

The file lay open on the table like a confession waiting to be read.

I began going through the pages.

At first, everything felt... normal. Structured. Professional.
Logical.

Reports. Numbers. Approvals.

Convincing enough to lull suspicion.

I frowned.

Why would anyone want this hidden?

What was wrong with it?

Then

Page by page, something shifted.

The language changed. Subtle, but unmistakable.

Omissions where there should have been clarity.

Approvals granted too quickly.

Names that appeared once and never again.

My breath slowed.

By the time I reached the final pages, I knew.

I hadn't just discovered a mistake.

I had discovered something big.

And whatever it was

It had already learned how to write my name.

What is it?

Arya asked, though the question never left his lips. It echoed inside his skull instead, cautious, restrained like a man afraid of the answer.

What could possibly be that devastating?

The front pages of the file were harmless. Almost insulting. Carefully designed covers, legal formatting, preservation notes things meant to reassure, not alarm. Bureaucratic beauty.

A mask.

The real horror lay beneath.

He turned a few pages.

And then he stopped.

The diagrams weren't of people.

They weren't of money.

They weren't even of cities.

They were of mountains.

Arya frowned.

"Mountains?" he muttered to himself.

"What's so terrifying about a stupid mountain?"

His eyes moved again, slower this time. The words began to bite.

Aravali Range.

Redefined.

A new legal definition stared back at him, cold and deliberate:

A hill in the Aravali range must be at least 100 metres above the surrounding terrain to be legally recognised as a mountain.

Arya leaned back slightly, confused.

That didn't sound like destruction.

It sounded like... semantics.

Then it hit him.

His jaw tightened.

"So that's it," he whispered.

If it didn't qualify as a mountain

it didn't need protection.

The next pages explained it with terrifying calm.

Under this new interpretation, nearly ninety percent of the Aravali range would no longer exist on paper.

Which meant it could exist only one way in reality:

cut

dug

mined

hollowed

Mining permissions. Industrial clearances. Quiet approvals buried under legal language so refined it felt surgical.

The ecosystem destroyed.

Endangered species erased without blood.

Cities slowly poisoned.

The poor forced to breathe what the rich would never inhale.
Arya scoffed, forcing a laugh.
“How scary can that be?” he said aloud, mocking it.
“Who even cares about rocks and hills?”
But his fingers had tightened around the pages.
The name appeared again.
Justice Suresh Bansal.
Arya’s expression changed.
“So it was him,” he murmured.
The man who had spoken of balance and development.
The man who had convinced the court
or had been convinced himself.
Corruption wasn’t loud here.
It was polite.
Measured.
Signed.
“This order will cause debates,” the notes said.
“Protests.”
“Public unrest.”
Arya nodded slowly.
Of course it would.
But then he reached the final section.
And that’s where his breath stalled.
The scary part wasn’t the damage.
It wasn’t the mining.
It wasn’t even the deaths that would come later.
It was the timing.
These weren’t consequences being predicted.
They were outcomes being anticipated.
Planned.
Calculated.
They knew protests would erupt.
They expected outrage.

They were waiting for resistance.
And they didn't care.
Because by the time people noticed
the mountains would already be gone.
Arya lowered the pages.
"These bastards..." he whispered.
This wasn't ignorance.
This wasn't greed alone.
This was intent.
They wanted the chaos.
They wanted the anger.
They wanted the distraction.
While everyone screamed at the sky
the earth would be sold underneath their feet.
Arya finally understood.
This wasn't about mountains.
It was about how easily truth could be buried
so long as it was buried legally.
They never wanted ninety percent.
That was the lie everyone swallowed.
They only wanted ten.
Ten percent of the Aravalli Range nothing more, nothing less.
And that was precisely why the move worked.
Because when people hear ninety percent, their chests swell
with relief. They breathe easier. They pat themselves on the back.
They call it victory. They tell their children, "See? We fought. We
saved the land."
No one asks what ten percent really means.
The protests erupted exactly as planned loud, emotional,
televised. News debates screamed through prime time. Panels
argued. Activists marched. Students skipped classes. Hashtags
trended. Anger burned hot and fast.
And then came the compromise.

Justice Suresh Bansal stood at the centre of it all calm, measured, reasonable. A man who spoke like history itself had entrusted him with balance. A redefinition was proposed. A subtle one. Clean language. Legal language. Dangerous language.

Only ten percent would be opened for mining.

Only.

Behind closed doors, the number translated into money millions flowing quietly, obediently, efficiently. Corruption does not roar; it whispers. And Bansal listened.

The genius of it lay not in force, but in comparison.

At least we saved ninety percent.

That sentence killed the revolution.

Because now no one would leave their jobs. No one would skip dinner. No one would sleep on the streets for the remaining ten.

Anyone who tried would be silenced not by police, but by society itself.

“Why are you overreacting?”

“Be practical.”

“You can’t save everything.”

The politics would mute them. The people would mock them. And slowly, their own minds would begin to rot with doubt.

Ten percent of the Aravalli Range.

A number that sounded small until you understood it meant fourteen thousand four hundred square kilometres. A wound large enough to scar the earth permanently. A territory vast enough to swallow forests, villages, water tables, futures.

A small country, erased politely.

And still, no one would rise again.

That was the real victory.

Not the land. Not the money. But the psychology.

Arya stood frozen in that realisation.

For the first time, he wasn’t angry.

He was terrified.

Because now he understood political science not from books, but from bloodless brilliance. How wealth and power do not conquer through violence, but through relief. Through making loss feel acceptable. Through teaching people to be grateful for what wasn't taken.

His mind sharpened painfully.

This wasn't corruption. This was design.

This was strategy.

This was a power move so elegant, so surgical, that resistance died smiling.

Arya exhaled slowly.

"So this is how the world ends," he thought.

"Not with screams but with compromises."

Mr. Suresh Bansal

After all,

you were never just a judge.

You were the protagonist.

And for once, Arya truly saw how power doesn't destroy the world.

It convinces it to destroy itself.

The files lay open on my desk like an exposed ribcage papers spread, margins marked, names circled again and again.

I had been reading for too long. No digging. The kind of digging where time stops asking permission.

That was when the telephone rang.

Once.

Twice.

Again.

The sound crawled over my skull, sharp and metallic, but I didn't move. My eyes were still trapped on the page on that name.

Ink never trembles, but my hands did.

The telephone rang again.

And again.

Still, I didn't lift my head. I didn't want the world to interrupt what I was beginning to understand.

But it wouldn't stop.

The ringing became aggressive now less a call, more a demand. A pulse. As if the phone itself knew something I didn't.

"Oh, what a load of bullshit," I snapped aloud, rage flaring where fear hadn't yet found words.

I grabbed the receiver and slammed it to my ear.

"Yes?" I barked.

The voice on the other end was calm. Too calm.

Measured. Polished. Practiced.

"Hello, Vanshika," it said gently.

"It's me. Suresh Bansal."

My breath collapsed inside my chest.

"U who?" I stammered, though my mind already knew.

"Justice Suresh Bansal," the voice continued, unhurried.

"The same man whose page you're holding in your hands right now."

The room seemed to tilt. The air thickened, like something unseen had entered and was standing very close.

"Aren't you," he went on, "the daughter of the great businessman and investment advisor Mr. Kailash Kumar?"

My anxiety tore through me then violent, sudden, physical.

My fingers went numb around the receiver.

"Yes," I said finally.

"Yes, I am."

"Good," he replied, pleased.

"I've arranged a meeting at my palace. I'd like you to come."

A pause.

"Would you be interested?"

His tone was cordial. Civil. Almost kind.

But beneath it something else. Something watching.

"It's at four p.m. this evening," he added.

"At my palace. We'll discuss... business."

Business.

The word didn't belong there.

It landed like a threat disguised as an invitation.

I said nothing.

"I do hope you'll attend," he finished softly.

The line went dead.

I sat frozen, the receiver still pressed to my ear, listening to nothing.

My heart began to pound not loudly, but deeply. Each beat felt heavy, deliberate, like a warning bell buried inside my ribs. My body felt heavier too, as if gravity had suddenly increased just for me.

I tried to steady myself. Failed.

My eyes drifted back to the papers on the desk.

To the name circled in ink.

Suresh Bansal.

The telephone rang again.

Sharp. Immediate.

I didn't answer.

Somewhere else far from that room, far from that desk

Arya looked at Vansh.

There was disbelief in his eyes. A tight, helpless worry that had no direction to run in. He feared for his sister, yes but deeper than that, something older stirred inside him.

A part of him already knew.

The past does not wait to be solved.

It has already spoken.

And some truths once told cannot be undone.

I was ready.

I reached the palace at the exact hour you had mentioned as if punctuality itself might save me.

The gates opened without question.

Servants in immaculate uniforms ushered me inside, their faces neutral, their eyes trained not to linger. The palace rose around me like a monument built not of stone, but of stolen breath golden architecture forged from the dying blue blood of the poor. Every wall gleamed with corruption polished over centuries. It was beautiful. And it was obscene.

I followed the servants through corridors too wide for a single man, too lavish for a clean conscience. With every step, a single thought repeated itself in my head:

How did I end up here?

This is wrong.

I should never have come.

But the doors were already open.

One of the servants stopped and gestured silently toward the room. I paused at the threshold. I looked in before stepping inside.

There you were.

Seated at the far end of a long table, posture unhurried, unmoved as if the world waited for you to blink first. A thick candle burned between us, its flame tall and steady. You were admiring it, almost fondly, watching the wax surrender itself drop by drop.

"Come here, Ms., please," Bansal said.

His voice was calm. Too calm.

I entered with measured steps. The moment I crossed the threshold, the servant behind me shut the door swiftly

BAMM.

The sound echoed like a verdict.

At that exact moment, the candle flame vanished.

Darkness swallowed the room not complete, but deliberate. Enough light remained to remind me where I was, and who I sat before.

"You may sit," you said, pointing to the chair opposite.

I obeyed.

My body betrayed me. My shoulders were stiff. My hands refused stillness. Fear clung to me, visible, uncontrollable as though my own posture was confessing what my mouth refused to say.

You leaned back slightly.

"Why are you even doing this?" you asked.

There was no anger in your voice. Only curiosity like a man examining an insect that had wandered somewhere it did not belong.

"You are the beautiful daughter of late Mr. Kailash Kumar. You don't need to work like this. You could have been anything."

You smiled faintly.

"A model. An actress. Why choose... this?"

My throat tightened. Words gathered slowly, painfully.

"I thought," I began, "I'd be good at it. Honest."

You chuckled softly.

"Every honesty has a price," you said. "And you'll have one too."

You leaned forward now.

"Ask for anything. Anything at all."

It felt like a bribe disguised as generosity.

"I don't want anything," I said surprised by my own courage.

You raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I could have been a model. An actress. You're right. But there is something I desire more."

I met your eyes.

"Truth."

A pause.

"Perhaps justice."

You studied me carefully now, like a chessboard revealing an unexpected move.

"I don't think I need to explain what I mean," I added quietly.

"You are a brave woman," you said. "But why waste such courage on a petty job? You are... more than this."

"I don't need approval," I replied, "not even from Justice himself. I know who I am. More or less it doesn't matter."

Silence stretched.

Then your tone changed.

"I want you to keep this a secret," you said. "Professional courtesy. Otherwise, my lawyers may have discussions you might find... inconvenient."

"Are you threatening me?" I asked.

"No," you replied smoothly. "I'm ensuring you have no trouble in the future."

You smiled again this time colder.

"The wealth your family has I could take it in a single night. Because I'm not just power. I am what stands behind it."

Something in me snapped.

"You already have everything," I said. "Why be so greedy? What do you even want to do with all this money?"

You laughed.

"Everything."

That was when I ran for the door.

I had never experienced a meeting like this never felt power so naked, so amused by fear. I chose retreat over risk.

But even as I fled, one thought haunted me more than the palace itself:

Walking away was safer.

But it was also my failure.

Arya's eyes did not widen in shock.

They softened.

The realisation did not strike him like thunder it seeped in, quietly, cruelly, the way guilt always does.

Had I abandoned them?

Thousands of species.

Lives that breathed, crawled, rooted themselves into soil and time.

Had I abandoned the poor?

The ones who lived downstream from greed, who drank poison disguised as progress.

Had I abandoned the ecosystem itself?

The questions did not demand answers.

They accused.

And slowly, painfully, one name rose above all others clear, undeniable.

Suresh Bansal.

Arya's jaw tightened.

So this was the cost of your hunger, he thought.

This was the altar you built for your greed.

But now now the truth would no longer remain buried beneath files, influence, and polite silence. The world would face the reality you had so carefully upheld, protected, varnished.

There was no obstacle left between truth and exposure.

Not even a life like mine.

His voice low, steady, almost distant cut through the stillness.

"Will the file be needed," Arya asked quietly, "or is my voice enough?"

He didn't expect an answer.

Some questions exist only to measure resolve.

A pause followed.

Then the recording ended.

Silence reclaimed the room.

Vansh exhaled slowly, his fingers still hovering near the controls.

"She couldn't expose the file," Vansh said at last, his voice controlled but heavy. "The recording makes that clear."

Arya didn't turn.

“But we can,” Vansh continued. “And that is where the story changes.”

He stood straighter now something rare. There was certainty in him, sharpened by grief and clarity.

“And the question everyone will ask,” Vansh said, almost anticipating the world, “is why not release everything at once. Why not drop the tapes, the files, the proof end it in a single blow?”

Arya finally looked at him.

Vansh’s eyes were calm. Dangerous.

“Because it won’t last,” Vansh answered himself. “Someone will repress it. Bury it. Call it fabricated. AI-generated. Say it’s propaganda. Power never lets truth pass unchallenged especially when it threatens foundations.”

He stepped closer, voice lowering.

“So we don’t give them a single explosion,” Vansh said. “We give them inevitability.”

Arya understood.

“For that,” Vansh continued, “we need proof that cannot be dismissed. Deliberate. Layered. Verified.”

He allowed himself a thin, controlled smile.

“One by one,” Vansh said, “the files will surface. Each authenticated. Each undeniable. Each stamped by the Techman.”

This time, there was no hesitation in his voice.

“The world will know,” Vansh said. “And this time, the truth will not vanish.”

He paused.

“And justice,” he added softly, “will finally have witnesses.”

For the first time, Vansh sounded certain.

For the first time, certainty sounded terrifying.

Chapter 23: Greed (Act 2)

The doorbell rang soft, domestic, harmless.

The door opened.

“Ohh, Mama!” the little girl burst out before anyone else could speak, her voice ringing through the house like a bell of its own. “Pretty Mama is here!”

Chavi barely had time to put her bag down before the child ran into her arms. Instinct took over. She lifted her daughter effortlessly, spinning her once in the air, the weight familiar, grounding.

“Yes,” her husband laughed from behind, leaning against the wall. “The Queen has returned.”

Chavi smiled an unguarded smile, the kind that never survived outside these walls.

“Where do you want the kiss, huh?” she asked, tilting her head theatrically. “Left cheek?”

She kissed.

The child giggled and shook her head furiously. “Nooo.”

“Oh. Right cheek then?”

Another kiss.

“Mama,” the little girl said suddenly, serious now, her small hands holding Chavi’s face. “Love you.”

The words landed heavier than any case file.

“Love you too,” Chavi whispered, pressing her forehead against the child’s. “My cutie.”

She gently set her down. “Now go to bed. It’s very late.”

“Okay,” the girl said obediently, already retreating, her footsteps fading down the corridor.

Silence returned soft, warm, earned.

Her husband watched her, still smiling. “So,” he asked casually, “how was work?”

Chavi exhaled. Slowly. As if unloading something invisible.

"Tiring," she said. "Everything is tiring."

She didn't elaborate.

Instead, she reached for the remote and turned on the television not for entertainment, but out of habit. Noise filled the room, the familiar authority of a news anchor's voice replacing the quiet.

"The Supreme Court today accepted a revised definition of the Aravalli Range..."

Chavi's posture changed not visibly, but internally. Her shoulders stiffened.

"...classifying it based on height, stating that only landforms rising one hundred metres or more above the surrounding terrain, and clusters of such hills, would qualify as part of the Aravalli Range."

Her husband glanced at the screen, uninterested. Chavi did not blink.

"Environmental groups have raised concerns, as this revised definition effectively excludes a significant portion of the existing Aravalli range from legal protection, potentially opening vast areas to mining and industrial exploitation."

The anchor continued, calm, neutral, professional.

Mining.

Redefinition.

Exclusion.

Words dressed as policy. Greed dressed as law.

Chavi sat down slowly.

The television kept speaking, but her mind was elsewhere somewhere between blood-stained hospital floors and courtroom corridors polished too clean to ever show dirt.

She did not change the channel.

She did not mute it.

She listened.

And for the first time that night, the comfort of home felt... fragile.

“Oh God...”

Chavi exhaled, the sigh leaving her chest like something tired and wounded.

Her husband looked up from the table. “What happened?”

She didn’t answer immediately. Her eyes were still on the screen, scrolling once more as if the words might rearrange themselves into something less dangerous.

“It’s not right,” she finally said. “This new definition... of the range.”

“The range?” he asked, frowning. “What do you mean?”

She put the phone down, leaned back, and spoke not like a detective this time, but like a woman who understood consequences.

“The new definition of the Aravali Mountains,” she said slowly, “strips protection from countless low, ancient hills that don’t look dramatic enough to matter, but quietly hold the ecosystem together.”

Her voice steadied as she went on, each sentence heavier than the last.

“These hills stop the desert from swallowing the land. They recharge groundwater, block dust storms from the Thar, and shelter forests that animals depend on. If they are excluded from protection, mining and construction will tear through them without resistance.”

He listened now, silently.

“Delhi will choke more than it already does. Water tables will sink further. Temperatures will rise. Leopards, pangolins species already hanging by a thread will vanish, not with noise, but with neglect.”

She paused.

“And it won’t be the powerful who pay the price,” she added. “It never is. It will be the poorest those who rely on clean water, grazing land, forests, and a stable climate. They’ll lose everything first. Pollution, scarcity, displacement while the profits go elsewhere.”

She shook her head.

“It turns a fragile natural shield into an industrial zone,” she said quietly. “The kind of damage that looks legal on paper and irreversible in reality.”

There was a silence between them.

“I can’t stay quiet about this,” Chavi said, standing now. Her tone had changed resolved, responsible, almost defiant. “I have to raise my voice. I can’t let this happen.”

Her husband hesitated, then said, low and careful,

“We may have to... neglect the orders of the Supreme Court.”

She looked at him sharply.

“I’ll speak to the youth,” he continued. “This can’t be buried.”

“Yes,” she said, already reaching for her phone. “Let people see the danger.”

She unlocked the screen, her thumb hovering for just a moment before opening Twitter.

Little did she know,

voices raised in truth often echo into places where truth is not forgiven.

Meanwhile, Arya wore the mask.

The black cowl slid over his face like a second skin tight, deliberate, ritualistic. It did not merely conceal him; it sealed him. The material was layered, reinforced, built not just to hide bone and flesh, but to protect what little humanity still clung to his features. Beneath it, the red eyes ignited cold, artificial, alive flickering once before stabilising, now directly connected to Vansh’s system.

A thin hum filled the basement.

The microphone embedded near Arya's jaw clicked softly, testing its range.

The drone hovered above, engines whispering, already calibrated to follow his movement automatically, no matter how fast or how violently he moved.

Sensors pulsed.

Radars synced.

Locations locked.

Every firewall stood upright like a sentry. No external breach. No traceable signal. No hacker no matter how arrogant would even know where to begin.

This was not preparation.

This was execution waiting to happen.

Behind them, the television murmured.

The news anchor's voice trembled not theatrically, but with the unnatural stiffness of someone reading words that frightened even them. A new definition. A revised interpretation. The language was polished, bureaucratic, harmless on the surface but both Arya and Vansh heard what lay beneath it.

Control.

Erase.

Permission.

Vansh stood behind Arya and placed both hands on his shoulders not heavy, not hesitant. Firm. Familiar. Almost brotherly.

"Just as we planned," he said quietly, as if the walls themselves were listening.

"You'll go to India Info. Retrieve those files. And you'll come back here safely."

A pause.

"There's no catch."

Arya didn't respond. The red lenses stared forward, unblinking.

Vansh tilted his head slightly, a trace of something darker curling at the corner of his mouth.

“And the graffiti,” he continued casually, as though asking about a misplaced document.

“Did you customise it properly?”

For the first time, Vansh smiled not the charming one, not the polite one.

A devilish curve, precise and intentional.

“Yes,” he said. “Perfectly.”

He turned back to the screens.

“Here it is,” Vansh murmured, fingers dancing lightly over the keyboard.

“Exactly as we wanted.”

The footage replayed.

The symbol.

The scale.

The impossible spread.

“The warning is coming soon,” Vansh added softly.

“The monster is out. And it’s about to explode.”

He took his seat at the table calm, composed, almost serene surrounded by monitors that reflected fractured light across his face. He looked less like a man now and more like an operator of something far larger than himself.

Arya said nothing.

He stepped backward once... then turned.

The shadows swallowed him whole.

His gear absorbed light instead of reflecting it thick black combat fabric reinforced with modern plating, each piece designed not for glory, but for endurance. Every step he took was silent. Every movement purposeful.

As he walked toward the garage, the past began to speak.

Not loudly.

Not clearly.

But insistently.
The basement.
The table.
The plans drawn in fragments.
Why not a gun?
Why not end it quickly?
Why not kill them all of them?
The questions echoed not as doubts, but as temptations.
Arya clenched his jaw beneath the mask.
This wasn't about killing.
It never was.
It was about making them understand.
Slow. Calm. No anger. Almost disappointed.
"Because death is an escape, Arya.
And guns are mercy disguised as power."
Arya would argue. Vansh wouldn't raise his voice.
"You want to end them.
I want them to understand."
A pause.
"A bullet lasts a second.
Guilt lasts a lifetime."
Arya clenches his fists.
"If you kill them, the world learns nothing.
If you expose them, the world collapses around them."
Then the line that defines Vansh:
"We are not here to punish bodies.
We are here to dismantle masks."
When Arya asks: "Why not just fight them all?"
Vansh doesn't glorify violence.
"Because rage makes you predictable.
Predictable men lose."
He leans closer.
"You fight when you have no other weapon."

We have information.”

Then:

“And information doesn’t miss.”

When Arya asks: “Why not a gun?”

This is the philosophical core:

“A gun ends a story.

We are writing one.”

And then quiet, brutal truth:

“If you use a gun, Arya...

you become just another headline.

If you don’t

you become the question that keeps them awake.”

As he started the car, the machine did not roar it breathed.

A BMW 7 Series.

All blacked out. Fully tinted. Bulletproofed.

Fast, merciless, and stripped of identity.

No number plate.

No badges.

No emblem to worship.

Every logo had been removed with surgical intent, as if the vehicle itself had been erased from the idea of ownership. What remained was not a car it was absence on wheels, an empty black thought cutting through the night.

Arya’s hands tightened around the steering wheel.

The engine hummed low, restrained, waiting like a predator that knew it would be unleashed soon enough.

The air inside the cabin vibrated softly as the earpiece crackedled to life.

“It’s time to go,” Arya said, his voice steady but hollow, as though it had already travelled this road before perhaps in another life.

A pause.

“Yes,” Vansh replied through the microphone.

“It is.”

Somewhere far behind them, Vansh stepped out of the palace gates. Above him, the drone ascended, its faint mechanical whirr slicing through the stillness as it climbed, eyeing the world from above like a silent witness.

For a moment, everything worked.

Then

A sharp crack.

A sudden distortion.

Static.

The drone clipped the heavy branches of a massive tree, its blades shrieking for a fraction of a second before the machine spiralled violently and vanished into darkness.

“Oh my fucking God,” Vansh burst into the mic, the composure snapping instantly.

Arya didn’t take his eyes off the road.

“What happened?” he asked, pushing the accelerator harder, the speed climbing into something reckless uncertain deliberate.

“I lost the drone,” Vansh said, disbelief mixing with fury. “I customised that thing myself. Every line of code. Every circuit. And now ”

He exhaled sharply. “Now I’ll have to build another.”

Arya scoffed, the sound sharp and bitter.

“Don’t we have other drones?”

A beat.

“What did you do with all that money?”

Silence lingered for half a second too long.

“Whatever,” Vansh snapped, regaining control the only way he knew how by moving forward. “We’ll restructure it later. Right now listen carefully.”

The tone changed.

“As I can see from your trajectory, you need to take a left. Three kilometres straight. Don’t slow down.”

The city thinned as Arya followed the instructions, concrete giving way to darker stretches of road where streetlights grew scarce and shadows began to gather in clusters.

When he finally arrived, it was 1:00 AM.

The kind of hour where the world pretends nothing is happening.

Dogs began barking almost immediately low, aggressive, territorial. Their voices echoed unnaturally, bouncing between structures, as if warning something unseen that a boundary had been crossed.

“Park it there,” Vansh instructed. “Out of sight.”

Arya manoeuvred the car into a pocket of darkness where even moonlight struggled to reach. He killed the engine.

The silence that followed was heavier than the noise before it.

“There’s an exit door,” Vansh said quietly.

“You’ll have to breach in from there.”

Arya reached into the back without hesitation and pulled out the heating equipment.

It was compact.

Efficient.

Unforgiving.

A device capable of melting metal as if it were wax designed not for force, but for inevitability.

He held it for a moment longer than necessary.

Then he stepped out into the night.

“Why is there no guard?” Vansh asked suddenly, his voice low, almost careful, as if raising it might alert something unseen.

Arya stopped walking.

“They wouldn’t have one,” he said, dismissively at first. “It’s late. Corporate people rely on systems, not men.”

“No,” Vansh replied at once too quickly. “That’s wrong.”

Arya turned.

"This is a very big company," Vansh continued, scanning the dark stretch of the lobby. His eyes weren't searching for objects they were measuring absence. "They don't leave a place like this empty. Not completely. Something is off."

A silence followed. The kind that presses against the ears.

"Head up front," Vansh said finally. "Check the CCTV room."

Arya didn't argue. He moved ahead, boots echoing faintly against the marble floor. Each step felt louder than it should have been. The building smelled sterile cleaned too thoroughly, like a place that wanted to erase memory.

He reached the security desk.

The monitors were dark.

All of them.

"They're off," Arya said, his voice tighter now.

"I know," Vansh replied immediately through the comm. "I can see."

That disturbed Arya more than the darkness itself.

"But why?" Arya asked. "Why shut everything down?"

Vansh didn't answer right away. His fingers hovered over his device, mind racing faster than code.

"Doesn't matter," Vansh said at last. "I'm breaching through the exit route. Go inside. Slowly."

Arya stepped forward.

The moment he crossed the threshold, darkness swallowed him whole.

Not empty darkness occupied darkness.

He moved carefully, senses sharpened, breath controlled. Shapes began to emerge: rows of desks, cabinets, almirahs stuffed with files. The skeleton of a company that fed on information.

"Wait," Vansh said suddenly.

Arya froze.

A soft mechanical sound followed fingers tapping, a code entered.

Then

The world shifted.

The room bloomed into a pale green hue as Vansh enabled night vision. Edges sharpened. Shadows retreated, but didn't vanish. They never do.

Arya exhaled slowly.

He walked between desks now, eyes drifting across paperwork, plaques, glass frames. Until something stopped him.

A board.

Polished. Framed. Important.

BEST EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

His gaze dropped.

Vanshika Kumari

Head Journal Advisor

Arya stood still.

Too still.

He stared at the name as if it might move. As if it might deny itself.

"Are you there?" Vansh asked.

"Oh... yes," Arya replied, though his voice was distant now. "I'm here."

He tore his eyes away, forcing himself back into motion.

"I couldn't find anything classified out here," he added. "Nothing hidden. No sealed files."

But something bothered him.

A door.

Slightly ajar. At the far end.

"I think it should be there," Arya said, his tone sharpening.

He didn't wait.

The door flew open under his kick.

Inside chaos.

Documents scattered without order. Files stacked hastily. Drawers half-open, like someone had been interrupted mid-panic.

“Look for this year,” Arya said urgently. “Classified section.”

He moved fast now, rifling through folders, scanning headings, dates.

Nothing.

“No file,” he said. “There’s nothing for this year.”

That was wrong.

That was very wrong.

Then

A sound.

Faint. Distant.

Voices.

Arya froze.

“...the parking,” he whispered.

Footsteps echoed somewhere below.

More than one.

They were coming up.

“What is going on at the middle of the night?” Vansh whispered, his voice barely surviving the darkness.

“Who are these people?” Arya asked, already lowering himself closer to the floor, instinct overriding thought.

“I can’t say,” Vansh replied after a pause. His fingers danced nervously over the screen. “You’ll have to look at them.”

Arya shifted further into the shadow, his body flattening against the cold structure beside him. Through the narrow opening, he saw them.

Three figures.

Two walked slightly apart ordinary men by appearance. Civilian clothes. One in a loose formal shirt, the other in casual wear. Faces forgettable. The kind you’d never remember twice. Between them walked a man who didn’t belong to anonymity.

Grey suit. Perfectly pressed. Shoes polished despite the dirt beneath them. His posture was upright too confident for someone who feared being seen.

“Do you see them clearly?” Arya murmured.

Vansh leaned closer to the screen. “Not yet. The angle’s wrong.”

Arya adjusted himself, inch by inch. “Did you get all that right?” he asked, not taking his eyes off them.

“No,” Vansh replied. “I can’t match him. I need his face ninety degrees. Full profile.”

Arya crouched lower, heart pacing ahead of his breath. As he shifted, his elbow brushed the edge of a wooden box resting on the table behind him.

It slipped.

The sound wasn’t loud but in silence, even a whisper can scream.

The box hit the floor.

“Who’s that?” the first man snapped, his voice sharp, alert.

The second scoffed, irritation dripping from his tone. “Relax. Must be a stupid rat. I killed a bunch of them yesterday.”

They laughed casually. Carelessly.

Arya didn’t move.

His muscles locked. Breath frozen halfway between inhale and panic. His eyes stayed fixed on the man in the grey suit.

The man turned slightly.

Enough.

Just enough.

Vansh’s fingers stopped mid-motion.

“I’ve got him,” Vansh said, his voice changing instantly no doubt now, only disbelief. “Arya... it’s Mukesh Bansal.”

Arya’s jaw tightened. “Who?”

“The younger brother of Suresh Bansal.”

The name sank in like poison.

"But... what is he doing here?" Vansh continued, more to himself than to Arya.

"Tell me," Arya said, his voice hardening. "Now."

Vansh swallowed. "He's invested in illegal businesses. Smuggling. Unethical edibles opium routes, underground supply chains. He has contacts outside the country. Powerful ones."

Arya listened without blinking.

"But why here?" Vansh asked again, unease crawling into his calculations.

As if answering him, the man in the grey suit spoke his voice calm, commanding.

"You find the classified files," he ordered. "Everything mentioned in the documents. Once you're done burn the place. Make it look like an accident."

Vansh's eyes widened slightly. His mind started racing patterns forming too fast to stop.

Arya stayed silent, absorbing every word.

"I suggest you hide," Vansh whispered urgently. "Let them take what they want. We retrieve the files later all of them."

Arya nodded once. "I'll get them back."

He moved deeper into a safer shadow, becoming part of the dark itself.

The man in the grey suit pulled out his phone.

Arya heard every word.

"Yeah, big brother," he said casually. "I'm here. Just like we planned. No problem the files will be delivered."

A pause.

Then laughter.

"Are you kidding me?" the man continued. "So that bitch who died... the one who committed suicide recently... she worked here?"

Arya's fists clenched.

His nails bit into his palms.

“You told me about her once,” the man went on, indifferent.
“Funny how things turn out.”

Arya’s breath shook but his body didn’t move.

In Vansh’s ear, silence screamed.

“Control,” Vansh whispered urgently through the comm.
“Control, my friend. We get the files. You come back safely.
That’s the plan.”

The man snapped his fingers at the others. “You move. Quick.
I’ll be waiting in the car.”

Footsteps faded.

Engines hummed.

Minutes passed.

Arya didn’t move.

Not because it wasn’t safe

but because something inside him had gone terrifyingly quiet.

They had found everything.

“Found them all!” one of the men said, almost pleased with himself.

A pause. Then irritation.

“Where is the kerosene can? Go and get it.”

The other didn’t move. He was distracted lounging back, eyes glued to a glossy image glowing on his phone.

“Oh no,” he muttered, half-laughing, “look at this. My favourite actress. This ad damn, it’s menacing.”

Footsteps approached.

“What are you doing?” the first snapped. “I’m arranging the files. In the briefcase. Go get it quick.”

The door opened.

Arya stepped in.

The kerosene can hung from his left hand heavy, metallic, indifferent.

Both men looked up at once.

Their expressions changed instantly.

He was tall more than six feet.

Not just tall, but assembled. Thick shoulders. Dense frame. Every inch of him sealed beneath dark coverings. His face was hidden, but his eyes

Red.

Not metaphorical. Not imagined.

Red like something awake too long.

They didn't speak.

They didn't breathe.

For a moment, the room forgot sound.

The briefcase slipped from one man's hand and struck the floor with a dull thud. Papers spilled, unnoticed.

Arya lowered the can slowly, deliberately, as if the weight meant nothing to him.

"Here's your kerosene," he said calmly.

He closed the door behind him.

The lock clicked.

He never broke eye contact.

Somewhere far too casually Vansh's voice came through the device.

"Here we go..."

Arya moved.

Not rushed.

Not dramatic.

Efficient.

He crossed the space and drove his fist into the first man's jaw.

Bone shifted. Teeth clashed. The sound was wet, wrong.

Before the man could fall, Arya struck again stomach, stomach each blow compressing breath, folding resistance inward until the body forgot how to stand.

The second man lunged, panic finally replacing shock.

Too late.

Arya seized the first man with his left hand fingers digging into collar and flesh and wrenched him sideways.

With his right, he delivered a brutal hook that caught the second man mid-motion.

Then without releasing either

He dragged the first body into the table.

Wood cracked.

Metal screamed.

The second man followed his head slammed into the same surface.

Again.

Again.

Dham.

Dhamm.

Dhamm.

The table shook like it wanted to escape.

Blue blood streaked across the surface unnatural, vivid.

Skins split. Heads opened. The room filled with the sharp iron-sweet smell of violence.

They screamed.

Briefly.

Then they couldn't.

Their bodies collapsed useless now sprawled across the floor like discarded equipment.

Arya stood there, chest rising and falling.

He exhaled.

"Woah... woah," he murmured.

It felt good.

Not joy.

Not pleasure.

Release.

Years of defamation.

Hatred that had nowhere to go.

Anger that had learned patience.

Now it spoke in bruises, in broken jaws, in blue blood smeared across a table.

His rage had finally been acknowledged.

Vansh smiled not with joy, not with triumph but with something colder.

A smile that did not belong to a man.

He stood still, witnessing everything through eyes that did not blink, as though Lucifer himself had borrowed his sight for a moment curious, amused, detached. Every scream that tried to form, every breath that trembled in the room, entered him without resistance.

Arya moved with a frightening calm.

He placed the briefcase gently against the wall, almost respectfully, as if order still mattered in a place where morality had already died. Then his hand reached for the kerosene can.

The men on the floor understood too late.

Arya tipped the can.

The liquid poured out in a relentless stream, splashing against chests, arms, faces soaking clothes, skin, hair. The smell hit first. Sharp. Suffocating. Final. They tried to speak, to beg, to scream but shattered jaws and broken teeth betrayed them. Only muffled sounds escaped, animal and useless.

Their eyes locked onto him.

Not a man.

A thing.

A silhouette standing upright while they lay collapsed, reduced, drenched in inevitability. Their pupils widened, begging where mouths could not. Terror spoke fluently through their silence.

Vansh's breath hitched.

"What... what are you doing?" he asked, though he already knew.

Arya did not answer.

Instead, he crouched beside one of them and calmly searched his pockets. A phone. A heavy steel lighter. He took both, rising slowly to his full height while they remained on the floor broken, soaked, waiting.

Arya raised his right hand.

His fingers flicked the lighter open.

Tick.

The sound echoed louder than it should have.

One of the men tried to move, dragging himself backward, nails scraping against the floor. His head shook violently no, no, no his eyes screaming what his body could not escape.

Vansh stepped forward, panic breaking through his composure.

“No Arya! Stop!”

His voice cracked. “You can’t do this!”

Arya didn’t turn.

Didn’t blink.

Didn’t speak.

“You shouldn’t kill them!” Vansh continued, desperate now. “We don’t even know who they are how deep they are in this ”

Arya paused.

Just for a second.

Then, quietly, without emotion, he said,

“No one is innocent.”

Vansh swallowed hard.

“I know,” he said, forcing himself steady. “I know. But we can’t be the ones terrorising people. We’re not terrorists.”

Arya’s face didn’t change but inside him, something fractured.

A voice surfaced. Soft. Familiar. Impossible.

Hey Arya... I love you.

His chest tightened.

I love you too, pineapple.

His thumb loosened.

The flame died.

The lighter clicked shut.

Arya exhaled, as if returning from somewhere far away. He threw the lighter aside. It clattered uselessly across the floor.

Vansh's knees almost gave in from relief.

Silence reclaimed the room.

"What's next?" Arya asked, empty now.

Vansh steadied himself. His mind switched gears back to strategy, control, survival.

"The phone you took," he said. "Message his boss. Say the work will be done. Tell him you're leaving. We'll handle the rest."

Arya typed.

The reply came almost immediately.

Okay.

Outside, engines began to buzz distant, impatient.

"Now call the police," Vansh said. "Give them the location. Say nothing else. Then leave everything as it is."

Arya dialed.

"Robbery," he said.

And cut the call.

He threw the phone away.

Then, as if remembering something unfinished, Arya picked up the graffiti spray can. He walked to the transparent glass wall. His reflection stared back fractured, masked, unrecognisable.

He raised the can.

Hiss.

Large letters bloomed across the glass, slow and deliberate, the paint dripping like a warning that couldn't be wiped away.

DON'T

LIE.

The words stared back at them.

At the city.

At the world.

Vansh watched in silence.

And somewhere deep within him, something smiled again.

As he took hold of the briefcase, its weight unfamiliar yet deliberate in his hand, Arya moved toward the exit. The door sighed open, spilling a thin blade of light into the darkness outside. He crossed the distance to the car without haste every step measured, every breath controlled then placed the briefcase carefully in the back seat, as though it were not an object but a consequence.

He sat down behind the wheel.

The engine did not start immediately.

From the shadows, still and alert, he watched.

Two cars Range Rovers slid past the far end of the street, their silhouettes clean and expensive, gliding leftward like predators certain of their route. Arya remained motionless, eyes fixed, posture folded into the night. An owl does not rush. It waits.

Only when the cars committed fully to the left did Arya's hand turn the key.

"Well done, Arya," Vansh's voice crackled softly through the concealed speaker behind the dashboard, calm, precise too calm. "You played it smoothly. Now take the right. We succeed the mission."

The words succeed the mission lingered longer than they should have.

The two Range Rovers continued their slow, confident drift to the left, unaware. Arya eased the car forward, the tyres whispering against the road. As he turned right, the glow of the streetlights briefly caught his eyes in the rear-view mirror red, watchful, alive.

And then

A memory.

Not a sound. Not a vision.

A sentence.

A bitch?

You called my sister a bitch?

Mukesh Bansal's voice, preserved perfectly, replayed itself in Arya's mind not loud, not dramatic just careless. That was what made it unbearable.

Arya had always been the sensitive one.

Not weak. Never weak.

But porous. The world leaked into him.

The car moved forward, steady, obedient, while his thoughts did not.

He glanced again at the mirror. The Range Rovers were still visible, shrinking now, committed to their path. Arya reached up and, with deliberate calm, removed the audio devices from his ears.

Silence fell.

"Arya?" Vansh's voice returned instantly, sharper now. "Hello? Arya don't do this. I knew something like this would happen."

The small speaker behind the car carried Vansh's words with urgency thinly disguised as control.

"What are you doing?" Vansh continued. "Why did you remove your phone? Don't just don't do anything stupid. Come back. Come back home. Safely."

A pause.

"Everything is done."

Arya did not respond.

His hands remained steady on the wheel. His foot pressed the accelerator just enough to feel the road yield beneath him. The city stretched ahead indifferent, complicit, waiting.

Arya didn't say a word.

Not a syllable.

Not a breath shaped into language.

Instead, his hand moved slow, deliberate to the radio.

A single twist.

Music poured into the car.

It wasn't loud at first. It crept in, like a presence that didn't ask permission. The kind of sound that didn't want to be heard only felt. Vansh's voice followed immediately after, sharp with panic, layered with reason, spilling warnings and logic from behind the seat, from behind the moment.

But Arya did not turn.

The volume rose.

The speaker felt smaller somehow, shrinking as the sound expanded an illusion of physics bending under rage. Vansh spoke again, louder now, closer to shouting, but his words began dissolving into static, into vibration, into nothing.

Arya turned the wheel.

Hard.

The car drifted rear snapping sideways, tyres screaming like something alive being skinned alive on asphalt. The road blurred. Streetlights stretched into lines. The city stopped being a place and became a corridor.

The music burst.

Not played.

Burst.

And the lyrics didn't sit inside the scene they punctured it, tearing straight through the fourth wall, speaking at Arya rather than to him.

"I'm a king but I'm far from a saint,

They call me a bad man that's a fucking good thing "

Arya's eyes locked forward.

He accelerated.

The first impact came without hesitation.

Metal kissed metal.

He rammed the first car once hard enough to dent the door inward like a crushed rib. The steering wheel kicked back violently. Arya corrected it instinctively, hands steady, jaw clenched, breath measured as if he were performing surgery instead of vehicular assault.

Glass shattered.

Sparks flew.

The second hit came faster.

Again.

And again.

His gaze lifted just enough to confirm it.

Mukesh Bansal.

The name didn't echo in his mind. It settled there, heavy and final.

The song continued, relentless

"Father forgive me, I can't forgive them,

You know my history, you know what I did then, what I do now, a whole lot worse, heavy is the head, it's the blessing and a curse "

Arya hit them again.

The driver lost control.

The car swerved, tyres screeching, momentum snapping loose as it tore straight through the corrugated steel wall of a godown. The impact was violent steel ripping open like paper, beams screaming as they bent, debris exploding outward in a cloud of dust and rust.

Silence tried to return.

It failed.

Men stumbled out, disoriented, swearing, coughing, adrenaline flooding systems not built for comprehension anymore.

"What the fuck "

"We got him "

"Didn't we?"

They laughed. Nervous. Broken. Victorious too early.

One of them leaned toward the steering wheel.

It was empty.

No one was there.

The realisation landed half a second too late.

Arya emerged from behind.

A shadow detaching itself from darkness.

The first punch landed on the fat man's jaw with a sound too dull for bone, too wet for flesh. He went down immediately dead weight, useless, forgotten.

The second man barely raised his hands.

Arya didn't slow.

Punch.

Elbow.

Knee.

Bodies folded. Collapsed. Reconsidered their existence.

Someone screamed for support. A phone hit the ground. Footsteps came running more men, more noise, more confidence than intelligence.

Arya turned to face them.

Alone.

The music still played.

And for a moment just a moment he looked less like a man and more like a consequence.

They came anyway.

All of them.

And Arya met them head-on.

The car lay half-flipped, its nose jammed into the building like a broken tooth. Glass rained slowly, ticking against metal. Arya pulled himself out, blood warm on his knuckles, eyes hunting through smoke and sirens.

"Mukesh Bansal!"

His voice tore through the night.

"Where the fuck are you, you motherfucker get out!"

Two guards staggered toward him, bodies already ruined by the collision, breath sharp with panic. Arya didn't hesitate. The shocker cracked alive white pain, blue sparks. One dropped twitching. Then the other. Silence returned, thick and heavy.

Mukesh tried to run.

Arya caught him by the collar and dragged him back like dead weight.

The first punch broke the jaw.

The second crushed the left eye.

The third wasn't a punch it was everything that had ever been taken.

"You called her a bitch," Arya growled, each word shaking.

"No one calls her that. No one."

Punch after punch. Not rhythm eruption. Rage without language. When Mukesh collapsed, unconscious and bleeding, Arya didn't feel victory. Only emptiness. His arms trembled. His lungs burned. He stepped back, exhausted, hollowed out.

Then he looked up.

The night sky had turned purple unnatural, bruised, alive. Thunder rippled across it, lightning flashing first, the sound arriving late, as if the world itself needed time to process its anger. The air vibrated. The city felt small beneath it.

Arya stood there, chest rising and falling, blood drying on his hands, listening.

Nature wasn't watching.

It was responding.

And somewhere in that purple sky, something inside him broke forever and something else was born.

Arya moved slowly toward his car.

Each step felt delayed, as if the world was buffering him, giving him time to reconsider but he didn't look down. His eyes stayed on the sky. The purple bruises in the clouds churned, thunder crawling through them like veins waking up. It felt less like weather and more like judgment.

He got into the car. The engine protested, coughed, then surrendered. As he drove, the city blurred past lights smeared, buildings reduced to silhouettes. No sirens followed him. No one chased monsters at night.

He stopped near the monument.

Old stone. Forgotten pride. Something built to remember a past no one understood anymore.

Arya climbed.

Hands scraped against rough surfaces, blood mixing with dust, but pain had lost its authority. At the top, wind slapped his face, trying failing to wake him. He pulled out the spray can. The rattle sounded obscene in the silence.

He wrote slowly. Deliberately. Like a confession carved into the world:

THE
MONSTER
IS
OUT
TO
EXPLODE

The words bled into the stone, black against history.

For a moment, he stood there, staring at them. Not proud. Not ashamed. Just aware. This wasn't a warning. It wasn't a threat.

It was a declaration.

Arya climbed down, returned to the car, and drove away without looking back. The monument remained scarred, marked, finally honest.

Behind him, thunder rolled again.

The city didn't know it yet, but something irreversible had begun.

Chapter 24: Crucifixion of Greed

“So... you didn’t listen to me after all.”

Vansh’s eyes opened slowly. The ceiling above him was unfamiliar high, pale, lined with old cracks that spoke of age and endurance. Cold pressed against his skin: ice packs bound carefully along his ribs, bandages tight and methodical, the faint sting of antiseptic lingering in the air. Medicines rested on a small wooden table beside him, arranged with the discipline of habit rather than concern.

He tried to turn his head. Pain answered before movement did.

“I didn’t know,” Arya began quietly, standing a little away, as if distance could undo what had already happened. “I didn’t know you could do all this medical... stuff.”

“It’s not me,” Vansh replied, his voice calm but strained. His eyes shifted toward the far end of the room.

Footsteps approached slow, deliberate. An old man stepped into the light, his back slightly bent, his hands steady in a way that only years of repetition could teach.

“I was a soldier’s doctor once,” the man said simply.

Arya tried to sit up at that. The attempt was a mistake.

“Ah ”

The pain tore through his chest, sharp and unforgiving. He collapsed back, breath breaking unevenly.

“Please,” the old man said at once, placing a firm hand on Arya’s shoulder. “Just rest. I can’t let you fight your body now not after what you’ve already put it through.”

His voice softened then, not with weakness, but with something heavier.

“I promised your mother,” he continued, emotion cracking through the discipline for the first time, “the day we settled here

that I would take care of you. That I would not let anything happen to you.”

He gestured toward the bandages, the bruises darkening beneath them.

“Look at the bleeding,” he said, almost to himself. “You were already hurt... and still you kept going.”

Vansh exhaled sharply and intervened.

“I told you to get out,” he said, the disappointment unmistakable. “It was your first real encounter. You’d never fought like that never taken that many hits.”

Arya stared at the ceiling now, jaw clenched.

“Do you even know,” Vansh continued, “how many punches you took? How long you stayed on your feet when you shouldn’t have?”

Silence stretched.

“Your rage,” Vansh said finally, quieter now, almost reflective, “couldn’t fill the time it cost you.”

Arya said nothing.

For the first time since the beginning of this war, the room did not feel like a palace.

It felt like a reckoning.

Arya turned toward the old man.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Not rushed. Not defensive. “I made you feel this.”

He reached out and held the man’s hand firm, grateful, human. The kind of gesture Arya had never learned how to make without force.

“Thank you,” he continued. “For everything.”

The old man didn’t pull away.

“The only reason I lived,” Arya said, his voice steady but hollow underneath, “was my sister’s presence. And now she’s not here.”

He paused. Not because he was choking but because the truth needed space.

"I can't waste what's left of my life. And it's not just about me. Or her."

His eyes lifted.

"It's about this country. This society. These people."

A breath.

"I can't abandon them."

The old man's eyes crumpled not in weakness, but in conflict. Too many thoughts arrived at once: fear, memory, responsibility, regret. Arya expected refusal. He expected anger. He had lived his whole life prepared for those.

Instead, something unexpected surfaced.

Pride.

For the first time, Arya was not empty.

For the first time, he was not drowning inward.

For the first time, he stood outside himself.

"I heard the recordings," the old man said suddenly, a dry chuckle escaping him. His eyes were red, but sharp. "All of them."

Arya turned sharply toward Vansh.

Vansh raised an eyebrow, unfazed.

"You came into the garage," Vansh said, calmly, "and collapsed right after opening the door. I barely caught you in time."

Arya frowned, trying to remember.

"I had the medicines ready," Vansh continued. "The equipment too. I knew this day would come. But I'm no doctor. I'm not precise."

He glanced toward the old man.

"So he came in clutch."

The old man nodded faintly.

"He started instructing," Vansh said. "Dosages. Painkillers. Internal trauma. What to avoid. What to monitor. He worked like a soldier disciplined, focused, ruthless with time."

A pause.

"After he was done," Vansh added, "he asked me something."

The old man looked away.

"He asked me why I was doing all this."

Arya waited.

"I didn't answer," Vansh said. "I just showed him the tapes."

Silence thickened the room.

"He listened," Vansh finished. "And now..."

The old man stepped forward.

"I'm proud of you," he said simply. "You did good."

Arya smiled.

Not wide.

Not triumphant.

Just real.

He had always carried anger toward this man old wounds, old silences, old disappointments. But not now.

Not today.

For the first time, he wasn't fighting alone.

"So," Vansh began, breaking the stillness, "our new medical expert joins the team."

The old man didn't react. He was already packing his tools with the quiet efficiency of someone who had stitched men together under gunfire.

"He'll heal you," Vansh added, almost casually, "the same way he healed soldiers back in the war."

Vansh turned to him.

"How much rest do you recommend?"

"A week," the old man replied without hesitation.

"A week?" Arya frowned. Disappointment cut deeper than pain.

The old man met his eyes. "Your bones will listen to you later if you don't."

Vansh nodded once. "You can rest now," he said to the old man. "We've got it from here."

The man hesitated just a second then turned and left.

Arya exhaled.

"So," he said, "what happened to the mission?"

Vansh's lips curved not a smile. Something colder.

"Well," he said, "first thing you should know you've been unconscious for a day."

"A whole day?" Arya's eyes widened. "Already?"

"Mm," Vansh replied. "And a lot happened in that time."

He picked up the remote and clicked on the television.

The screen came alive.

News channels.

Protest footage.

Courtroom visuals.

Hashtags flooding the screen like fire.

"I released everything," Vansh said calmly. "Anonymously. Everywhere."

Arya watched in silence.

"Independent websites. Google-hosted mirrors. YouTube archives. Facebook drops. Snapchat leaks. WhatsApp chains. Instagram reels."

A pause.

"There's no deleting it now."

On-screen, a reporter shouted over chaos.

CLASSIFIED FILES EXPOSED GOVERNMENT UNDER FIRE

"The people saw the files," Vansh continued. "And protests stopped being polite."

Footage changed.

JUSTICE SURESH BANSAL SUMMONED FOR HEARING

"He was called," Vansh said. "To the very Supreme Court he once hid behind."

Arya's jaw tightened.

"Justice," Vansh added quietly, "is now the accused."

The screen shifted again.

MUKESH BANSAL IN COMA AFTER MYSTERIOUS ACCIDENT

"His brother," Vansh said, "was found after a... terrible accident."

Arya didn't blink.

"He's in a coma," Vansh continued. "And we're the only ones who know why."

The next headline appeared.

DRUG SMUGGLING & ILLEGAL ARMS FOUND IN LUXURY VEHICLES

"Both his cars were loaded," Vansh said. "Drugs. Smuggling records. Enough evidence to bury him twice."

The footage cut to guards being wheeled into hospitals.

"They survived," Vansh said. "And they talked."

Confessions played in broken audio.

We worked for Mukesh Bansal...

We protected the routes...

We were paid to stay silent...

"They admitted everything," Vansh said. "Empire. Protection. Collaboration."

Arya finally spoke.

"And Suresh?"

Vansh's eyes stayed on the screen.

"Collaborative involvement," he said. "Documents. Transfers. Silent approvals."

A beat.

“He’s finished.”

The broadcast shifted again.

MYSTERY MAN ATTACKS PRIVATE CONVOY NO
CCTV NO WITNESSES

“And then,” Vansh said, lowering the volume, “there’s this.”

Night footage. Empty streets. Shaken voices.

“They don’t know who you are,” Vansh said. “All they know is one man appeared out of nowhere. No motive. No words. Just rage.”

Arya’s reflection stared back at him from the dark screen.

“The companies involved were also taken into custody,” Vansh added.

“Both men were found inside an Indian Info Systems office. Trespassing. Data theft.”

Arya finally turned.

“They were lying on the floor,” Vansh said softly. “Trembling. Whole bodies shaking.”

A reporter’s voice echoed:

When asked what happened, the suspects could only say one thing...

The screen froze.

‘RED EYES.’

Silence.

Vansh looked at Arya.

“They couldn’t explain anything else.”

A pause.

“Just that.”

Vansh turned the volume up.

The room filled with noise.

“Red eyes?” the reporter repeated, almost laughing in disbelief. “Who or what are the Red Eyes?”

Footage cut to the hospital.

Fifteen men. Bandaged. Shaking. Some staring at walls, some refusing to speak at all.

“Doctors say they’re physically stable,” the reporter continued, voice lowering, “but mentally ”

A pause.

“ they are broken.”

A doctor appeared on screen.

“They keep saying the same thing,” he said.

“That the night was watching them.”

The reporter returned, standing beneath harsh studio lights.

“The men claim it took one night,” she said.

“One man. No witnesses. No recordings. No explanation.”

Images flashed empty alleys, shattered glass, blood on concrete washed away by rain.

“He exposed an empire,” she continued. “Collapsed a dynasty. Dragged justice itself into court.”

Her eyes met the camera.

“So who was he?”

A beat.

“An angel?”

Another beat longer, darker.

“Or the devil?”

The screen froze on that question.

Vansh muted the television.

Silence returned.

Arya didn’t look away from the screen.

Somewhere, deep inside him, something smiled

not with pride,

not with joy,

but with inevitability.

Days after the hospital incident

Chavi woke slowly, the way one does after a dream that refuses to loosen its grip.

The room was quiet. Morning light filtered through the curtains, soft and unreal.

"Are you okay, love?" her husband asked from beside her.

She turned toward him, relief washing over her face. For a moment just a moment she hoped everything she remembered had been a nightmare.

"I couldn't get it out of my head," she said finally. "The hospital. The men."

He nodded, gently. "It's your job. Anyone in your place would be shaken."

She stared at the ceiling.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

Chavi hesitated.

"Whoever did it," she said slowly, choosing her words like stepping across broken glass, "wasn't just angry."

Her husband stayed silent.

"He didn't care," she continued. "Not about consequences. Not about pain. Not even about himself."

A pause.

"He beat them one by one but not to kill them."

She swallowed.

"It was done so they'd live with it."

Her husband frowned. "You've seen violence before."

"Yes," she said. "That's why this was different."

She turned toward him now, eyes sharp with certainty.

"This wasn't fantasy. Not Batman. Not Daredevil. Those stories still believe in limits."

Her voice lowered.

"This... didn't."

She closed her eyes briefly.

"The room felt wrong," she said. "Like a place where something irreversible had happened. Not death something

worse. They were alive, but whatever made them human was... displaced."

Her hands tightened around the bedsheet.

"And the screaming," she whispered. "It stayed with me."

She picked up her phone, more out of habit than intent.

The headline stared back at her.

JUSTICE SURESH BANSAL FOUND GUILTY

Corruption. Abuse of power. Underworld ties.

Brother Mukesh Bansal remains in coma.

Sentenced to decades in prison.

She scrolled.

ARAVALI MINING DEALS CANCELLED PROTECTED
ZONE RESTORED

A final line caught her breath:

"We are relieved to announce the Aravali range is safe."

Chavi lowered the phone.

Somewhere deep inside her, relief and unease collided.

Justice had been served.

But not by the hands she had been taught to trust.

And that thought

more than the blood,

more than the screams

was what truly frightened her.

"The sin has been executed," Vansh said, smiling.

They sat at the familiar café the one he, Vanshika, and Arya used to visit yet never all three together. Same counter. Same front-facing seats. The world outside moved as if nothing had changed.

Arya looked at him.

"Then tell me something," he said. "Why didn't you leak the first recordings? That was the plan. You always plan first. Then execute."

Vansh didn't answer immediately.

“Because,” he said finally, “what you did was... too much.”

Arya raised an eyebrow.

“It was outrageous,” Vansh continued, lowering his voice. “I couldn’t have predicted that scale. Not the damage. Not the aftermath. I didn’t know how the world would receive it.”

He paused, then added quietly, “And because the first suspect would’ve been you.”

Arya didn’t interrupt.

“Your sister dies. You live alone. You disappear. You suddenly have access to resources. No social circle. No witnesses.” Vansh exhaled.

“You’d have been swallowed by the same corrupt system we were trying to expose.”

Arya nodded slowly.

“You’re right,” he said. “There was no perfect time.”

They fell silent.

Then Vansh noticed the shift.

People were turning. Smiling. Nodding. Complimenting someone near the entrance.

A man in a black suit. Cleanly groomed beard. Long hair, low volume. Sleeper build. The kind of presence that didn’t demand attention yet quietly owned it.

Every table noticed him. Every exit seemed to pause for him.

Arya leaned closer.

“Who is that?”

Vansh watched carefully.

“No idea. But he’s pulling focus.”

The man approached the counter casually.

Vansh spoke up. “Hey can I ask you something?”

The man turned, amused.

“Sure.”

“Who are you?” Vansh asked. “Big deal or something?”

The man smiled not arrogantly, not humbly. Something in between.

“Who am I?” he echoed. “I don’t know. And I don’t think I ever will.”

A beat.

“If you need a name,” he added, “it’s Prashant. Prashant Faleja.”

Arya studied him.

“And what do you do?”

The man chuckled softly.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why?” Vansh frowned.

“It would complicate the timelines,” Prashant replied easily.

Vansh blinked. “The what?”

“A secret,” Prashant said. “One I’ll keep.”

He stepped back, still receiving nods and smiles from strangers around him.

“But just so you know,” he added, turning once more,

“I’m just another charming guy.”

He paused at the exit.

“And don’t let the charm fool you.”

Then he left vanishing into the street like someone returning to a dugout after a brief appearance.

Vansh exhaled.

“...That was weird.”

“What a meathead,” Arya muttered. “I want another cappuccino.”

“Orange juice for me,” Vansh said, waving to the barista.

Greed was not crucified to be punished it was crucified so no one could pretend it was innocent anymore.

Chapter 25: Gluttony

"I'm sorry."

Arya said it to no one

or perhaps to the pineapple keychain clenched in his fist.

Its metal edge bit into his palm, but he didn't loosen his grip.

Her voice still visited him at night uninvited, unmerciful.

At breakfast.

At lunch.

At dinner.

Every attempt at normalcy cracked open the same wound.

The rage came like a tide, but unlike before, it did not explode.

It settled.

Heavy.

Quiet.

This was only the beginning.

"I will not stop," Arya said.

The old man stood behind him, silent, watching.

The dinner table was untouched again. Steam rose from food that would go cold like everything else in the house.

As Arya turned toward the basement stairs, the old man finally spoke.

"At least finish your dinner, Arya," he said gently, worry trembling beneath the words.

"You need protein. Nutrition. You can't abandon your body like this."

Arya didn't turn back.

"I was always in the shape people desired," he replied flatly.

"I don't care about that anymore."

"This is exactly the time you should," the old man insisted.

"Your brain needs rest."

Arya paused.

Then, in a voice calm enough to terrify

“Since Vanshika is dead, there is no rest for me in this world.”

A breath.

“There is only this. Me. And my ambition.”

The words were not dramatic.

They were decided.

As he stepped out, the old man said softly, almost pleading

“Take care of yourself.”

Arya didn’t answer.

He left.

As Arya stepped into the basement, his movement slowed.

His eyes locked onto something in the corner.

It was concealed beneath a heavy black cloth tall, elongated, almost five feet in both height and length. Whatever it was, it didn’t belong to storage. It belonged to intention.

“What’s that?” Arya asked.

Vansh didn’t look up. He was buried in notes, screens glowing around him, fingers moving between a keyboard and dismantled drone parts.

“That,” Vansh said casually, “is a surprise.”

He paused, tightening a screw.

“It’s still unfinished. I’ve saved it for later.”

Arya didn’t push.

But his curiosity stayed awake.

The basement felt alive.

Wires coiled like veins.

Monitors pulsed softly.

Blueprints, scribbled calculations, dismantled gadgets boxes filled with imported, expensive equipment stacked neatly along the walls.

For the first time in a long while, Arya felt something unfamiliar.

Relief.

His money was finally breathing.

Not rotting in accounts.

Not feeding silence.

It was being used for something better.

For something that resembled justice.

Vansh lifted a small device from the desk.

"I've got this camera," he said. "Portable. Reliable. Hard to trace."

Arya raised an eyebrow.

"A camera?"

A dry smirk followed.

"What am I supposed to do pose for criminals? Paparazzi style?"

Vansh smiled. Not amused. Not offended.

"Who am I to answer that?" he replied.

"You'll understand when you listen to her."

His hands stopped mid-motion.

The air shifted.

Arya's expression changed not anger, not fear recognition.

Vansh reached for a pair of headphones and handed them over.

Arya hesitated.

Then put them on.

The world narrowed.

It was time to be confronted again

by the only voice that ever had power over him.

His sister.

"So," Vansh said quietly, his finger hovering over the control,

"Recording two."

He pressed play.

"Hello..."

It's me again.

This time, it isn't someone you can chase through alleys or drag out of cars.

This time, it's someone who decides what goes into your stomach and mine when we pay hospital bills or stand in pharmacy lines.

Not just you and me.

Millions of poor families.

Innocent children.

All of them depend on her.

But maybe her job is too burdened to notice the underprivileged.

Maybe she doesn't have time to look down.

And that woman...

is you.

Pooja Verma.

Doctor.

Head of Medical Drug Certification."

Arya's jaw tightened.

"I've always loved kids," her voice softened.

"Their innocence. Their chaos. Their strange little gifts.

They feel like blessings the world hasn't corrupted yet."

Arya froze.

Kids?

Where are you going with this...?

"There was a two-year-old daughter of a friend from my college.

She lived near my apartment society.

I used to visit on weekends.

Sometimes with chocolates.

Sometimes cakes.

Sometimes tiny dolls she'd forget about in five minutes.

We talked for hours

or rather, she talked, and I listened.

Everything heavy inside me...
just vanished when I heard her nonsense stories.”
A pause.
“She used to kiss me.
On the cheek.
On the forehead.
I taught her to say something naughty.
‘I hate you.’
We’d laugh.
‘I hate you!’
‘I hate you too, cutie.’”
Arya’s fingers curled.
“One day,” Vanshika continued,
“she stopped laughing.
She said,
‘My mom says hate is a bad word.
Why do we say hate instead of love?’”
Silence.
“I lifted her onto my lap.
Kissed her left cheek.
I told her
‘We say love when we want to believe someone.
But the world is a tragedy.
We never know if love is true.’”
Her voice wavered but only slightly.
“But hate?”
Hate is honest.
When someone says they hate you
they’re not lying.
And I’m not a liar.”
A faint laugh.
The kind that hurts more than crying.
“She whispered,

'But... I love you.'"
Arya swallowed.
"I laughed.
But something inside me cracked.
I told her
'If "I love you" is the ocean,
then "I hate you" is its deepest part.'"
Another pause.
"She smiled and said,
'Then I hate you.'"
A breath.
"I laughed again.
Then I asked her
'What's your wish?'"
"She said,
'My friend Neeru has a big brother.
He drops her at kindergarten.
Picks her up.
Takes care of her.
I want a big brother too.'"
Arya's chest tightened.
"I was surprised.
She asked me,
'Do you have a big brother?'"
"Yes," I said.
She laughed.
'You never told me.'
Then she asked again
'Does he hate you?'"
A final pause.
"Yes," I said.
Arya paused again, irritation clawing up his spine.
"Where is she even going with this?" he snapped.

"This is pointless. Stupid. Humans are stupid."
Vansh didn't look at him.
"Humans are supposed to be stupid," he replied calmly.
"That's why they are human."
He clicked the recording forward.
"One Saturday evening...
when I reached her house, she was already sick."
A breath.
"Not the normal kind of sick.
Not a snuffle.
Not a playful cough."
Arya leaned back slightly.
"She was coughing in a way a child shouldn't.
Deep. Dry. Repeated.
Like her chest was trying to throw something out and failing."
Her voice slowed.
"I rushed into her room.
She was curled on the bed, small too small
hugging a pillow like it was holding her together."
A pause.
"I called out to her mother.
'Did you take her to the hospital?'
'She's coughing too much.'
'Why didn't you call me?'"
A faint, tired sigh.
"She said
'She doesn't want to go.'
'She's denying everything.'
'You talk to her.'"
"I sat beside her.
'You don't want to go to the hospital?' I asked."
A tiny voice echoed through the speakers.
"No..."

Cough.
Cough.
Cough.
"She shook her head, eyes watery but stubborn.
Like she was guarding something important."
"It's okay,' I told her.
'I'll call the doctor home.'"
Immediate protest.
"No doctor!"
More coughing.
Her voice softened.
"I smiled
the fake calm smile adults use when they've already decided."
'No bargaining now, sweetie.'
"The doctor arrived.
Clean shirt.
Neat bag.
Practiced confidence."
A pause.
"He examined her quickly.
Listened to her chest.
Pressed the stethoscope like he was checking a machine."
A faint bitterness crept in.
"He said,
'She'll be fine by morning.'"
Another pause.
"Just make sure she takes these medicines properly."
Paper rustled in the audio.
"I nodded.
Trusted him."
"I ordered everything from the pharmacy.
Every name on that list."
Silence.

“I stayed with her.
She was still coughing, yes...
but smiling.
Still smiling.
That smile didn’t fade.
Not even when her breathing rattled.”
Arya’s jaw tightened.
“The doorbell rang.”
A breath.
“Before opening the cough syrup, she asked me
‘What Sunday gift will I get in the morning?’”
A tiny laugh slipped into Vanshika’s voice.
“I had already decided.
‘A Labubu,’ I said.”
Cough-laugh.
She squinted.
‘What’s that?’
“‘A doll,’ I told her.
‘Scary, but cute.’
‘Just like you.’”
A small laugh.
“She laughed too
through coughs
that kind of laugh that feels borrowed.”
“I opened the cough syrup.”
The tone shifted.
“Thick.
Pink.
Glossy.
Smelled... wrong.”
A pause long enough to feel uncomfortable.
“She wrinkled her nose.
‘I don’t want to drink it.’

She begged.
Soft.
Tired.”
“I insisted.
Adults always insist.”
Arya exhaled slowly.
“I told her
‘If you don’t drink it, I’ll get angry.’
‘No Labubu tomorrow.’”
A quiet shame slipped into the words.
“She sighed.
‘Okay... whatever...’”
“I poured the syrup myself.
Held the spoon steady.
Watched it slide down.”
Silence.
“She swallowed.
Once.
Twice.
Her eyes fluttered.”
“She got sleepy.
I kissed her forehead.
Tucked her in.
I left.”
The audio didn’t end.
It hung.
Morning came with a strange calm
the kind that follows a night of worry, when the mind
convinces itself that daylight will fix what darkness threatened.
“I went first to the Supermall in Jaipur,” her voice continued,
steady but hollow now,
“because promises once spoken to children become
obligations of the highest order.”

She described the shop with unnecessary clarity: bright shelves, artificial cheer, objects designed to imitate innocence. And there, among them, she found it.

“A Labubu,” she said.

“Terrifying. Horrific. And yet somehow adorable. Like a nightmare softened for a child’s hands.”

She bought it without hesitation.

“I rang the doorbell.”

A pause.

“My friend answered. She looked tired but relieved.”

Her voice shifted, mimicking the casual tone of that moment.

“‘She hasn’t woken up yet,’ she said.

‘You know... she was ill.’”

A faint, almost embarrassed smile crept into Vanshika’s words.

“I remember thinking how fortunate.

What better way to surprise a child than to appear in her room like a secret?”

“I walked down the corridor quietly.

Held the toy behind my back like contraband joy.”

She inhaled.

“The room was dim. Curtains drawn.

She lay straight on the bed too straight.”

Arya’s fingers tightened unconsciously.

“Eyes closed.

Mouth slightly open.”

A pause, heavier now.

“I jumped lightly onto the bed.”

She tried to laugh then failed.

“‘Hello, Pookuu,’ I said.

‘How’s Priyananda doing?’”

Silence.

“She didn’t stir.”

“I touched her nose the way I always did to annoy her.”
Nothing.
“I kissed her cheek.
Leaned close to her ear.”
Her voice softened painfully.
“‘Good morning, Priyu,’ I whispered.
‘I hate you.’”
Another pause.
“I squeezed her cheeks gently, just to make that little pout she
always hated.”
“And then...”
Her breath caught.
“Her mouth released a thin, bubbly liquid.
Pink.
Light.
Almost playful.”
Arya stiffened.
“But she didn’t move.”
The words slowed.
“I called her name.”
Nothing.
“I shouted.”
Nothing.
“I screamed until I understood something no human should
ever have to understand.”
Silence stretched unbearably.
“She was not pretending.
She was not asleep.”
Her voice dropped to a whisper.
“She would never wake up to receive her Labubu.”
“She had slept forever.”
Arya exhaled sharply. His hands trembled now, visibly.

He looked at Vansh not at the speaker terrified by the weight of what had been said.

“That little baby...” he murmured.

He did not finish the sentence. He did not need to.

“The post-mortem reports came much later,” Vanshika continued.

“Until then, I couldn’t eat.

Couldn’t drink.

Couldn’t breathe without guilt.”

A pause.

“When they came... everything worsened.”

Her voice hardened.

“The cough syrup.”

Another pause.

“The very one I forced her to take.”

Silence.

“I blackmailed her,” she said plainly.

“I held love hostage.”

A breath.

“I killed her.”

“No.”

Arya tore the headphones off violently. They struck the floor with a hollow crack.

“No no this is wrong,” he said, breath uneven, voice breaking through clenched teeth.

“This is stupid. This is not right.”

He turned to Vansh, eyes burning, almost pleading.

“How did she kill her?” he demanded.

“How is this her fault?”

His eyes were merciless now not with anger, but with desperation.

And Vansh did not answer immediately.

Vansh broke eye contact at last.

Not because he lacked words
but because some truths are better introduced sideways.

He bent down slowly, retrieved the fallen headphones, and dusted them with a care that felt almost ceremonial. When he handed them back to Arya, his voice was low, controlled.

“You’ll have your answers,” he said.

He slid a laptop across the desk and opened it directly in Arya’s line of sight. At the same time, he unplugged the main monitor deliberately removing the larger screen, as if to say: this is not for spectacle; this is for understanding.

Arya placed the headphones back on.

Vanshika’s voice returned
but it was different now.

Less composed.

More human.

There was a tremor beneath the words, the unmistakable fracture of someone recalling something too tender to survive memory intact.

“I was angry,” she said.

“Angry at myself.”

A pause.

“My friend cut all contact with me. Blocked me everywhere. She didn’t scream. She didn’t accuse.”

Her voice tightened.

“She vanished.”

Another pause longer this time.

“For her daughter who was already a ghost.”

Arya’s jaw clenched.

Why are you punishing yourself? he thought, rage building silently.

Why do humans always choose the nearest soul to crucify?

Vanshika continued.

“I became the scapegoat.

But I was not guilty.”

The words were firm now spoken not as defense, but as conclusion.

“So I went to my desk.

And I called the man from the post-mortem.”

A faint, bitter exhale.

“He told me things no mother, no sister, no human should have to piece together after the fact.”

Her tone shifted cooler, sharper almost clinical.

“In December 2023,” she said,

“Indian regulators issued a directive.”

Not an accusation.

Not a confession.

A directive.

“Certain cough syrup combinations chlorpheniramine maleate with phenylephrine were declared unsafe for children under four. The risks were acknowledged. The benefits dismissed.”

She paused deliberately.

“But it was only a warning.”

“Not a ban.”

The word landed like a gavel that refused to strike.

“There was no compulsory recall.

No aggressive removal from shelves.

No accountability.”

Her voice darkened.

“By 2025, bottles were still being manufactured.

Still distributed.

Still sold quietly.”

Arya’s fingers curled.

“Many had no updated warning labels.

Many pharmacies claimed ignorance.

Many health centres stocked them without question.”

A pause.

“And no authority ensured they disappeared.”

She spoke the name next not angrily, not dramatically
but the way a coroner speaks a cause of death.

“Coldrif.”

Another pause.

“The same syrup I held in my hand.”

Silence followed not empty, but dense.

“I did not poison her,” Vanshika said finally.

“I administered what the system allowed.”

Her voice softened again, painfully so.

“I trusted what I was told was legal.

Approved.

Certified.”

A breath.

“And that trust killed her.”

Arya’s breathing slowed not because the rage diminished,
but because it changed shape.

This was not a crime that could be chased down an alley.

There was no man to punch.

No jaw to break.

No blood to spill.

This sin wore paperwork.

It lived in files.

It hid behind signatures, circulars, and non-enforced
directives.

Arya lowered his head.

Not in defeat.

But in realization.

This

this

was how Gluttony survived.

Not by excess of food,

but by excess of profit.
Not by hunger,
but by negligence scaled to millions.
And for the first time, Arya understood:
Some monsters are not fought in the dark.
They are fought in daylight
with evidence.

I received the newspaper the following morning.

It lay on the table like an accusation folded neatly, indifferent to the chaos it carried within its columns. I read it once. Then again. Then a third time, slower, as if the words might soften with repetition.

They did not.

Toxic contamination.

Directly linked to child deaths.

The report named Madhya Pradesh. Then other states. The phrase was casual, almost lazy other states as though geography itself had grown tired of counting bodies.

I turned on the television.

Every channel spoke the same language, though none spoke loudly enough.

“At least twenty-two... possibly twenty-six children...”

“...suspected kidney failure...”

“...after consuming contaminated Coldrif cough syrup...”

The anchor’s voice remained professional. Calm. Sanitised.

Laboratory reports flashed briefly on the screen chemical names scrolling past too quickly for the grieving to understand, but slow enough for the guilty to deny.

Dangerous substances.

Unacceptable compounds.

A chain of negligence long enough to strangle an entire system.

I felt something shift inside me then.

Not grief.

Ambition.

Anger sharpened into direction.

I went to the head office.

Not as a criminal.

Not as a vigilante.

But as a citizen foolish enough to believe that truth, when spoken calmly, would still be allowed inside glass buildings.

The building was magnificent steel and stone, security guards at every entrance, air-conditioned corridors cooled by money that did not smell of blood.

This was where you, Pooja Verma, sat.

At the very chair purchased by the taxes of parents who would now never hear their children cough again.

I carried reports with me.

Post-mortem summaries.

Chemical analyses.

Hospital records that spoke more honestly than people ever do.

Hundreds of innocents numbers buried under words like procedural lapse and administrative delay.

And yet, when I asked for you

I was delayed.

Not for minutes.

Not for hours.

For days.

Each visit came with a new excuse.

“She is in a meeting.”

“She is unavailable.”

“Please submit an application.”

Children had died faster than your calendar could move.

When I finally got the opportunity, it was not because you allowed it.

It was because I stopped asking.

I slipped past reception the way truths always do quietly, uninvited, unwanted. I waited outside your office, listening to the hum of bureaucracy through polished doors.

When I entered, you did not look surprised.

You looked irritated.

As if I were a delay.

As if I were the inconvenience.

You did not deny the reports.

You did not question the deaths.

You spoke instead of procedures.

Of committees.

Of shared responsibility.

You spoke as though guilt could be diluted by repetition.

And when I said the word children

You looked away.

Not in shame.

But in boredom.

That was when I understood.

You were not cruel.

You were worse.

You were full.

Full of position.

Full of protection.

Full of excuses layered so thick they insulated you from consequence.

Gluttony does not always eat with its mouth.

Sometimes it consumes accountability.

And leaves nothing for the dead.

“Doctor Verma,” Vanshika said, her voice calm enough to pass for courtesy, “before we begin may I record this conversation?”

There was a pause.

Arya could almost see Pooja Verma lean back in her chair. The faint rustle of fabric, the creak of leather. A woman accustomed to authority adjusting herself into comfort.

"You may," Pooja replied. "I have nothing to hide."

Vanshika did not respond immediately.

She let the silence stretch just long enough to make the confidence itch.

"I lost a child," Vanshika said softly.

Not my child.

Not someone I loved.

Just

"A child."

Pooja exhaled, rehearsed empathy sliding into place.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said. "But I must clarify I am not responsible for individual medical outcomes. These matters are "

"systemic," Vanshika finished for her.

"Yes. I know the word."

There was a faint click. Perhaps a pen. Perhaps a nail against glass.

"Let me ask you something, Doctor," Vanshika continued.

"How many children does it take before a warning becomes a ban?"

Silence.

Arya's jaw tightened.

"We issued an advisory," Pooja said at last. "In December 2023. The data at that time suggested "

"suggested risk," Vanshika interrupted.

"Not uncertainty. Risk."

Her voice hardened not louder, just sharper.

"You knew chlorpheniramine and phenylephrine combinations were unsafe for children under four. You knew kidneys could not process them. You knew syrups like Coldrif were still being sold without revised labels."

Another pause.

"That is not entirely accurate," Pooja replied. "Regulatory enforcement involves state authorities, manufacturers, distributors "

"So when my friend's daughter died," Vanshika said quietly, "whose responsibility was it?"

Arya's breath hitched.

He felt as though the basement walls were inching closer.

Pooja cleared her throat.

"I understand your emotions," she said, slipping into official tone. "But medicine is not black and white. There are margins of "

"My hands poured the syrup," Vanshika said.

The sentence landed like a dropped plate.

"I held the bottle you approved. I followed the dosage printed under your certification. I watched her swallow it."

Her voice wavered for the first time.

"And she never woke up."

The silence this time was different.

Heavier.

Uncomfortable.

"That is... unfortunate," Pooja said.

Unfortunate.

Arya's fingers curled into his palms.

Vanshika inhaled slowly. When she spoke again, her voice had lost something.

Warmth.

"Doctor Verma," she said, "how many files cross your desk in a day?"

"Hundreds," Pooja answered briskly. "Which is precisely why emotional "

"And how many do you read fully?"

A beat.

“We rely on expert committees.”

“And when those committees delay?” Vanshika pressed.

“When manufacturers lobby?”

“When distributors keep selling what should have been pulled?”

Pooja’s patience thinned.

“You must understand,” she said, “that halting a drug nationwide has economic consequences.”

That was the sentence.

Arya felt it before he understood it.

“Economic,” Vanshika repeated.

She laughed once.

A sound without humour.

“So a child’s kidney is negotiable,” she said. “But a company’s quarterly report is sacred.”

“That is not what I said,” Pooja snapped.

“It is exactly what you said,” Vanshika replied.

“You just used better words.”

There was movement perhaps Pooja standing now.

“You are being unreasonable,” Pooja said. “If you wish to file a complaint, submit it through proper channels.”

“I did,” Vanshika replied.

Her voice was calm again.

“You delayed it.”

“Due process takes time.”

“Children don’t have time,” Vanshika said.

Another pause.

Then Pooja spoke, and for the first time, her voice carried irritation rather than authority.

“You think I enjoy this?” she said. “You think I want deaths on my conscience? Do you know how many decisions I make under pressure? How many lives depend on supply chains?”

Vanshika leaned forward.

"I know exactly how many," she said.

A soft tap.

"Twenty-two confirmed. Possibly twenty-six. More pending toxicology."

Arya's throat closed.

"You signed off on renewals without audits," Vanshika continued.

"You allowed production to continue after advisories."

"You trusted manufacturers who have failed before."

Pooja's voice dropped.

"You are crossing a line."

"No," Vanshika said.

"I am standing on it."

A chair scraped.

"You want a villain," Pooja said sharply. "You want someone to punish so you can sleep better. But this is bigger than me."

Vanshika did not deny it.

"That's why I'm here," she said.

A faint click another document placed on the table.

"These are internal memos," Vanshika continued. "Delays approved by your office. Complaints archived. Field reports ignored."

Arya stared at the floor.

He felt cold.

"You leaked classified material?" Pooja asked, alarm creeping into her voice.

"I listened," Vanshika replied.

"You didn't."

The room on the recording felt suddenly airless.

"This conversation is over," Pooja said.

"No," Vanshika replied.

"It isn't."

There was a pause long, deliberate.

Then Vanshika spoke the final line of the recording.
Not loud.
Not angry.
Just final.
“You didn’t kill that child alone,” she said.
“But you made sure no one stopped it.”
Silence.
The recording ended.
Arya did not move.
The headphones slid slightly off his ears, but he did not notice.
His breathing was shallow. Uneven.
A sin you can’t punch.
A face you can’t break.
A system that eats children quietly and calls it policy.
Vansh stood behind him, watching not interrupting.
After a long while, Arya whispered:
“So... what do you do,” he asked, “when justice doesn’t bleed?”
Vansh did not answer immediately.
The basement hummed softly machines alive, waiting.
Finally, he said:
“That,” he replied, “is why this chapter isn’t over yet.”
And somewhere, far above them,
pharmacies still sold pink syrup to desperate parents
who trusted a label more than their instincts.

Chapter 26 Gluttony Act 2

The scream tore out of Arya like an animal dragged from its cage.

“Aaahhh !”

His fist came down hard upon the laptop. Once. Twice. The third strike shattered the screen entirely. Glass burst outward like frozen rain, scattering across the desk and floor. The device sagged into silence, its final glow dying as if relieved.

Then he laughed.

Not the kind that carried humour. Not even the kind born of madness. This laughter was hollow, broken at its edges, as though it scraped his throat on the way out. It came in uneven bursts, stopping suddenly, restarting again each one more unsettling than the last.

The recordings were over.

Vansh did not flinch. He had expected this. That was precisely why the primary system had been dismantled earlier, the core drives removed and sealed away.

“I knew,” Vansh said quietly, his voice steady against the chaos. “That’s why I disconnected the main computer.”

Arya stood with his back to him, shoulders heaving. From behind, the change in him was unmistakable. Rage radiated outward not explosive anymore, but dense. Heavy. Like a storm that had learned patience.

He struck the table once more not in fury, but in finality.

“How,” Arya asked, his voice low now, controlled, dangerous, “are we going to avenge this?”

Silence fell not the awkward kind, but the deliberate pause of someone choosing the exact weight of words.

Vansh leaned back slightly, folding his arms. His eyes did not leave Arya.

“First,” he said, “we need to understand what gluttony actually is here.”

Arya turned slowly.

“This isn’t about overeating,” Vansh continued. “Not about indulgence in flesh or appetite. This is institutional consumption.”

He stepped closer, each word measured.

“Consuming profit at the cost of children’s lives.

Consuming time delaying files, postponing committees, stalling signatures while people die quietly in hospital wards.

Consuming responsibility by passing blame from desk to desk until guilt dissolves into paperwork.

Consuming innocence without ever touching blood.”

Arya’s jaw tightened.

“And Pooja Verma?” Arya asked.

Vansh exhaled slowly.

“She’s not a monster,” he said. “That’s the most terrifying part.”

Arya’s eyes narrowed.

“She’s an ordinary servant of the system. Efficient. Educated. Replaceable.”

Vansh turned away briefly, toward the wall of monitors dark now, reflecting only shadows.

“If she disappears tomorrow,” he continued, “another name will occupy her chair. And after that, another. And another.”

The words settled heavily between them.

“That’s why Vanshika couldn’t end it,” Vansh said at last, his voice dropping. “She understood something you’re just beginning to.”

Arya said nothing.

“She didn’t kill for endings,” Vansh went on. “She killed by exposing continuities. She understood that this system doesn’t feed on villains it feeds on compliance.”

He looked back at Arya.

"Gluttony isn't the act of harm," Vansh said. "It's the permission to let harm continue."

Arya clenched his fists.

"So what do we do?" he asked. "You said punching won't work."

Vansh nodded.

"You can't beat gluttony into submission," he said. "You starve it."

Arya's eyes lifted.

"We collect everything," Vansh continued calmly. "Every delayed memo. Every ignored warning. Every safety advisory that was 'acknowledged' but never enforced. We trace signatures, timestamps, funding routes. We prove not that she killed but that she allowed killing to remain profitable."

A pause.

"And then?" Arya asked.

Vansh met his gaze.

"Then," he said, "you don't confront her as a man."

Arya felt something shift inside him.

"You confront her as consequence."

The room fell quiet again but this time, it was not empty.

It was deliberate.

Outside, the city continued breathing hospitals admitting patients, pharmacies selling bottles, systems functioning as designed.

And somewhere above them, on a balcony washed in artificial light, a woman who believed she was untouchable would soon learn the difference between authority and judgment.

"So," Arya said at last, his voice stripped of heat, sharpened into something colder, "we cannot avenge her by punching her."

The words did not tremble. They settled.

"If she dies tomorrow," he continued, "the world will mourn her. They will call her efficient. Dedicated. A martyr crushed by fate. Just like all the others she let die quietly, without headlines."

Vansh did not interrupt.

"But you," Arya said, turning slowly, "you don't look defeated."

Vansh met his gaze. There was no triumph in his eyes only calculation.

He placed the camera into Arya's hands.

"I have," Vansh said softly, "just the right plan."

Night had settled like a deliberate choice.

Pooja Verma entered her apartment with the exhaustion of a woman who believed the world rested on her shoulders and had long ago stopped questioning what it crushed beneath her feet.

Her phone was pressed to her ear. Her voice softened as she spoke to her children abroad studying, thriving, far removed from the hospitals that bore the cost of her decisions.

"Yes, beta... eat properly... no, I'm fine... just tired."

She smiled.

A lone woman, they would say. A responsible mother. A public servant.

She stepped onto the balcony.

Across the gap, half-swallowed by shadows and skeletal concrete, stood another structure unfinished, forgotten, perfectly invisible.

There, wrapped in black, face hidden beneath layers of fabric, eyes glowing faintly red beneath the lens, Arya watched her through binoculars.

The city lay between them like an accomplice.

"The guard's inattentive," Arya murmured into the mic. "Routine fatigue. Predictable."

"Copy," Vansh replied, his voice calm in Arya's ear. "Patience over precision. This isn't a raid it's a vigil."

Arya lowered the binoculars slightly.

"There has to be a key. Or a code," Vansh continued. "But not tonight."

Arya almost smiled.

"She's finished dinner," he said. "Watching some absurd Indian serial. The kind where justice arrives in background music."

A pause.

"She'll sleep soon," Arya added. "Hard-working woman, after all."

The irony did not need emphasis.

"This will take time," Arya said quietly. "Tell me what happened at the office last night? How did you even get inside?"

A faint breath of amusement crossed Vansh's tone.

"You want to know?"

"Yes."

"You remember the woman from the party," Vansh said. "Naina Kapoor."

Arya's brow furrowed.

"She knew Pooja. Social proximity. Casual trust. I didn't force entry I was invited."

A silence followed.

"Our old man confirmed stage-one cancer," Vansh added calmly.

Arya stiffened.

"My old man?" he asked.

"Nothing dramatic," Vansh replied. "Just believable. Truth-adjacent. Systems don't question grief they process it."

Arya exhaled slowly.

"That's... dark," he said.

"That's honest," Vansh replied.

Another pause.

“How did you know,” Arya asked, “that Naina knew Pooja Verma?”

Vansh did not answer immediately.

“You’ll get your answers,” he said at last. “When you understand this: gluttony isn’t greedy because it wants more.”

Arya listened.

“It’s greedy because it refuses to stop.”

“She’s heading to bed,” Arya whispered, lifting the binoculars again.

Across the balcony, Pooja Verma closed the glass door. The lights dimmed. The city swallowed her silhouette.

“She thinks the night forgives,” Arya said.

Vansh’s voice returned, steady, precise.

“No,” he said. “The night remembers.”

And somewhere between concrete shadows and glowing windows, the plan did not move forward

It waited.

Vansh’s voice returned lower now, steadier, as though recounting something already sealed in memory.

“Well...” he said, “I didn’t enter as an intruder.”

Arya listened.

“I entered as a grieving nephew.”

The night air seemed to still.

“My glasses,” Vansh continued, “are not what they appear to be. I wear them for a reason. They remember what rooms try to forget.”

Arya did not ask more. He had learned that Vansh never lied he merely chose how much truth survived the sentence.

“I sat,” Vansh said. “She welcomed me kindly. Offered concern the way officials do professionally, efficiently.”

Vansh’s voice shifted, mimicking the cadence perfectly.

‘Oh, you must be Vansh Raj. Naina mentioned you. Tell me how can I help your uncle?’

A pause.

"I begged," Vansh admitted. "Not because I needed to but because systems only open when fed the correct emotion."

Arya clenched his jaw.

'Please... just do anything,' Vansh had said that day. 'Save him.'

And she had smiled.

'Relax,' she said. 'I'm the head of the department. Responsibility rests with me.'

Vansh's internal voice cut sharper than his spoken one.

Then why couldn't you say this to Vanshika?

Why did responsibility vanish when it arrived uninvited?

"Yes," Vansh murmured now, back in the present. "You are responsible for everything."

Arya felt the weight of that sentence.

"She offered tea. Coffee," Vansh continued. "Gestures of comfort."

"What did you ask for?" Arya said quietly.

"Orange juice," Vansh replied.

A small, bitter smile passed through the darkness.

"I observed the room," Vansh said. "Not with curiosity with purpose. Offices always have one door they trust more than the others. One place meant to remain untouched. A room for what cannot be explained publicly."

Arya understood immediately.

"Complaints," he said. "Suppressed files."

"Exactly," Vansh replied. "Not erased. Just... postponed indefinitely."

The city hummed below them.

"Our country doesn't destroy truth," Vansh said. "It exhausts it. Thousands of regions. Millions of delays. One death becomes noise."

"And she," Arya said, "fed on that."

"She survived on it," Vansh corrected.
Silence returned thick, deliberate.
"And now?" Arya asked.
Vansh exhaled.
"Now," he said, "we stop pretending this is about force."
Arya's eyes lifted back to the distant apartment.
The lights were out.
"She's asleep," Arya said.
"Yes," Vansh replied. "Which is exactly why we move."
Arya turned.
"Does this really work?" he asked. "We're no dexter."
Vansh allowed himself a rare, quiet breath of amusement.
"We're worse," he said. "We're witnesses."
Arya stiffened.
Vansh continued, softer now.
"And systems fear witnesses more than violence."
A pause.
"Get ready," Vansh said.
Arya did not move yet.
He watched the dark balcony once more.
"Tonight," Arya said, "she won't be punished."
"No," Vansh agreed. "Tonight she will be remembered."
And somewhere between sleep and accountability, gluttony prepared to face a hunger it could not consume.
Arya moved as though the night itself had lent him its limbs.
The road lay quiet, indifferent, unaware of the weight of intention pressing upon it. His boots made no sound, yet every step carried a violence that had learned restraint the hard way. Power hummed beneath his skin not the crude kind that demands release, but the controlled kind that waits.
The guard sat slouched near the gate, half-awake, half-forgotten by the system he served. A man paid to be present, not alert. Arya passed him by the narrow gully, keeping to the

shadows cast by parked cars steel carcasses lined like obedient witnesses.

Then the dog barked.

Sharp. Sudden. Accusatory.

Vansh froze.

Arya's breath slowed.

The barking multiplied, echoing off concrete walls, dragging attention out of sleep. The guard stirred, irritation replacing lethargy. Vansh slipped behind a car, instinct overtaking thought.

And then

The car screamed.

The alarm shattered the night, a mechanical wail protesting a touch it had not consented to. Lights blinked. Windows flickered alive. The guard lunged forward, shouting at the dogs, cursing the city, the night, his fate.

"Go! Get lost!" he barked, waving his baton.

The alarm died suddenly, as if embarrassed by its own hysteria.

Silence returned but it was no longer innocent.

The guard paused.

He stared.

A shadow lingered ahead. Too still. Too deliberate.

"Who's there?" he demanded, stepping closer. His voice tried to sound authoritative; it failed.

Nothing answered.

A moment passed.

Then another.

"Just my delusion," he muttered, exhaling defeat.

That was when Arya moved.

Not with rage. Not with panic. With precision.

The guard never cried out. His body folded, as though relieved to stop pretending. Arya caught him before he struck the ground, lowering him gently almost respectfully.

From the earpiece came Vansh's voice, sharp and contained.
"What did you do?"

A pause.

"That wasn't for him."

"Well," Arya whispered back, irritation edged with logic,
"what was I supposed to do? Shake his hand? Get arrested?"

Silence crackled between them.

"I thought one would be enough," Vansh finally said. "This was meant to be clean. Surgical."

Arya dragged the guard into the security room, laying him down where monitors blinked uselessly eyes blinded long before tonight.

"I'll manage," Arya replied quietly. "I always do."

The door closed.

The building loomed ahead now.

Above, in a lit window soon to darken completely, Pooja Verma slept.

A woman who would never hear the screams her decisions had muted.

A woman who believed exhaustion was the same thing as innocence.

Vansh's voice returned, calmer now. Colder.

"Remember, Arya this isn't about hurting her."

Arya adjusted his gloves, his gaze lifting toward the balcony.

"I know," he said.

"It's about starving the beast."

And for the first time that night, the city seemed to listen.

Like a thought slipping past conscience, Arya breached the door.

No sound. No resistance. Only intention.

Inside, the house breathed differently warmer, heavier. A lived-in silence. He moved room to room with the patience of someone who had learned that haste was the loudest sin.

Furniture spoke of routine, not wealth. Framed photographs smiled with curated honesty. The kind that convinces the world a person is good.

"There's a clinic here," Arya whispered into the mic.

A pause.

"Inside the house."

"That's... perfect," Vansh replied, hope betraying his restraint. "Get the old man."

Another pause, longer this time.

"You sure?" Vansh asked carefully. "You really want to involve him?"

"Just do it," Arya said. Not angry. Certain.

The line clicked. Ringing.

Nothing.

Again.

Still nothing.

Vansh's breath caught. A realization arrived late but loud.

"Oh no," he murmured. "Because of the dose... he's still asleep."

Arya stopped moving.

"What?" he asked quietly.

A beat.

"Then get him here. We don't trust a machine for this. Go."

The connection shifted. Vansh pulled out the other earpiece, the one bound only to Arya, and bolted up the stairs.

"Where are you, old man?" Vansh hissed, urgency sharpening his voice.

That was when Arya heard it.

A soft sound.

Bare feet.

A shuffle.

"She's awake," Arya whispered. "She's moving."

“What?” Vansh snapped, panic cracking through discipline.
“Wasn’t she asleep?”

“Apparently not,” Arya said, already retreating into shadow.
“Kitchen.”

From behind the partition, Arya watched Pooja Verma step into the dim light. Sleep clung to her posture. She moved like someone who believed the world owed her peace. She opened the refrigerator, eyes half-closed, unaware that judgment stood ten feet away.

“You stay hidden,” Vansh ordered. “I’ll handle this.”

Upstairs, Vansh reached the room. The old man lay motionless, too still for comfort.

“Wake up,” Vansh whispered. Then louder. “Wake up.”

Nothing.

Panic abandoned subtlety.

He grabbed a bottle, rushed back, water sloshing against plastic. It splashed across the old man’s face once, twice then all at once.

Downstairs, the bottle slipped from Pooja Verma’s hand.

It clattered against tile.

She blinked.

Arya’s muscles tightened. His fingers hovered, not ready to strike ready to decide.

Upstairs

The old man gasped.

A violent inhale. A cough. Breath returned like a debt repaid unwillingly. His eyes flew open, wild, disoriented.

“Oh easy,” Vansh said quickly, gripping his shoulders. “Don’t panic.”

“Why what ” the old man stammered, drowning in confusion.

Vansh leaned in, voice low now. Controlled.

“I need your help.”

Downstairs, Pooja Verma stood still, water spreading across the floor at her feet. She stared into the dark hallway, listening.

Arya watched her reflection in the glass.

A woman who believed she was safe.

A woman who had never truly been cornered.

And somewhere between two floors, between breath and consequence, the night waited to see who would speak first.

The basement swallowed them whole.

Concrete walls. A colder air. The kind of place meant for storage, not confession. Vansh's footsteps echoed once, then learned restraint. The old man followed slowly, every step heavier than the last not from age, but from memory. He had avoided this space since the renovation, avoided the truth it quietly preserved. Tonight, avoidance had expired.

Vansh pressed the mic again.

"Arya?"

Silence.

Upstairs, Arya watched her.

Pooja Verma stood near the bedroom door now, glass in hand, water trembling slightly as she drank. She drank like someone who trusted what flowed into her body like someone who had never imagined poison could be administrative. Arya's jaw tightened. His eyes burned not with hatred alone, but with a recognition that felt personal.

You allowed this, his mind whispered.

And I paid the price.

He didn't move.

He couldn't afford to.

In the basement, the old man finally crossed the threshold. His eyes adjusted slowly, scanning cabinets, instruments, sealed drawers. He had heard the recordings before muffled through walls, half-believed. Back then, denial had been easier than participation.

“Yeah... he’s here,” Vansh said quietly into the mic. “Tell him.”

Arya lowered his voice, forcing it steady.

“Can you hear me?”

A pause. Then

“Yes... yes,” the old man replied. His voice cracked not from fear, but from something closer to shame.

Arya slipped into the clinic room, the light barely kissing his shoulders. Shelves lined the walls orderly, sterile, indifferent. Tools designed to heal, waiting silently to be misused or redeemed.

“I’m in her clinic,” Arya said. “And because I can’t punch a system in the face... I need your help.”

The old man’s breath hitched.

“Inject something,” Arya continued, not looking at anything in particular now. “Just enough that she fades. Sleeps. Nothing permanent.”

The words hung in the air like a verdict.

“Oh... no,” the old man whispered. He looked at Vansh instinctively as if seeking permission to refuse.

Vansh didn’t speak.

But his eyes did.

They didn’t plead.

They didn’t command.

They confessed.

We’re already dirty, they said.

Help us finish knowing why.

The old man closed his eyes.

All his life, he had believed neutrality was morality. That staying away kept his hands clean. But standing in that basement, he finally understood: cleanliness was a luxury paid for by other people’s blood.

“Are you listening?” Arya asked again, softer now. Less demand. More desperation.

“I... I need time,” the old man said, voice trembling. “To think.”

Arya stopped searching.

The room felt smaller suddenly.

“It has to be something,” the old man continued slowly, thinking aloud, not to solve a problem but to face it. “Something that doesn’t punish the body... only pauses it.”

Upstairs, a door creaked.

Pooja Verma turned off the light.

Darkness swallowed the hallway.

Arya froze.

In the basement, Vansh and the old man exchanged a look one that carried decades of medicine, guilt, compromise, and delayed courage.

The old man finally spoke.

“Listen to me carefully now,” he said, his voice low, deliberate no longer that of a patient, but of a man who understood consequences. “Find exactly what I tell you to find. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

Arya straightened.

“I’m ready,” he said, quietly.

The old man continued, each word weighed before release.

“Somnex-47.”

Arya’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the shelves.

“A restricted clinical sedative,” the old man said, “once designed for extreme trauma patients. It does not attack the body it overwhelms it. Heaviness. Blurred awareness. Sleep that arrives like gravity, not mercy.”

A pause.

“Calmora Black.”

Arya’s hand hovered before moving again.

“An abandoned pharmaceutical prototype,” the voice went on, now tinged with unease. “Buried after ethical violations. It suppresses panic, slows the will, dulls emotion. The mind does not fight. It simply... lets go.”

Another silence longer this time.

“And finally Nerovale.”

Arya exhaled slowly.

“A synthetic neural suppressant,” the old man said. “Used only in sealed facilities. Muscles loosen. Breathing shallows. Consciousness dims not extinguished, merely pushed to the edge.”

Arya listened without interruption.

“Each one,” the old man continued, “must remain in sub-therapeutic presence. Non-lethal. Clinical trace levels only. Below fatal thresholds. Within reversible sedation limits.”

His voice hardened.

“The combination is not meant to kill. Every compound must sit just beneath irreversible harm enough to silence the body, not stop it.”

The line went quiet.

Arya worked.

Not hurried.

Not uncertain.

Time passed thirty minutes that felt like an hour, an hour that felt like judgment. His movements were precise, restrained, almost surgical. This was not rage at work. This was control.

Focus carved his face into something unreadable.

When he was done, he lifted the syringe slightly, watching the faint glimmer inside.

A final, measured press.

Just enough.

Arya looked up.

“It’s ready.”

Now he was not afraid of anything anymore.

Fear had exhausted itself. What remained was motion driven by resolve. His military boots struck the floor with purpose, each step sounding less like haste and more like a verdict being carried out. Ambition moved him forward, not impulse.

The bedroom door burst open under the force of his kick.

“Who’s there ?” the doctor cried, her voice breaking as the room flooded with sudden terror.

Somewhere far away, Vansh winced. He could have done this quietly, he thought. Silently.

But rage, once awakened, does not obey strategy.

To her eyes, he was no man.

A shape filled the doorway covered, thickly built, unnaturally still for something so large. The faint red glow where eyes should have been made him seem less human and more summoned. A nightmare stepping forward.

She turned to run.

He reached her with alarming ease. One hand steadied her head not gently, not cruelly, but with certainty while the other arrested her escape by the roots of her hair. The moment froze, stretched thin as breath before impact.

Then the sting at her neck.

Her scream rose

and vanished beneath his palm.

She struggled, limbs flailing in instinct, but the force holding her was immovable. Panic clawed at her body, yet found no leverage. It all happened too fast faster than thought.

Not like a bullet, which ends before pain can arrive.

This lingered.

Seconds passed.

Too many.

She had not collapsed.

Inside the feed, Vansh’s voice cracked with disbelief.

“What’s happening? Why isn’t she unconscious yet?”

“It takes time,” the old man answered, unease thick in his tone. “Minutes sometimes ”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?” Vansh snapped.

There was no answer.

In Arya’s grip, her strength began to drain, her resistance loosening as consciousness wavered. Her body sagged, caught between waking and surrender.

Arya felt it and his anger ignited.

“Get him out. Get him out,” he snarled into the microphone, voice low and feral.

Vansh froze, confused. “What? Arya what are you ”

Then the vigilante screamed not outwardly, but inwardly, where restraint finally shattered.

“There

is

no

time

for

this.”

The words landed like a final judgment.

The knife gleamed under the dim light, a thin streak of inevitability. Vansh and the old man could only watch, their breaths caught somewhere between fear and disbelief. The doctor’s eyes were wide, pupils dilated with terror, a silent scream trapped in her throat as Arya advanced.

He moved with a precision that belied rage, the red glow of his eyes reflecting a certainty that chilled the room. One moment he was just a shadow, the next he was upon her, grasping her hand.

A scream tore from her chest as he began. Pain, sharp and raw, cut through the night, but Arya’s focus never wavered. The thumb resisted, then yielded, as the finality of the act unfolded.

Blood welled, and with it her consciousness began to drift, a fluttering candle almost snuffed out.

Arya stepped back, examining what he had taken not triumphantly, but as one who had simply removed an obstacle. He tested the finger in his hand, imagining the evidence it would unlock, the truths it would reveal.

"I thought... it wouldn't work," he murmured to himself, almost to dispel a shadow of doubt. Yet in that thought lingered no guilt. Only clarity. Only purpose. And in the echoes of the room, the weight of justice, cold and uncompromising, pressed down.

"Arya..." The old man's voice broke through the heavy silence, trembling. "Didn't I tell you to get him out?"

"I told you there's no time for this!" Arya snapped, voice sharp, eyes never leaving the evidence in his hand. The sound cut through the basement like glass.

Vansh exhaled slowly, his body rigid. The old man shook, grief and horror warring in his expression. They had witnessed what few could an act that danced along the edge of morality. And yet, there was no guilt in Arya. None. Only the cold satisfaction of a step taken, a wrong confronted.

He raised the microphone, his voice calm, deliberate, echoing into the silent room. "It's time... for the next one."

The air itself seemed to hold its breath.

Chapter 27: Gluttony Act 3

“So... this is it,” the old man said at last.

His voice did not tremble but it lacked conviction, as though each word had been forced through a conscience unwilling to release it. He had seen many things in his lifetime: war injuries dressed under fire, men crying for their mothers as the world collapsed around them, promises broken in the name of survival. Yet what he had just witnessed refused to settle into any category he knew.

Not war.

Not medicine.

Not justice.

Something else.

He closed his eyes briefly not in denial, but in recognition.

“That wasn’t Arya,” he continued, quieter now, almost to himself. “That was someone who has crossed the line where names stop mattering.” A pause. Then, with a weight that felt final: “That was a vigilante.”

Vansh did not interrupt. He rarely did when truth began to speak on its own.

Arya stood unmoving, his back to the room, shoulders squared as if bracing against a wind only he could feel. He did not turn. He did not defend himself. He listened because some part of him already knew what was coming.

The old man leaned closer to the microphone, the soft static crackling like a pulse between them.

“So tell me,” he said, “when did the story change?”

Silence answered him.

“You told me this was about the country. About society. About systems rotting from the inside,” he went on. “You spoke

of responsibility, of innocent lives, of duty. And I believed you because I wanted to.”

His voice hardened.

“But that was never the truth, was it?”

Arya’s jaw tightened not in anger, but in restraint.

“This,” the old man said, now unmistakably firm, “is about one thing only.”

He let the word fall slowly, deliberately, as though naming it might summon consequences neither of them could escape.

“Vengeance.”

Vansh finally looked at Arya not accusingly, not defensively, but with the quiet curiosity of a man watching a hypothesis confirm itself. He had planned operations. He had calculated risks. But this this was something he could never fully program.

The old man turned away.

Not abruptly. Not in panic.

But with the deliberate finality of someone who knew that if he stayed one moment longer, something inside him would fracture beyond repair.

“I’ve seen enough,” he said though no one had asked him to stay.

His footsteps retreated down the corridor, slower than before, each step burdened by the knowledge that some doors, once opened, do not close again. He did not look back. He could not afford to.

Arya did.

But only for a moment.

Then the work resumed.

There was no triumph in him no thrill, no excess. What remained was calculation. Cold, precise, relentless. He moved through the apartment like a man correcting errors in an equation, revisiting each variable, anticipating every response the system might attempt in self-defense.

What would she do when she woke?

Who would she call first?

Hospital? Police? Lawyers? Ministry?

He accounted for them all.

Escape routes. Alibis. Delays. Medical explanations. Institutional fog. The system's favorite weapon was not force it was time. Arya knew this now. And so he denied it.

When there was nothing left to correct, nothing left to secure, he turned toward the stairwell.

Halfway down, he stopped.

The silence pressed in around him.

"So what now?" he asked, voice low, controlled. "Hospital? Or back to base?"

Vansh did not answer immediately.

He was already working.

Multiple screens glowed before him maps, transit overlays, institutional directories. His fingers moved with mechanical certainty, but his eyes betrayed something deeper: strategy wrestling with consequence.

"The department she oversees is linked to a tertiary hospital," he muttered, more to himself than to Arya. "Shared archives. Shared servers. But physical files..." He paused. "Those will take time."

He ran the distance simulation again.

"One hour thirty minutes by road," Vansh continued. "At a hundred kilometers per hour, you reach before dawn but retrieving everything? That's another problem."

He leaned back, eyes narrowing.

"Second option," he said quietly.

Arya waited.

"If you come back now," Vansh went on, "before she regains full consciousness before the bodyguard does I can move in her

office network from here. Sneak in digitally. Mirror everything. Pull records before alarms trip.”

A beat.

“That’s cleaner.”

Arya considered it.

Then, slowly, a smile appeared not wide, not cruel, but unmistakably certain.

“Understood.”

“Come back,” Vansh said. “I’ll substitute from here.”

Arya resumed his descent.

At the bottom of the stairs, he adjusted his grip his right hand clenched around the severed thumb, wrapped now, contained, reduced to evidence. To a key.

The system demanded keys.

He was learning how to take them.

As he stepped out into the night, the city remained unaware traffic lights blinking faithfully, stray dogs circling trash heaps, apartment windows glowing with borrowed comfort.

Early morning, around eight.

The city had begun to pretend it was ordinary again.

Vansh stood before the mirror, adjusting the fall of his black suit with meticulous care. The fabric sat well on his shoulders sharp, deliberate, chosen with intent rather than vanity. He tilted his head slightly, inspecting the symmetry, the calm authority the reflection suggested.

“Am I looking good?” he asked, almost casually.

“Doesn’t matter,” Arya replied at once, without lifting his eyes.

Vansh smiled faintly. “Why not? Isn’t my face pretty?”

Again, the answer came without hesitation. “Doesn’t matter. At least not to me.”

Vansh turned, curiosity edging into his expression. “Why?”

Arya finally spoke in full, his voice level, stripped of emotion yet heavy with certainty.

"Because it doesn't matter," he said. "None of it. Your face, your beauty, your polish. It's all temporary skin stretched over time, waiting to wrinkle, waiting to decay. We dress well to please others. To attract them. To receive their approval. And then we lie to ourselves, saying we do it for us."

He paused, fingers tightening briefly.

"That lie has a name," he continued. "Self-deception."

Vansh listened without interrupting.

"I was born ugly," Arya went on, not bitter merely factual. "And that's how I know. When you have nothing to sell, you learn the truth early. I'm glad I'm not part of that foolishness. And I never will be."

For a moment, the room felt smaller.

Vansh let out a quiet breath and gave a short, almost amused chuckle not mocking, not dismissive, but grounding.

"We're drifting," he said gently. "Stay focused. Today matters."

"I am focused," Arya replied.

He lifted his gaze not to Vansh, but to the object in his hand. The thumb.

Sealed carefully inside a transparent plastic sachet, it rested there like a grotesque token, mute yet accusing. Arya examined it with the same cold attention one might give to a weapon or a document something that existed not as flesh anymore, but as purpose.

He handed it to Vansh.

Vansh took it without comment.

In that moment, Arya looked less like a man driven by rage and more like someone hollowed out by grief sad beyond repair, animated only by the need to correct what the world had allowed to rot.

Not to save it.

Not to heal it.

But to make it answer.

And as Vansh turned toward the door, suit immaculate, evidence concealed, Arya remained behind still, silent, carrying the kind of sorrow that does not weep, only waits.

Arya felt his thoughts splintering, not loudly, not in a dramatic collapse, but in the quiet, corrosive way stone cracks under constant pressure. The pineapple-shaped keychain swayed gently beside the laptop absurd, almost childish and yet it struck him with a cruelty sharper than any blade. His sister's face surfaced uninvited, persistent, unerasable. I should have killed her, the thought came, clean and unapologetic. Why did I listen to fools? Morality, he decided again, was a game designed by the weak to keep the vicious obedient. And vengeance vengeance felt honest. It felt good. He would not stop. Not now. Not ever.

Vansh moved out of the basement with measured steps, his voice calm as he performed the ritual checks.

"Mic check."

"Check," Arya replied instantly.

"Audibles?"

"Check."

The words were procedural, but Arya's breathing was not. It was heavy, uneven, as though something inside him was running faster than the situation demanded.

In the garage, Vansh's eyes found the black Audi at once. The key chimed softly as it unlocked a sound soothing in any other life, but here it carried menace. He slid into the driver's seat and pulled out of the palace grounds without haste. On the monitors, Arya tracked everything: radar, route, time. Calculations flickered across his mind, but beneath them all was a pulse of doubt.

"I have a question," Arya said through the mic.

"Yes?" Vansh replied, turning the wheel smoothly.

“Why didn’t you just hack that room? Like you hack everything else.”

Vansh took a right turn he had already memorized. “Because I didn’t know it,” he said evenly. “And in our line of work, if you don’t know something completely, then you don’t know it at all. It could’ve triggered an alarm. Or worse.” He paused, then added, quieter, “I wasn’t willing to take that risk. Not for you.”

Arya listened deliberately, absorbing every word without agreement or resistance.

“Oh,” he said at last. “Wouldn’t have been a problem for me.”

“That’s exactly why we don’t take risks,” Vansh replied. “What you did last time I wasn’t happy with it. You follow my lead. I don’t want the police. I don’t want intelligence agencies sniffing around us.”

Arya said nothing. There was no guilt on his face only stillness.

“It’s already under investigation,” Vansh continued. “Even denial won’t erase that. We’re becoming visible. The world is going to notice.”

“Fuck the world,” Arya muttered. “What has it ever done for me?”

The words sank deeper than Arya intended. Vansh didn’t answer immediately. His grip tightened on the steering wheel as the city lights slid past the windshield. Vanshika’s voice surfaced again, unbidden, as if carried through the radio static. Her presence lingered in the rear-view mirror, in every shadow behind him. For a brief moment, the road blurred not from speed, but from memory.

At the far end of the signal, a policeman raised his hand an unhurried gesture, practiced, authoritative. The black Audi was singled out with quiet precision. Vansh’s breath caught.

“Oh my God,” he murmured.

Before the car could even roll to a complete halt, another patrol vehicle edged in from the front, boxing him neatly into compliance. There was no urgency in their movements only certainty.

“Why now?” Arya hissed through the airpods. “Of all times.”

Only then did Vansh realize the oversight. The seatbelt lay untouched beside him, useless as hindsight. He parked, stepped out, and was immediately guided away from the car as though proximity itself were suspicious.

“Just do it already,” Arya snapped. “Pay the fine and move.”

“You weren’t wearing a seatbelt,” the chief announced, his eyes roaming over Vansh’s black suit rather than his face. The tone carried no concern only superiority. His ego was visible, almost tangible, like a badge worn beneath the uniform.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Vansh replied, controlled, professional. “I was in a rush. It’s urgent I need to get to the hospital.”

“Oh, we don’t care about that,” the chief said flatly.

Vansh’s jaw tightened. “Well, I do.”

He produced his license, extending it politely. “Here. I’m getting late.”

The chief ignored the card entirely. His gaze drifted instead to the Audi.

“From where’d you get this beast?”

“It belongs to a friend,” Vansh answered.

“A very rich friend,” the chief remarked, lips curling faintly.

He still didn’t look at the license.

“You see,” the chief continued, enjoying his monologue, “we are the police. We take care of the roads. We maintain the system. You can’t just dis-follow the system.”

“The system is broken,” Arya muttered into the airpods.

“Stop,” Vansh whispered under his breath. “Not now.”

But Arya did not stop.

“Look around,” Arya urged, his voice low but relentless. “Just look.”

Vansh’s eyes shifted to the road, to the chaos flowing uninterrupted around them. Cars sped past without seatbelts, without indicators, without restraint. Motorbikes carried three riders at once bare heads slicing through traffic, laughing. Smoke belched from expired engines. Old bikes rattled by with no mirrors, no signals. Tempos lurched under impossible loads, each a moving accident waiting for permission. Buses thundered forward drivers unbelted, passengers packed, some seated, some clinging to rails like wagers against gravity. Trucks groaned under excess weight, indifferent to the lives they shadowed.

“And yet,” Arya continued, “you were stopped.”

“These rules,” Arya said bitterly, “they apply only to the wise. To the unlucky. Fuck this system.”

Vansh had seen this every day. He had lived inside it. But he had never looked not like this. The policeman’s voice blurred into noise, a droning justification for something indefensible. In that moment, Vansh understood something unsettling: he had always been part of it. Obedient. Silent. Useful.

And now betrayed.

“They didn’t pull you aside to talk,” Arya said quietly. “They did it to waste time. To let others pass. To meet targets. The Audi just caught the eye.”

Vansh watched traffic flow freely past the checkpoint, unchecked, unbothered. The realization settled like lead in his chest.

“This system,” Arya finished, “doesn’t protect the poor. It consumes them. Every second. Every day. And the police ” he paused, “ they laugh while it happens.”

The chief was still speaking.

But Vansh was no longer listening.

“Now you know,” Arya said coldly. “What you’ve got to do.”

The chief exhaled theatrically, adjusting his stance as though resuming a lecture.

“This expensive car,” he said, tapping the Audi lightly with his knuckles, “should always be driven with a seatbelt. Right?”

“How much?” Vansh asked.

The words came out steady measured, almost judicial. Not defiant. Not apologetic. The voice of a man acknowledging guilt in a courtroom where verdicts were already sold.

The chief smiled.

He stepped closer, close enough to invade comfort, draping an arm over Vansh’s shoulder like an old friend guiding him away from a crowd. They walked a few paces toward the edge of the road.

“That’s what I like to hear,” the chief murmured.

“Just do it quick. Tell me your bank account.”

Moments later, a soft chime rang from the chief’s phone.

A notification.

The smile widened not of relief, but of satisfaction.

Vansh turned to him, eyes calm, voice confident.

“Isn’t that what you like to hear, chief?”

The money had already arrived.

No receipt. No warning. No law just transaction.

As Vansh returned to the car, the chief didn’t bother looking back. The system had been fed. It was content for now.

Vansh was late.

That thought pressed harder than the accelerator.

Somewhere behind stone walls and iron gates, a bodyguard stirred awake in his security room. His head throbbed with uncertainty. The room felt wrong too quiet, too still.

Did I fall asleep?

At night?

The thought unsettled him.

He sat up slowly, trying to piece together fragments that refused to align. A vague heaviness lingered in his limbs. As he stood and moved toward the main gate, dogs began barking sharp, frantic.

Confusion tightened around him.

Was I really here... the whole time?

The Audi tore through the road now.

Vansh didn't glance at patrol lights. Didn't hesitate at signals. The seatbelt was tight across his chest almost ironic. Not obedience. Not fear.

Acknowledgment.

He had seen the system naked. And whatever love or restraint once tied him to it whatever part of Vanshika still lived inside him no longer had the authority to stop him.

Not anymore.

He parked.

Stepped out.

The department building rose ahead quiet, early, sparsely occupied. Morning light washed its walls with deceptive innocence.

But Vansh didn't walk in.

Not yet.

People were few. Movement was predictable. And Vansh already ahead of the hour had a plan.

He adjusted his suit.

And moved.

"Excuse me, miss," Vansh said softly, fatigue carefully stitched into his voice. "May I speak to Mrs. Verma?"

The woman at the counter barely looked up at first. "I'm sorry," she said, rehearsed and polite. "She isn't here today."

"Oh," Vansh replied, the word slipping out heavier than intended. "Really?"

“She’s late,” the clerk added after a pause. “If you leave your contact details, I’ll inform you as soon as madam arrives.”

Vansh hesitated just long enough to appear torn between dignity and desperation.

“It’s just... there’s a document,” he said quietly. “Something I need urgently for my father.”

His voice wavered not theatrically, but with the tired tremor of someone who had repeated the same sentence too many times.

“He’s in the hospital. They won’t proceed without confirmation. They’re afraid I won’t be able to pay.”

He swallowed.

“With Mrs. Verma’s name just her acknowledgment the hospital will listen. Otherwise...”

He let the sentence dissolve. Some conclusions did not need to be spoken.

The clerk finally looked at him.

The suit was expensive. Impeccably pressed. Yet his eyes carried none of its confidence. That contradiction unsettled her. Wealth did not usually kneel like this.

“I know it sounds strange,” Vansh added gently, “but she told me yesterday evening it was ready. I couldn’t come because of... emergencies.”

He raised his phone, hesitating again.

“If you’d like, I can call her.”

That was the moment the woman faltered not from proof, but from guilt. She suddenly felt like an obstacle in a corridor where someone else was bleeding.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “Please come with me.”

As she stepped out from behind the counter, Arya’s voice slipped into Vansh’s ear, amused and precise.

“You’re disturbingly good at this,” Arya said. “You almost convinced me.”

Vansh didn’t smile.

Elsewhere, in a quieter corner of the city, the morning shift guard arrived at the Verma residence.

“Hey,” he said casually, stepping into the security room. “You’re still here? Didn’t leave yet?”

The night guard looked up, unsettled. Something about the question struck him wrong. He had been awake but not awake. Present but absent.

“I thought...” he began, then stopped.

The morning guard peered toward the garage monitors.

“Huh. Madam hasn’t left yet? What is it weekend already?”

“No,” the night guard replied slowly. “She must be resting.”

The other chuckled. “Always working. Even rest feels like work with people like her.”

The night guard didn’t answer.

The barking from the dogs had stopped now but the silence that replaced it felt heavier than noise.

Something had happened.

He just didn’t yet know what.

Meanwhile, Vansh and the counter lady stepped into the office together. The door closed behind them with a soft, administrative click the kind that marked the boundary between routine and intrusion.

“Oh,” the woman said, pausing near the desk. “You can ask her where she’s put the ”

She never finished the sentence.

Vansh moved without drama, without rage nothing like Arya. One hand steadied her shoulder; the other delivered the injection with professional swiftness. There was no struggle, no scream. Only surprise flickering briefly across her face before her knees gave way.

He caught her before she could fall.

"I'm sorry," Vansh whispered, lowering her gently to the floor. "You'll wake up in a few hours. With nothing more than a headache and questions you won't want answered."

He straightened, already elsewhere in his mind.

From his coat pocket, he drew the plastic sachet. Inside lay the severed thumb wrapped carefully, preserved with clinical respect rather than revulsion. The weight of it disturbed him more now than it had earlier.

"Should I?" Vansh asked quietly, hesitation creeping into his voice. "Any chance of "

"Hail Mary," Arya replied at once. No hesitation. No doubt. Vansh exhaled.

He pressed the thumb against the scanner.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the soft confirmation tone. Green light. Access granted.

The room accepted the lie.

Inside, the black-tinted glass cabinets stood like confessionals that had waited too long to be opened. Vansh moved quickly, methodically no wasted motion, no indulgence.

Files came out one after another.

Old circulars disguised as safety notices.

Internal emails delaying bans under the language of "review."

Photographs of pharmaceutical stock expiry dates scratched out, relabeled, recycled.

Doctors' testimonies rewritten, softened, diluted.

Postmortem reports where causes blurred conveniently into ambiguity.

Financial ledgers thin lines connecting regulators to companies, signatures disguised as procedure.

Each document was a wound.

Each page confirmed what Arya had already known.

"This isn't negligence," Vansh murmured. "It's design."

Arya didn't answer. He didn't need to.

Elsewhere, far from glass cabinets and silent scanners, the guard at the Verma residence frowned.

“Why hasn’t she opened the kitchen windows?” he muttered. “She does that every morning.”

The night guard shifted uneasily. The unease from the night hadn’t left him it had simply changed shape.

“Something’s off,” the morning guard said at last. “I’m checking.”

He started toward the house.

Back at the department, Vansh sealed the files, wiping surfaces clean not obsessively, just enough. He left the office as quietly as he had entered, the sleeping clerk undisturbed, the door locking behind him as if nothing had happened at all.

Outside, the morning had fully arrived.

He slid into the Black Audi, the documents resting beside him like a verdict.

“This,” Vansh said softly into the mic, starting the engine, “changes everything.”

Arya stared at the monitors from the basement, expression hollow, eyes burning.

“No,” he replied. “This only proves it was already broken.”

The car pulled away.

And somewhere between law and justice, the world edged closer to noticing.

Whereas, the security guard climbed the stairs slowly, every step measured, every breath cautious.

“Madam?” he called, forcing politeness into his voice. “Mrs. Verma? Are you there?”

No reply.

He cleared his throat, inventing an excuse as he went. “Can I... can I get some water?”

The bedroom door stood ajar.

That alone was enough to still him.

He pushed it open inch by inch.

“Madam, I’m sorry I just ”

What he saw shattered the sentence.

The scream tore out of him before thought could restrain it.

“CALL THE OTHER GUARD NOW!”

Dr. Pooja Verma lay bound across the bed, her body spread unnaturally, wrists and ankles secured with coarse rope pulled tight into the frame. A cloth was knotted across her mouth, damp with breath. Whoever had tied her had done so with intention not cruelty for its own sake, but certainty. She had been arranged to remain helpless whether unconscious or awake.

Not a struggle.

A conclusion.

She was still fainted. And would be for hours.

By late afternoon, the house no longer belonged to silence.

Police vehicles crowded the driveway. Cameras flashed. Voices echoed against marble walls that had never known panic.

Detective Chavi stepped inside with practiced calm, her eyes already cataloguing damage before her mind named it. She passed the bedroom first the ropes still tied to the bedposts, the indentation in the mattress speaking louder than words.

Then she turned toward the dining hall.

Dr. Verma sat there now, wrapped in shock.

Her eyes were red and swollen, her nose raw. Her right hand rested awkwardly in her lap, white tape wrapped tightly where her thumb should have been. An officer stood beside her, holding a plain white glass.

“Drink,” he said gently.

She obeyed, emptying it without pause, as if thirst were the only sensation she trusted.

Chavi watched her closely. Not as a victim alone but as a variable.

Behind them, a constable leaned over an open laptop on the table.

“Ma’am,” he called suddenly. “You need to see this.”

Chavi turned sharply.

The screen glowed.

Text already open.

She stepped closer.

Another message appeared before her eyes, typed with deliberate calm:

“No. Not without the lady without the thumb.”

A smiley face followed. Simple. Childlike. Unforgivable.

Chavi took the laptop herself and carried it to the table.

“Mrs. Verma,” she said softly, kneeling to meet her gaze. “Is it alright if we show you something? We believe this might help us catch him.”

Fear crossed the woman’s face raw, unfiltered.

Chavi turned the screen toward her.

Emails. Anonymous. Attached files downloading one after another.

Photographs of dead children.

Documents stamped classified.

Notices bearing dates she had erased from memory or pretended to.

Records aligning too perfectly to be coincidence.

Each file tightened the room.

Then the final message appeared.

No urgency. No threat.

Just certainty.

“Someone is counting your sins.”

The room fell silent.

Chavi closed the laptop slowly.

And in that moment, she understood not who had done this, but why they would not stop.

Chapter 28: Sloth

The basement breathed like an old animal low, mechanical, tired.

Wires lay open across the concrete floor like exposed veins, blinking lights pulsing softly in uneven intervals. Vansh moved among them with the discipline of habit, crouching, standing, plugging, unplugging his hands busy enough to keep his mind from wandering where it feared to go. Screens flickered awake one by one, casting pale reflections across the walls.

Arya sat apart.

Not restrained.

Not hidden.

Not defiant.

Just... present.

He sat on a metal chair near the table, spine relaxed, shoulders loose, eyes empty of urgency. There was no guilt in his posture, no urgency to explain himself. If anything, there was a quiet exhaustion clinging to him like a man who had already reached the end of an argument the world was still shouting about.

The silence lingered long enough to become uncomfortable.

Then Arya spoke.

“Tell me something, Vansh.”

Vansh didn’t look up. A cable snapped into place with a soft click.

“Would people still care about skincare,” Arya asked calmly, “or what dress they’re wearing... if everyone in the world vanished one day?”

Vansh paused.

The question was absurd and yet it wasn’t.

He thought for a moment, eyes fixed on a monitor that reflected nothing but code.

"I guess," he said quietly, "no."

Arya nodded, as if the answer had been expected.

"Then there would be no happiness," Arya continued, voice steady. "No morality for sadness. No one to impress. No one to judge. No one to ask for meaning."

He leaned back slightly.

"No purpose to fight for. No audience to suffer for."

Vansh returned to his work, though his hands had slowed. He listened now not casually, but carefully.

"Aren't humans lazy?" Arya asked.

This time, Vansh stopped completely.

Arya's eyes remained fixed on nothing in particular as he spoke, as though addressing a presence older than the room itself.

"They were bored," Arya said, "so they built systems. Countries. Thrones. Borders drawn by men who never bled on them. Kings sent lakhs of warriors to fight not for survival, not for necessity but for expansion."

His voice sharpened slightly.

"They told the soldiers: You matter.

They told them: This land is your mother.

They told them: Die for it."

Arya exhaled through his nose, almost a laugh.

"But the only thing the king believed in," he said, "was his own reflection multiplied by how much land he could stand on."

Vansh turned fully now.

Arya continued, unbothered.

"After the war, they celebrate victory. Fireworks. Songs. Statues."

A pause.

"No tears for the ten thousand men who never returned."

His fingers twitched slightly against the armrest.

"Ten thousand lives. Each with a blood type. A family. A voice. Fear. Love. Weakness. Memories."

Another pause.

“And all of it becomes a number.”

Arya looked up at the ceiling.

“Because the system humans worship is lazy. Too lazy to evolve. Too lazy to admit it’s broken. Too lazy to fix itself.”

Vansh felt something tighten in his chest.

“They don’t want change,” Arya said. “They want position. They want to climb. And if a thousand bodies are the steps so be it.”

He turned his gaze back to Vansh.

“So they kill in the name of country.

Religion.

Language.

Colour.

Fear.”

Vansh said nothing.

“There’s no country for animals,” Arya went on quietly.

“No religion for water.

No language for the sun.

No colour for darkness.”

The words settled heavily in the room.

“These things exist without borders,” Arya said. “Without hierarchy. Without ego.”

He leaned forward slightly now.

“All of this nation, identity, superiority it’s a human construct. A psychological crutch. Something to make us feel important in a universe that doesn’t notice us.”

Vansh felt the shift then.

His psychology had fractured the day Vanshika was hung.

But his philosophy

That was breaking now.

“For the universe,” Arya said softly, “there is no difference between an ant and a human.”

Silence followed.

The machines hummed.

A screen flickered.

Vansh had no words left.

“And yet,” Arya finally said, almost to himself,

“We’re cursed to live inside it, aren’t we?”

He didn’t look for an answer.

The basement remained still bearing witness to two men standing at different edges of the same truth, staring at a system too tired to justify itself.

Vansh finally spoke.

Not abruptly.

Not defensively.

As if the words had been waiting for years.

“My father used to blame my mother for our financial problems,” he said. “And I had to endure it all. Quietly. Because society says parents are gods.”

Arya did not interrupt.

“My parents were never gods,” Arya replied calmly. “Not to me. They’re just humans reproducing, blaming, and then teaching their children to fulfill dreams that were never theirs to begin with.”

A pause.

“Who asked them to?” Arya added. “I didn’t.”

The silence that followed was not awkward it was heavy, deliberate.

Vansh’s gaze dropped to the floor.

“You never told me about your parents,” he said at last. “Where are they?”

Arya tilted his head slightly.

“I don’t know,” Vansh answered before Arya could speak. His mouth tightened. “Probably still respected by society. Wrinkled. Old. Waiting to realize too late that respect never mattered.”

Arya listened. Closely.

"When I was a kid," Vansh continued, "we were poor. Not destined to be but poor by choice."

He laughed once, hollow.

"We could've lived like a normal middle-class family. But my father chose alcohol every day. Gambling. Betting the future of the family like it was spare change."

Arya's eyes did not leave him.

"He pushed me to study what I never wanted," Vansh said. "Not because he cared about my life but because he wanted money. Money that would erase his failures."

Vansh swallowed.

"I was suffocating."

The machines hummed behind them, indifferent.

"I did my own work," Vansh said quietly. "Cracked the company. Got the job."

His voice trembled not with pride, but fatigue.

"And one day "

The memory hardened.

"I stood in front of him with cash in my hands. Thousands. Real money. Earned."

Vansh's jaw clenched.

'Here,' I said. 'This is for you.'

"And I told him ten lakh would be in his account by evening."

Arya felt the weight of the moment without being told.

"I picked up my bag," Vansh continued. "My suitcase."

'I'm leaving,' I said. 'And I don't want to hear from you anymore.'

His father's voice echoed faintly in his memory.

'Are you abandoning your father?'

Vansh exhaled sharply.

"You abandoned my mind," he said. "You gambled. You got scammed by call centres chasing easy money. You wasted what you never invested in anything meaningful."

He looked up now.

"You forced me into a life I never chose."

A pause.

"And now," Vansh said, almost bitterly, "what I'm doing isn't that what you wanted?"

His hand clenched unconsciously.

"You wanted money. There it is.

You wanted a big house. You can buy it."

The sound of cash hitting the floor echoed in the memory like a verdict.

"At last," Vansh said softly, "he succeeded."

Arya waited.

"He won the money," Vansh finished. "But lost the son."

A silence settled between them thick, final.

"That," Vansh said, eyes distant, "never mattered to him."

Arya said nothing.

He didn't need to.

Because in that moment, Sloth revealed itself not as sleep, not as laziness

but as a refusal to love,

a refusal to grow,

a refusal to take responsibility for the damage one leaves behind.

"So," Arya said at last, deliberately light, as if stepping away from the edge, "what is it for today?"

Vansh did not answer immediately.

"The system cracked," Arya continued, almost dismissively. "After the arrest of Suresh Bansal. Now she just walks from courtroom to courtroom with attorneys trailing behind her like shadows. No power left."

He paused.

“No thumb.”

Vansh reached for the headphones.

“Our next recording,” he said quietly, handing them over.
“Are you ready?”

Arya didn’t respond. He snatched them instead.

“Just give it to me already.”

The faint hiss of static filled his ears.

Then her voice.

“Hello... you.

It’s me. Vanshika.”

She sounded exhausted. Not dramatic. Not frightened. Just tired like someone recording a reminder they already know they won’t live to follow.

“I’m just lying on my bed. Lazy. Trying to convince myself to record once more.

Don’t waste your time.

You’ve not much left.”

Arya’s jaw tightened.

“And by the time you’re listening to this... I’m ”

(a pause)

“I’m dead already.”

A weak laugh followed. Not playful. Not hysterical.

Empty.

“Isn’t it fun? Listening to a ghost?”

She laughed again thin, brittle.

Arya’s fist clenched so hard his nails bit into his palm.

“One day,” Vanshika continued, “I received a call. I was exhausted just came back from work, about to sleep.”

Her breath hitched slightly.

“Third time that week.

Someone said I’d won a lottery. An iPhone.”

A faint scoff.

"I told them I can buy a whole mobile studio, bitch. Stop calling."

She paused.

"They didn't."

The room felt colder.

"A few days later... I was home. Alone."

A faint sound fabric shifting. She must have turned on the bed.

"The doorbell rang."

Her voice dropped.

"Hey... hello? Vanshika, you there?"

Arya leaned forward unconsciously.

"I ran to the door. Thought maybe it was urgent."

She exhaled slowly.

"It was the counter worker from our office."

A pause, longer this time.

"She's... old. Heavy-set. Pale. Two kids. Both in college."

The detail mattered. Vanshika always noticed what others ignored.

"She was crying. Shaking."

The bed creaked again.

"I made her sit immediately."

"What happened?" I asked."

Her voice tightened.

"She couldn't speak properly. Just sobbing."

Then, suddenly

"My boy,' she screamed. 'My son he studies in Delhi. They've kidnapped him.'"

Arya's throat felt dry.

"They'll kill him,' she said, 'if I don't give them the money.'"

Silence followed. Long. Heavy.

"I was shocked," Vanshika whispered. "Her eyes... they weren't lying. They were terrified."

A faint sniffle she wiped her nose.

"She grabbed my hands."

Her voice cracked not crying, just breaking.

"I'm sorry,' she said. 'I shouldn't say this... but they told me you're the one with all the money in the world.'"

A hollow laugh escaped Vanshika.

"Will you help me?" she begged."

Arya felt something dark settle in his chest.

"Of course I said yes," Vanshika continued. "I didn't even think."

Her voice softened.

"I told her calm down. Money doesn't matter. Just tell me what happened."

A breath.

Then

"She said...

'Police.'"

The word landed like a verdict.

"She said the police took her son."

Static hissed softly.

"I have an auto phone recording," the lady added desperately.

"You can listen to it."

I did.

And the moment the audio began, I understood something was wrong not because it was crude, but because it was too controlled.

A woman's voice filled the room. Firm. Sharp. Practiced.

"I am DIG "

She stated the rank with authority, not introduction.

"Your boy was found sneaking into a girls' hostel at night."

A pause meant to sting.

"A girl complained. Begged. Tell me what did you teach him?"

The words were not spoken in anger.

They were delivered with contempt, the kind that enjoys its own righteousness.

Then other voices joined in men. Rough. Interrupting. Asking questions that were never meant to be answered.

Names. Addresses. Family details.

And then

The sound changed.

Not voices.

Impact.

A dull thud. A sharp gasp. A cry that didn't sound rehearsed only human.

"I don't know what for," the recording revealed, "but he was being beaten."

The mother collapsed into tears beside me.

"That's my boy," she sobbed.

"I can't listen to him like that."

Her hands trembled.

"His voice he's too gentle. Too caring. I raised him like that."

Then her own voice entered the recording fractured, pleading.

"Please... stop. Please don't beat him."

"I'm sorry. Whatever he did I'm sorry."

"Please don't file a case. Don't take him to jail."

"His future will die."

The DIG's voice hardened not louder, just colder.

"If you don't want trouble," she said calmly,

"transfer one lakh rupees to the account I mail you."

A pause.

The mother's voice cracked.

"One lakh?"

"I will... I will... but it'll take time. Please "

She didn't finish.

"Don't take too much time," the officer interrupted.

"Don't you care about your boy?"

The line wasn't cruel.

It was efficient.

The recording ended.

I was frozen.

Not calm distorted.

A thousand possibilities raced through my head, colliding without order. I had seen corruption before. I had heard stories.

But this

This was precision cruelty.

A woman begging.

A child's screams used as currency.

Authority weaponized not through force but certainty.

The threat did not feel distant.

It felt aimed at me.

I stopped trying to comfort her.

My voice changed before I realized it had.

Cold. Measured.

"Have you called your son?" I asked.

She stared at me as if I'd struck her.

"What are you saying?" she shouted.

"My boy is in lockup. I heard him. That's his voice."

She stood up, shaking.

"They know his name. My name. Everything."

"And you you are doubting me?"

Her voice broke into rage.

"I trusted you."

"You're just another rich girl playing games at work."

The words cut deeper than they should have.

Because for the first time in my life

I was not in control.

I should have given her the money.

I knew that.

I should have stopped thinking.

Stopped analyzing.
Stopped questioning.
My mind was tangled in logic when it should have
surrendered to fear.
Then
The phone rang.
Not softly.
Violently.
The vibration scraped against the table like an insect trapped
under glass.
Tring.
Tring.
The sound felt invasive.
Threatening.
My heart tightened not because I was scared of the call, but
because I realized something unbearable:
I had never been pointed at before.
Never targeted.
Never chosen.
And now, for the first time
I felt exposed.
Angry at my presence.
Angry at the world that allowed this to function so smoothly.
The ringtone kept screaming.
The vibration continued.
Not louder just persistent. As if the phone itself refused to be
ignored.
She took a hesitant step forward and glanced at the screen.
Her son.
For a moment, her mind rejected what her eyes confirmed.
Confusion clouded her face, but instinct triumphed over doubt.
She answered immediately.
“Hello?”

A familiar, sleepy voice emerged unguarded, ordinary.
“Hey, Mom. Sorry... I was sleeping. I didn’t see the calls.”

The world did not shatter.

It simply rearranged itself.

Her breath caught. Then released. Relief crashed into anger so abruptly that she could not tell where one ended and the other began.

She spoke to him for a long time too long. Begged him to come home. Ignored his protests about semester exams, lectures, responsibilities. She did not care. Fear had rewritten her priorities.

By the time the call ended, she was relieved... and furious.

At the system.

At herself.

At how easily terror had borrowed authority and worn it like a uniform.

I remained seated on the sofa, untouched by the chaos, holding a book I had bought days ago but never opened.

Whispers from the Grave.

I traced the title with my thumb and looked at the cover again, as though it might explain something I was not yet ready to name.

My mood had sunk into something unfamiliar insecurity, sharp and foreign. I had never known it like this. Not even after my parents died. Grief, yes. Loneliness, yes.

But betrayal?

Money had insulated me all my life. It had softened reality, filtered danger, postponed ugliness.

This

this could not be bought away.

“How did you know?” she asked suddenly, her voice quieter now.

“That it was just a scam?”

I answered without hesitation.

"She said she was a DIG."

She frowned.

"And that's exactly why it couldn't be real," I continued.

"A DIG doesn't sit in a local station beating a college boy and demanding money. Power doesn't work that inefficiently."

She absorbed this slowly, like someone relearning gravity.

"But... his voice," she whispered.

"How did they copy him so well?"

No one answered.

But somewhere in the silence between breaths a truth surfaced.

They don't guess.

They study.

They watch routines. Listen to voices. Collect fragments. Days sometimes weeks of observation.

And then

Boom.

One call.

A carefully constructed lie.

Minutes later, money and dignity vanish together especially from those who cannot afford to lose either.

The recording continued.

"Just block them," I said to her back then.

"Report it if you want. Go home. Get some sleep."

She apologized repeatedly too much, really. She had nothing to be sorry for.

But I wasn't ready to end the night.

She left.

I remained.

I opened the book Tamanna Sharma's words waiting patiently and dialed one of my closest friends. Someone who knew how to sit with silence without trying to fix it.

I didn't explain much.

I didn't need to.

I hugged him.

I cried.

And for the first time, comfort didn't feel like a solution only a pause.

"Who was it?" Arya asked quietly.

"Her friend?"

Vansh looked at him but did not answer.

The silence itself answered.

Arya's gaze sharpened, lingered, and then softened with recognition. He understood without being told.

It was Vansh.

Vanshika's voice on the recording had already betrayed it the pauses too familiar, the comfort too intimate to be anyone else.

After a moment, the recording resumed.

"Lately," she said, "I kept thinking about it the scam calls, the woman begging for her child. That wasn't even the full cruelty. That was barely one percent of it."

Her tone was no longer tired now. It had grown deliberate.

"These people don't just steal money. They steal certainty. Safety. Trust. They turn ordinary evenings into lifelong fears."

She paused, as if choosing what to confess next.

"I couldn't let it go. I didn't want this to happen to anyone else."

So she asked the woman later, when the panic had settled for the number that had called her. The woman sent it. Vanshika noted it carefully. Compared it with another number from a similar call.

Then she forwarded everything to the one person she trusted to look without blinking.

"The friend I hugged," she said softly.

"He's... talented. And I used that."

Arya's jaw tightened. Vansh looked away.

"He traced both numbers. Locations. Patterns. Time windows. And mailed me everything where the calls came from, and when they usually began."

Early evening.

Jaipur.

Targets selected when fatigue makes resistance weak.

"I wanted to see it myself," she continued.

"To understand how it actually works."

She went alone.

Parked her car far from the site. Walked the remaining distance like an ordinary woman with nowhere urgent to be.

The building revealed nothing at first glance just another concrete structure blending into the city's indifference.

But knowledge has a way of sharpening vision.

"Seventh floor," she said.

"That's where they were."

She took the elevator.

When the doors opened, the illusion collapsed.

Rows upon rows of chairs. Screens glowing. Voices overlapping some bored, some rehearsed, some cruelly calm. People on calls as if ordering food, not dismantling lives.

She stood there too long.

Someone noticed.

A young woman approached her quickly, professionally.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm here to see your director," Vanshika replied evenly.

"I'm a journalist. India Info."

The word journalist still carried weight then.

The girl relaxed.

"Oh. That's fine. The director is in the cabin."

Inside the cabin, power sat comfortably.

"And there you were," Vanshika said.

"Meera Iyer."

Meera sat as though the building belonged to her not just the office, but the people inside it. Around them, through glass walls, hundreds worked in quiet obedience.

"Please, take a seat," Meera said with a smile practiced to disarm.

"I wasn't informed someone was coming from your company."

"Connection issues," Vanshika sighed lightly, as though inconvenienced.

"These things happen."

Meera nodded, indulgent.

"So, Vanshika how can I help you?"

And then the question that changed everything:

"I was wondering," Vanshika said, calmly,

"how call centres like yours still operate. With all the modernization, regulations... this industry was supposed to be declining."

Meera's smile paused.

Not vanished.

Paused.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

And in that fraction of hesitation
that infinitesimal delay

Vanshika knew.

Meera Iyer adjusted the file on her desk before she spoke, not out of nervousness, but habit. Years in management had trained her hands to move before her conscience ever had time to intervene.

"You're asking the wrong question," she said gently, folding her fingers. "Call centres didn't disappear. They evolved. People like to believe crime is loud and visible but most of it wears a tie now."

Vanshika remained standing. She said nothing.

Meera continued, unbothered by the silence.

“Technology didn’t kill this industry. It refined it. Outsourcing, automation, regional subcontracting it’s all legal on paper. What happens inside a phone call is... interpretation.”

She smiled, briefly. Not proudly. Practically.

“Look around,” she gestured toward the glass wall, beyond which rows of cubicles buzzed softly. “Those people are not criminals. They clock in. They clock out. They pay rent. They send children to school. If I shut this down tomorrow, I don’t expose evil I create unemployment.”

Vanshika tilted her head slightly. Still silent.

Meera leaned back.

“People imagine there’s a single villain pulling strings. There isn’t. There’s demand. Fear. Urgency. People want shortcuts refunds, prizes, relief. We simply... answer that demand.”

She paused, choosing her words with care.

“And before you say it yes, there are excesses. There always are. But excess doesn’t define the structure. Hospitals have malpractice. Banks have fraud. Governments have corruption. Yet no one shuts them down.”

Her eyes met Vanshika’s now.

“So why us?”

A beat.

Meera exhaled slowly.

“I didn’t build this because I’m cruel. I built it because it works. Because no one stopped it. Because everyone pretends not to notice as long as the money flows upward and the damage stays invisible.”

She leaned forward slightly, voice softer.

“Tell me honestly if tomorrow the phones went silent, do you think the world would become kinder?”

A faint hum from the floor outside filled the room.

Meera lowered her voice.

“No. Someone else would take the calls. Someone rougher. Someone less regulated. At least here, there are rules. Scripts. Limits.”

She hesitated just enough to be human.

“And yes... sometimes people cross lines. But laziness isn’t what keeps this alive.”

She tapped the desk once.

“Convenience does.”

Her gaze steadied, calm but tired.

“So if you’re here to write a story, write it properly. Don’t look for monsters. Look for mirrors.”

She gestured to the chair across from her.

“Sit. Ask your questions. I have nothing to hide.”

The room felt suddenly smaller not because of menace, but because everything she said made sense.

And that was the most dangerous part.

Vanshika did not raise her voice. She never needed to.

“Your company presents itself as a multi-vertical call centre,” she said evenly. “Customer support. Lead generation. Telemarketing.”

She paused just long enough to be deliberate.

“But what customer support?”

Meera Iyer’s pen stopped mid-movement.

“What exactly do you support?” Vanshika continued. “Which product? Which service? Who is the client whose customers you claim to serve?”

Meera straightened slightly.

“And lead generation,” Vanshika went on, her tone still neutral. “For whom? On what basis? What market? What consent framework?”

The silence thickened.

“And telemarketing,” Vanshika concluded. “What are you selling?”

Meera blinked once.

Nothing in the room moved except the faint oscillation of the ceiling fan.

“Your website doesn’t specify,” Vanshika added. “It doesn’t classify the operation. It doesn’t name a sector. It doesn’t even state whether this is an inbound or outbound facility.”

She looked up.

“So I’m asking plainly what kind of call centre is this?”

Meera’s composure fractured not dramatically, but enough.

“What the ” she muttered under her breath, then stopped herself. Her chair scraped softly as she stood. “Raghav didn’t tell me about this.”

For the first time, she did not meet Vanshika’s eyes.

Instead, she reached for her phone.

The call connected quickly.

“What is this?” Meera said sharply. “You should have informed me before sending someone.”

A pause.

She turned slightly, pacing now. “I’m sitting with her. Yes, right now.”

Another pause longer.

“What do you mean you didn’t send anyone?”

Her jaw tightened.

“She says her name is Vanshika.”

The phone went silent for several seconds. Meera’s face changed not fear, not anger recognition.

Then she extended the phone toward Vanshika, irritation disguised as courtesy.

“He wants to speak to you.”

Vanshika took it.

The voice on the other end was brisk, controlled, impatient.

“What are you doing there?” the man demanded. “This wasn’t planned. Leave immediately.”

"I just have one question," Vanshika said calmly.

A sigh. Irritated.

"Make it quick."

"If your operations close at five in the evening," she asked, "who makes the calls after five?"

Silence.

Then cold.

"You don't need to concern yourself with that."

"But "

The line went dead.

Vanshika lowered the phone slowly.

Meera had already reclaimed her composure.

"Well," she said, waving a hand dismissively, a smile stretched too thin, "I'm afraid we're done here. I do have a schedule."

She turned away.

"Bye," she added lightly. "Girly."

Vanshika walked out without responding.

Outside, the floor buzzed.

Rows of people sat rigid in their chairs, headsets clamped tight, voices rehearsed, eyes empty. Screens glowed. Scripts scrolled. Every face was focused urgency without intention, motion without direction.

It did not look like work.

It looked like waiting.

Something was wrong.

She felt it settle in her chest not anger, not fear but certainty.

Back in the basement, Arya listened in silence, the recording ending in a soft click.

His jaw tightened.

His sister's voice had not trembled. It had not accused. It had simply asked.

And that, he knew, was what terrified them most.

She had not named the crime.

She had revealed the absence of truth.

Arya stared at the wall, unmoving.

Vanshika continued.

“I went to the police. They didn’t know who I was. I could’ve taken my father’s name but I wanted my own identity. And that’s when I understood the system. It makes you sit. And sit. And when you finally speak, it convinces you not to file a report.

That’s when it hit me we only ever see the crimes that become reports. We’re proud to be number one in crime statistics, but what about the files that never existed? In small towns. On the edges of villages. Girls and women still being raped while we boast about having a glorious history.

Isn’t that foolishness?

Isn’t that sloth?”

Her voice slowed.

“I got tired. Frustrated. That’s when I stopped reporting the system to the system.

Maybe that’s my sin.

And here I am.

Actually... I’m not anymore.”

It stopped.

Arya ripped the headphones off in one sharp motion and moved to the second cabinet, tearing it open. Polymer sheets crinkled as he pulled out the suit.

Vansh looked up, startled.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t,” Arya said. His hands didn’t stop.

“I can’t just listen to her exhausted, broken while those idiots make another call. Loot another poor soul. Play with emotions like it’s a script.”

Vansh scoffed.

“That’s just an excuse, right? You don’t care about them. You care about breaking the system.”

Arya froze.

He turned slowly.

The cowl lay still in his hands.

"Whatever," he said flatly.

"Fuck society. I'll destroy it for the love of my life. For what they did to her."

Vansh exhaled.

"But you can't just walk in and punch her in the face."

Arya's eyes hardened.

"Well... I might."

Silence.

Then Vansh spoke again, calmer.

"There's another way."

Arya looked down.

The suit was different this time black, but streaked with red. Lighter. Sharper. A thinner helmet, covering the head, protecting the nose nothing more. Not armor. A warning.

Menacing. Intentional.

On the left chest, a bold V burned in red.

"What do we do then?" Arya asked.

"I already planned it," Vansh said. His voice was calm too calm.

"We don't touch people. We touch the roots.

We find every location connected to her call centres. Every branch. Every franchise. When the workers go home when the buildings are empty we hit the places themselves. Not to kill. Never to kill. Only to destroy what they stand on.

Every site becomes a message.

A signal to the corrupt your empire is nothing but a trail of scams."

Arya stared at him.

"And how do we find them?" he asked.

"We confront Meera Iyer," Vansh replied.

“She isn’t running this alone. Someone above her knows the full map. Someone always does.”

Arya stood still, the red curve of his eye reflecting faintly in the dark.

Vansh stepped closer and said quietly, almost as an afterthought,

“You remember transferring money to someone?”

Arya didn’t answer.

“I want them bank details,” Vansh finished.

“That’s where the trail begins.”

The room went silent.

Not with doubt

but with inevitability.

Chapter 29: Sloth (Act 2)

Punches fell measured, deliberate, and merciless.

Bone met knuckle. Teeth cut flesh. A dark, bluish smear spilled from the man's mouth, staining the cracked concrete of the narrow alley beside the station. Trains screamed past somewhere beyond the walls, indifferent witnesses to a private execution of truth.

The chief collapsed, breathless, his back scraping the damp ground.

"Tell me," Arya said quietly.

His voice carried no rage now. Only certainty.

"I know you know. Meera Iyer. I've been through your phone contacts, mails, drafts you never meant to send. Just tell me where the centres are."

The man coughed. Blood gathered at the corner of his lips.

"Please," he whimpered. "I don't know anything. Who's Meera? I swear "

Another punch. Not wild. Corrective.

"Oh, you don't know?" Arya asked, almost amused. "That's strange. Because your Gmail history says otherwise. Late-night calls. Deleted threads. You know her well."

The man trembled.

"Now," Arya continued, kneeling to meet his eyes, "tell me where all the centres are."

Silence. Then

"I... I have a notebook," the man broke. "I can give it to you. Just just leave me and my family alone. I do it for my kids."

A pause.

From the headphones, Vansh's voice arrived calm, observant.

"Everyone does," he said. "Everyone has a reason. That's how sloth survives by pretending it's responsibility."

Arya stood. The man hurriedly fumbled inside his jacket and produced a small, battered notebook. Pages stuck together with sweat and fear.

Arya took it.

Blue blood smeared across the paper as he flipped it open addresses, codes, timings, scribbled carelessly, as if evil were routine paperwork.

“Screenshot,” Arya said. “Analyze every page I turn.”

The lenses whirled softly. Data flowed. The machine absorbed what human conscience had refused to hold.

“Locations mapped,” the system replied.

Arya closed the notebook and let it fall beside the man.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He walked out of the alley without looking back.

Behind him, the man lay breathing alive, spared not out of mercy, but because sloth does not die loudly. It rots quietly, waiting for someone else to clean up its mess.

And tonight, someone finally had.

As Arya started the car, the silence shattered.

The engine roared not loud, but authoritative. The road inhaled sharply as the vehicle surged forward, its speed bending the air, making the empty street feel heavy, breathless. Streetlights blurred into pale streaks. Somewhere behind, a traffic policeman turned his head too late, instinctively asking a question the night would not answer.

Then the red eyes appeared.

Not literal reflected.

Two sharp points of crimson glow cutting through the dark windshield, catching attention before logic could follow. By the time the city registered them, the car was already gone.

Sirens bloomed behind.

One. Then two. Then three police vehicles tearing through the quiet, urgency echoing off closed shops and sleeping homes.

Arya glanced into the rear-view mirror not with panic, but curiosity.

“Oh,” he murmured, voice steady. “So the system finally woke up.”

His hands remained light on the wheel. Calm. Precise.

He took a sudden turn hard, exact. The car obeyed instantly.

Arya’s driving wasn’t reckless. It was surgical. Every movement calculated, every turn anticipated. The chase did not worry him. If anything, it sharpened him.

“Catch the motherfucker!” someone shouted through a police loudspeaker. “It’s him look at the eyes!”

A black BMW cut through the night.

No number plate. No clear visibility. Windows swallowed light. The body of the car merged with shadow itself, as if the night had decided to move.

“He vanished where the hell did he go?” a cop barked.

Inside the car, Vansh’s voice arrived cool, analytical.

“There’s a gully ahead,” he said, watching the radar. “Sharp left. Narrow. They won’t risk it.”

Arya didn’t reply. He turned.

The alley swallowed the car whole.

Sirens screamed past the entrance, momentum carrying them forward while Arya stayed hidden engine cut, breath measured, red reflections dimmed.

Police cars scattered, searching blindly, their headlights clawing at empty walls.

“Where is he?”

“Check the area!”

“He couldn’t have vanished!”

Arya sat motionless, wrapped in shadow, calm as a held breath.

Minutes passed.

From the silence, he finally spoke.

“Are they gone?”

“They’re still searching the perimeter,” Vansh replied. “Stay put. Eyes closed if you want. Let the noise exhaust itself.”

Arya leaned back, closing his eyes not in fear, but in control.

Then, almost casually, he asked:

“So... how did it feel?”

Vansh paused.

“How did what feel?”

“When you scammed the scammers.”

A faint smile ghosted across Arya’s face.

“Taking their tools. Turning their certainty into doubt. Giving fear back to the ones who sell it.”

The car remained still. The city breathed again, unaware that something had changed quietly, without headlines.

As time crawled backward, Vansh sat unmoving before the screens, eyes fixed, fingers still.

He wasn’t waiting for a call.

He was waiting to receive it.

The phone vibrated.

Once.

Vansh picked it up instantly.

“Hello sir, this is Emily Williams from PayPal Security,” the voice said smooth, trained, rehearsed. “We’ve detected unauthorized activity on your account.”

Vansh listened quietly.

“I’ll need to verify some information to secure your funds. Could you please confirm your login details?”

A smile curved across Vansh’s face not wide, not cruel. Controlled. Patient.

“Oh no,” he said, voice cracking just enough. “That sounds serious. I can’t afford to lose my money.”

He leaned back slightly.

“Please... can you save it? Tell me what you need.”

“Don’t worry, sir,” she replied gently, slipping into reassurance. “I’m here to help. Just confirm your email and password and we’ll secure your account immediately.”

There was a pause.

Then Vansh spoke again calm now, polite, almost kind.

“You know what’s funny, Sushmita?”

Silence.

“I don’t have a PayPal account,” he continued. “But don’t worry. I’m actually here to help you.”

A sharp intake of breath came through the line.

“I what did you say?”

“Sushmita Kumari,” Vansh said softly. “You live at 49, Sector 7, Jaipur. Third floor. Small compartment. Your younger brother, Aryan, starts school this year.”

Her breathing changed. Faster. Uneven.

“How... how do you know this?” she whispered.

“I know everything,” Vansh replied evenly. “Including the forty-nine people you’ve scammed this month.”

He turned his chair slightly, eyes flicking across the screen.

“Congratulations, by the way. Five hundred dollars from Carl Johnson. Three hundred from Catalina. Not bad.”

She didn’t speak.

“You’re stealing from strangers to pay your own debts,” Vansh went on, tone almost conversational. “Tell me does your mother know how you earn your money?”

The professionalism collapsed.

“Sir... please,” she said, voice breaking. “Don’t tell anyone. I need this job.”

There it was.

Not justification. Not denial.

Fear.

Vansh ended the call.

The room returned to silence.

Arya stood nearby, listening to the recorded audio replay through the speakers. His jaw tightened not in rage, but resolve.

Vansh didn't look at him.

"They all sound the same in the end," he said quietly.

Arya stared at the dark monitor.

"I'll make every one of them cry," he said to himself.

Not as a threat.

As a promise.

Hidden within the narrow throat of the alleyway, where the city's breath turned damp and metallic, Arya allowed himself a low, incredulous laugh.

"I mean how stupid are they," he said, voice barely above a whisper, as though stupidity itself might overhear and take offence. "Listen to this."

He leaned closer to the mic, deliberately careless now, theatrical in his mockery.

"Hii," he said, stretching the vowel thin, disguising himself poorly and proudly so. "I'm Carolina Fernandes, calling you from Microsoft."

He paused just long enough.

"With an Indian accent?"

The laugh that escaped him this time was sharper, cleaner. The kind that came not from joy, but from certainty.

Behind the console, surrounded by screens glowing like watchful eyes, Vansh smiled not broadly, not triumphantly. It was the restrained smile of a man who had solved a riddle long ago and was merely watching others struggle with it.

The call connected.

"Ohh, hii Anamika," Vansh said pleasantly, as though greeting an old acquaintance. "How you doin'?"

There was a hitch on the other end of the line a microscopic fracture in confidence.

"Oh " she said. "How... how do you know my name?"

"I know everyone's name," Vansh replied calmly. "It saves time."

A silence followed. He could hear it the shuffling of feet, the faint murmur of voices behind her.

"Who's sitting on your left?" Vansh asked casually. "Shall I answer?"

Her breath grew audible now.

"...Mimi," she said, almost against her will.

Vansh nodded to himself, though she could not see it.

"Yes. Mimi. She types faster than you," he said. "But she lies worse."

The room on the other end erupted not loudly, but internally. The sound of a system suddenly realising it had been observed.

"I've complained to the nearest station," Vansh continued, his tone losing all warmth now. "Ten times, at least. They shut down two, perhaps three centres. Paper victories."

He leaned forward.

"I'm done being patient. Consider this my final warning."

"What are you saying?" she snapped, fear disguised as anger. "What nonsense is this?"

"You people don't need arrests anymore," Vansh said quietly. "You need explosions."

"What do you mean, idiot?" she yelled.

Vansh ended the call.

No drama. No farewell.

Calmly.

Elsewhere too far away to intervene, too close to escape Anamika clicked open the newest email in her inbox.

Sender: V

Just one letter.

The file loaded slowly. Eight hours of footage.

The room appeared on screen their room. Every chair. Every desk. Every headset. Every voice rising and falling in practiced

deception. Their faces, their routines, their crimes arranged neatly, methodically, without mercy.

The screams began almost immediately.

Chairs scraped back. Hands flew to mouths. Some stood frozen, others ran though none knew where to go. The lie had been recorded. Immortalised.

In the alleyway, wrapped in shadow, Arya spoke again his voice colder now.

"I don't just blame them," he said. "I blame the ones who get scammed. How can you be that foolish? Why always want more? Greed, desperation pick one. Humans are stupid. That's why they're human."

Vansh did not look up from the screen.

"No," he said, gently but firmly. "That's where you're wrong."

Arya turned slightly.

"They don't fall because they're stupid. They fall because they're afraid. Because someone promises safety. Control. A solution."

He paused.

"We would've fallen too if we were in their place."

The alley fell silent again.

Not with victory.

But with understanding.

"Did they go?" Arya asked quietly.

Vansh did not answer at once. His eyes were fixed upon the radar, fingers still, posture rigid in that peculiar way of men who knew something was wrong but had not yet named it.

"No," he said at last. "Two patrol cars remain to your right. Another is circling the block. They're restless. This will take time."

Arya's hands tightened on the steering wheel. The engine purred beneath his palms like a restrained animal, eager, impatient.

Then
A vehicle emerged ahead.
No indicators.
No headlights.
No hesitation.
It rolled forward and stopped deliberately within range.
Arya's gaze sharpened.
"Who's that?" he asked into the headset.
Vansh frowned, fingers dancing over controls. "Not police.
Too heavy. Metal body... looks like a Compass. Civilian."
"At this hour?" Arya muttered. "No lights. No signals. Parked
like it owns the night?"
"I don't know," Vansh replied. "Let me check."
The drone rose.
From above, the scene arranged itself with dreadful clarity.
"Four adult males," Vansh said cautiously. "Probably just...
wandering."
Arya exhaled, irritated. "Then whatever the hell they're doing,
let them. Get the drone higher."
But Vansh did not comply immediately.
His voice changed.
"Arya," he said slowly, almost unwillingly. "It's not four."
Arya's jaw clenched. "Five boys? Fine. I don't care. We have
police "
"No," Vansh interrupted. "There is no fifth boy."
The drone dipped.
Silence stretched.
"It's a girl," Vansh said. His voice was hollow now. "She's
crying. She's... unclothed from the upper body."
Arya's breath stopped.
For one fleeting second, another voice intruded faint, distant,
cruel in its calm.
I'm already dead.

Vanshika.

Arya did not speak.

“The patrols?” he asked finally.

“Yes,” Vansh answered. He did not add anything else. There was nothing more to say.

Arya turned the key.

The engine roared not recklessly, but with authority. A deep, mechanical growl that announced presence, intent, inevitability.

He hit the accelerator.

The car surged forward, horn blaring long, violent, unrelenting.

The boys startled. Hands flew to ears. Panic replaced arrogance.

The girl looked up confused, terrified, hope and fear colliding in her eyes.

The driver attempted a clumsy U-turn.

Too late.

Arya took the wheel in one hand, the horn still screaming beneath the other, and sent the black car into motion not straight, not erratic, but circular.

Round and round.

A tightening orbit.

The vehicle revolved them like prey caught in a storm metal flashing, tyres screaming, shadows bending unnaturally with speed.

Again.

And again.

The boys screamed now not in dominance, but in confusion. In loss of control.

There were no witnesses.

Only fear.

Only motion.

Only the night bearing quiet witness to something it had seen far too often and, at last, something answering back.

The horn split the night like a verdict.

Its iron voice tore through the sleeping lanes, and windows stirred awake as though conscience itself had been roused from slumber. Somewhere beyond the gully, an engine answered the unmistakable snarl of a police vehicle turning sharply toward the disturbance, summoned not by duty, but by noise.

Arya kept the car in motion, the circle tightening, the black machine revolving with dreadful precision. Then deliberately one of the windows slid down.

He looked upon the girl.

Not as a saviour, nor as a judge, but as a witness.

Her face bore no guilt, only terror refined into something quieter and far more terrible. Her eyes did not plead for escape alone; they begged for meaning, for punishment without crime, for mercy in a world that had offered none. In that instant, Arya did not see her nakedness he saw the crime written upon her gaze, inflicted without touch.

Shouts rose.

People emerged from doorways and balconies, drawn by instinct more than curiosity. The police car burst into the gully, then another, then a third, their lights clawing at the walls like frantic questions. Doors flew open. Guns were drawn. Authority arrived late, but loudly.

Arya pressed the accelerator once more.

The engine roared. Overhead wires snapped and spat sparks into the night as the black car surged forward, vanishing between shadows before hands could reach for it.

Silence followed.

The police stood before what remained the halted vehicle, its occupants frozen not by courage, but by exposure. Orders were barked. Hands were forced behind backs. The boys who moments

earlier had laughed now avoided every gaze, suddenly acquainted with gravity.

Someone placed a cloth upon the girl's shoulders.

Vansh did not look at Arya.

His eyes were elsewhere far above, through the drone's cold lens fixed upon the faces of those who had mistaken anonymity for permission. He watched them not with anger, but with a terrible attentiveness, as though committing them to memory in ink that could never be erased.

He recorded every face.

For some men escape judgment only once.

Arya drove upward along the spiral of the parking structure, the engine's growl echoing faintly against the concrete like a restrained animal. The upper levels lay deserted; rows of empty spaces yawned in the half-light. He chose the farthest opening, where the city revealed itself through a lattice of railings and mist.

The binoculars were already in his hands.

Through their narrow gaze, the windows resolved themselves one after another precisely as described in the chief's notebook. Offices still lit, long after honest labour had ceased. Screens glowing. Figures seated in mechanical patience.

"So this is it," Arya said quietly.

"Yes," Vansh replied, his voice measured and exact. "That window. You place it there."

Arya moved.

He crossed the gap between buildings with the economy of a man long accustomed to risk, his red suit catching the night wind, his eyes faintly luminous beneath the cowl. Against the darkened glass he fixed the charge firmly, without haste and withdrew.

Then another.

And another.

He passed through the city like a surgeon making incisions no patient would feel until it was too late. Each centre received its

mark rooms where voices had been trained to sound kind, where tea had been poured between lies, where cruelty wore the mask of employment.

The hour deepened. A pale winter fog crept between the buildings, blurring distance and sound alike. It was nearing four in the morning when Arya placed the final device.

He returned to the car.

"I'm leaving now," he said, fastening his belt. "You detonate when I give the word."

There was a pause.

"I hope the girl from last night is safe," Arya added, almost as an afterthought.

"She is," Vansh replied. "A family nearby took her in. The men were detained."

Arya exhaled. "Good. I had little time. Another moment, and they would have joined the rest sleeping without dreams."

The engine came alive.

"Do it," Arya said. "There's no need to wait."

Vansh's fingers moved.

Across the city, nearly fifty locations each bound by the same silent patronage, each sheltered by the same corrupted authority shuddered almost as one. The explosions were brief, precise, unmistakable. Not instruments of slaughter, but of announcement.

Glass failed. Walls blackened. Silence was replaced by shock.

It was a warning not merely to criminals, but to those who believed themselves untouchable.

The police would arrive, as they always did, too late to prevent and too early to understand. Others, however, would take notice. Agencies less interested in appearances than patterns.

Arya did not look back.

The car vanished into the thinning fog, leaving behind a city suddenly aware that something had changed.

Detective Chavi stood alone in her kitchen at precisely nine o'clock, the morning light filtering in pale bands through the window shutters. The grinder hummed steadily as oranges were reduced to pulp beneath its lid. She moved without thought, her mind already elsewhere.

The television murmured.

She glanced up.

The headline struck her still.

"More than fifty commercial centres destroyed overnight in coordinated explosions."

Her hand froze on the grinder.

The anchor continued, his voice measured, cautious trained for panic without surrendering to it.

"Authorities initially suspected a terrorist operation. However, preliminary findings suggest all locations were connected to large-scale fraudulent call-centre operations. Intelligence sources confirm the sites were used by organised scam networks. Significant sums foreign currency, documents, and electronic records have been recovered."

Chavi's brow furrowed.

The report did not stop there.

"Despite the targeted nature of the attack, officials have confirmed two civilian casualties janitorial staff on early-morning duty caught in the aftermath. Thousands are expected to be detained as investigations widen. The question remains: who is responsible?"

The anchor paused, then added quietly

"Is this the work of the so-called Red Eyes?"

The grinder clicked off.

Chavi stared at the screen, her reflection faintly visible over the chaos unfolding on it.

"He's escalating," she said to the empty kitchen.

Elsewhere, far from daylight and news tickers, Vansh sat motionless before a bank of darkened monitors. His shoulders were rigid, his hands unmoving, as though any motion might fracture something already unstable.

Behind him, water ceased running.

Arya emerged from the adjoining room, steam still clinging faintly to him, his movements efficient, unburdened. He reached for the cowl, adjusting its edges with habitual precision.

"I killed two people," Vansh said suddenly.

Arya did not turn.

"Two cleaners," Vansh continued, his voice low but exact. "Two janitors. They weren't part of it. They were just... there."

Arya finished fitting the cowl, then finally looked at him.

"Feels heavy, doesn't it?" he said. "That weight."

He stepped closer.

"They've killed more," Arya went on calmly. "Slowly. Invisibly. Every day. Ruined lives, emptied homes, buried hope one call at a time. Compared to that, what we've done "

Vansh looked away.

"Comparison won't bring them back."

The words did not come from Arya.

They came from somewhere behind Vansh soft, familiar, unyielding.

Vansh stiffened.

Vanshika's presence lingered like a pressure in the room, unseen yet undeniable.

"Neither will guilt," the voice continued, quieter now, receding like an echo through a long corridor. "What's done is done. That's not an excuse to stop."

Silence followed.

Not the silence of comfort but of acceptance.

Arya said nothing.

Vansh exhaled slowly, his jaw tightening not in agreement, but in resolve.

They sat together then, as men bound to consequences they could no longer undo, preparing coldly, deliberately for what came next.

Chapter 30: Collapsed

Arya and Vansh sat upon the open balcony of the mansion, the night air moving softly among the pillars like a courteous guest who knew when not to speak. Between them rested a bottle of red wine, its dark body reflecting the pale lights of the city below.

"This," Vansh said, lifting his glass with a faint smile, "is the same wine, I believe. The one from our first meeting."

Arya regarded the liquid for a moment before answering. "Perhaps," he said quietly. "Vanshika chose it. She had a fondness for such things."

He drank again, slower this time.

"I remember that evening well," Vansh continued. "You scarcely spoke. Only watched me as though you were measuring my soul."

Arya smiled faintly, smoke curling from his lips. "I was drunk," he said. "And curious."

They fell into an easy silence, the kind born not of discomfort but of exhaustion. Below them the city breathed, indifferent and vast.

"What was the food?" Arya asked suddenly. "Italian, was it not?"

"Yes," Vansh replied. "Italian."

"She adored Italian fare," Arya murmured. "Obsessed with it, truly."

They spoke of her still though they had sworn not to of her charm, her elegance, her small theatrical tempers that once amused and later wounded. It was meant to be a pause from vengeance, yet her presence lingered between them like an unextinguished candle.

After some time Arya turned his head slightly.

“Did she ever speak of me?” he asked.

Vansh answered at once. “Constantly. She could never understand your fixation, but she never ceased speaking of you.”

Arya exhaled, then gestured for another glass. The servant obeyed without a word.

“Why?” Arya asked at last.

“What do you mean?” Vansh replied.

Arya paused. The wine touched his lips, but he did not drink.

“I have always thought of myself,” he said slowly, “as a man unfit for the company of others. Ugly not merely in appearance, but in presence. The sort of man people avoid without knowing why.”

He smiled, though there was no mirth in it.

“They do not fear me for power. They fear me because I am near. Because something in me unsettles them.”

Vansh did not interrupt.

“I am untouchable,” Arya continued. “No discipline of the body will alter it. No skill, no fortune, no refinement. I may grow stronger, richer, sharper and yet I shall remain what I am.”

He leaned back in his chair, gazing at the dark sky.

“And the strangest part is this,” he said. “It no longer sounds cruel to me. It sounds... factual.”

He lifted a finger, pointing briefly toward Vansh.

“Some are born beautiful,” he said. “You. Vanshika.”

Then the finger turned inward, touching his own chest.

“And some are not. There is no remedy for it. No redemption. Only acceptance.”

“I would not argue,” Vansh replied at last. His voice carried no defiance, only a tired certainty. “I have come to believe that meaning is not discovered but constructed. One chooses a purpose, clings to it, and survives. Nothing more.”

Arya tilted his head slightly, eyes dulled by drink yet sharpened by pain.

“And you say she loved me,” he said. “Why? How?”

Vansh folded his hands around his glass.

“Because love,” he began, “is rarely born of appearances. It grows from memory. From shared hours, shared silences. From habit, from conduct. From the belief often mistaken that the other will not abandon you when the world turns cruel.”

Arya laughed, unsteady and bitter.

“Well, she did abandon us,” he said. “Did she not?”

Vansh’s gaze fell. His expression hardened, not with rage but with something heavier an anger that had nowhere left to go. Another bottle was set upon the table. Arya filled his glass carelessly.

“To that, then,” Arya said, lifting it. “A fitting truth.”

Vansh raised his own glass in silence. “To that.”

“She was the only one who ever loved me,” Arya continued. “And now she is... gone.”

The word seemed to resist his tongue.

“There is no one left,” he said, smiling through the tremor in his voice. “Only hatred remains. Even for myself. Especially for myself. And that ” he shrugged faintly, “ that will never be repaired.”

Vansh inhaled deeply.

“What we are doing,” he said slowly, “stands outside the law. Outside ethics. I never believed I would cross such thresholds.”

He paused.

“I was not without fault even before this. I deceived my own company. I broke rules when it suited me. But this...” His voice lowered. “This feels irreversible.”

“There is no legality,” Arya replied, his tone suddenly calm. “There is only one truth. This world has no morals to violate.”

Vansh stared into his wine.

“She smiled,” he said. “Always, when she was with me.”

His fingers tightened around the glass.

“And yet she cried alone.”

His voice wavered, just once.

“I ask myself in dreams,” he whispered, “whether she chose death. Or whether she was driven to it. I never know to whom I am asking.”

Arya paused. The red glow within his eyes faltered, dimmed by the weight of a single word.

“Have you ever,” he asked quietly, “considered killing yourself?”

“Rarely,” Vansh replied after a moment. “I blame myself for what has occurred, and then I proceed. The truth is less noble I am afraid. Too much of a coward even to die.”

“Aren’t we all,” Arya laughed softly.

He leaned back, staring at the darkened sky.

“I have often read of love,” he began again, his tone edged with irony. “They say true love does not exhaust you. That it does not tighten the chest or hollow the breath. That love is meant to feel like safety like rest. That it should make you more alive, more at peace than before.”

He smiled faintly.

“They say love requires sacrifice, but that anything which destroys you is not love at all. Only attachment. Obsession. Fear, wearing love’s mask.”

He paused.

“And before one dares call it love,” he continued, “they insist you ask yourself a single question: Does it make me better, or does it break me?”

Arya drained his glass in one motion.

“Well,” he said calmly, “it destroyed me.”

He exhaled.

“And yet, of this I am certain it was love.”

Vansh listened in silence, sipping his wine slowly, allowing the bitterness to linger. At last, he asked the same question in return.

“And you?” he said. “Have you ever thought of killing yourself?”

“Always,” Arya replied.

The answer was immediate. Unfiltered. Almost brutal in its honesty.

Vansh stiffened. “I’m sorry ”

“What kept me alive,” Arya interrupted, correcting himself, “was my sister.”

He paused, his voice lowering.

“What keeps me alive was my sister.”

After her death, he continued, “I did not die once. I died repeatedly. I am still dying.”

He looked down at his hands.

“When she was gone, there was nothing left. I had decided to end it violently, irreversibly. In ways I do not care to describe.”

He lifted his gaze toward Vansh.

“Then you came. With a purpose. The last one this world had left me.”

His lips tightened.

“I will die,” Arya said. “But I will not allow the ones who destroyed her to breathe easily. Not while I exist.”

“That is why I strike them,” he continued. “All of them. I take the blows. I collapse. I bleed.”

His voice softened, almost reverent.

“But her voice her memory the image of her in my eyes it does not let me stop. It moves me forward, again and again.”

He leaned back, exhausted.

“And so I endure.”

Vansh listened truly listened to pain in its rawest form. Not rehearsed sorrow, not dramatized grief, but the unfiltered confession of a mind that had reached its limit and found nothing beyond it. The words did not sound like speech; they

sounded like something torn directly from the chest and laid bare.

"I am no hero," Arya said at last.

His voice was steady, almost disturbingly so.

"I do not carry guns partly because you forbid it, and partly because I lack the discipline for such instruments. But I can fight."

He paused.

"And when I do when I am surrounded, struck, pressed against walls like an animal cornered in a narrow passage it gives me something."

He exhaled slowly.

"There is a surge. A dreadful clarity. A moment where the noise inside my head ceases."

His lips curled faintly.

"That sensation... it is what keeps me alive."

The words themselves felt monstrous, even to Arya as he spoke them.

"I will not stop," he continued. "Not until I find those who destroyed her. Not until I end them. Not until I bury this world for her sake."

He turned his gaze away.

"I am not repairing any system," he confessed. "I do not believe in redemption, reform, or justice. I am merely passing time borrowing breath until I decide to end it all."

The declaration did not sound like rage.

It sounded like a sentence already passed.

Vansh raised his glass with trembling fingers, drained it without tasting, and tried to steady himself. His eyes were heavy, soaked in wine and something far older than intoxication.

The room swayed.

His strength failed him.

Without a word, Vansh collapsed to the floor, consciousness slipping away as the night pressed in silent witness to a confession that could not be taken back.

The committee was convened beneath a ceiling heavy with authority.

A long mahogany table stretched across the chamber, surrounded by men and women who bore the stiff posture of those long accustomed to command senior officers, intelligence heads, seasoned detectives. At the far end, a projector cast its cold light upon the wall, flashing images in grim succession: scorched buildings, fractured streets, and the same recurring spectre red eyes glowing from within darkness.

THE MONSTER IS OUT TO EXPLODE, read one headline.

Detective Chavi sat among them, her back straight, her hands folded neatly upon her lap. It was her first time inside such a committee invited not for seniority, but for proximity. She had been present when the violence first unfolded. She had spoken to witnesses. She had seen what others had only read.

The host of the meeting rose, adjusting his spectacles as he gestured toward the screen.

“Our intelligence assessment,” he declared, “categorizes this as an act of terrorism. Fifty coordinated explosions. Two janitors dead. This is not vigilantism it is the opening chapter of mass violence.”

A murmur of agreement rippled across the table.

“What do our detectives propose?” the host asked.

The Head Detective leaned forward, his voice measured.

“With respect, sir, my field agents suggest a different interpretation. This does not bear the structure of organized terror. It appears... personal.”

The host raised a brow.

“We are open to interpretations.”

The Head Detective turned slightly and inclined his head toward Chavi.

She understood the signal.

Rising from her chair, she felt the weight of every gaze settle upon her. She was young. She was untested. But her voice, when it came, did not tremble.

"I believe," Chavi said carefully, "that we are dealing with a single individual."

A low scoff came from one of the intelligence officers.

"One man?" he asked incredulously. "Detective, fifty explosions do not occur by accident."

Chavi met his gaze.

"They do not," she agreed. "But patterns do not lie."

She gestured toward the projected images.

"The phrase 'The Monster is out to explode' appears repeatedly. Our forensic linguists confirm it matches the same handwriting found at the assault scene involving the Bansal brothers."

She paused, allowing the room to absorb the connection.

"Our archaeological analysis confirms the markings were made on the same day the Bansals were attacked. At that site, witnesses reported a single assailant."

She turned a page in her file.

"He stopped their vehicle alone. He was struck. Kicked. Shocked. Yet he continued. He used improvised devices non-lethal tools and despite clear exhaustion, incapacitated every man present."

A silence followed.

"Mukesh Bansal," she continued, "remains in a coma. He cannot recall the final exchange with his attacker. However, medical testimony confirms the injuries were consistent with a lone combatant."

She lifted her eyes.

“The officers who attempted to subdue him reported seeing only one man always the same figure. Red eyes. No accomplices.”

A senior officer shifted uncomfortably.

“And the thumb?” someone asked.

Chavi did not hesitate.

“Doctor Verma testified that her thumb was severed during a struggle,” she said evenly. “She described the act as brutal. Given that she is currently facing prosecution, her testimony should be regarded with caution.”

A faint stir moved through the room.

Chavi lowered herself back into her seat.

The screen continued to flicker red eyes blinking in and out of surveillance footage while the room sat in uneasy contemplation.

The conference man leaned forward, fingers interlaced.

“Then what of the explosives?” he asked. “The deaths. Two men lost their lives.”

Chavi did not look away.

“He is not acting blindly,” she replied. “First Bansal. Then Verma. Then this. There is a sequence. A pattern of exposure.”

She drew a breath.

“He struck where we failed to act. The call centres were operating openly defaming this country to foreign nations, looting crores every year. Thousands employed in fraud. Hundreds now detained. And yet... they flourished.”

Her voice hardened.

“The deaths of those two men were not his objective. They were consequences. Mistakes grave ones but not intent. And now he is preparing for something else.”

The room stiffened.

“Something else?” the conference man asked.

Chavi’s jaw tightened, but her mind remained clear.

“Yes. Another warning. Another revelation.”

“And what might that be?” he pressed.

Chavi hesitated only a second.

“Someone powerful,” she said. “Someone wealthy. Someone respected. Someone we trust.”

A murmur spread through the chamber.

“He is dismantling faith,” she continued. “Exposing what appears legitimate. He is not attacking the weak he is challenging authority.”

One of the intelligence agents raised a hand.

“But what is his motivation?” he asked. “Why would a man risk everything destroy half a city for this?”

Chavi paused.

Then she answered quietly, but with force.

“What does a person do,” she asked, “when everything meaningful has already been taken from them?”

Silence followed.

The Head Detective leaned back, a rare look of approval crossing his face.

“So what we are concluding,” he said slowly, “is that this is not terrorism. Not militancy. It is vigilantism.”

He allowed the word to settle.

“Something rare in this country. We tolerate injustice so long as it does not touch us personally. We are comfortable. Selfish. And perhaps” he glanced at the projector “those explosions were not weapons, but alarms.”

The host exhaled sharply.

“Even so,” he said, “this remains a crime. A man cannot crown himself judge.”

“Agreed,” the Head Detective replied. “Which is why we do not hunt him as a terrorist. We investigate him as a man.”

He turned toward the table.

"I propose the formation of a dedicated unit. One that abandons its comfort no traffic fines, no routine arrests, no political appeasement. A force that revisits cases left to rot."

Then, almost casually, he added

"And I would like to recommend Detective Chavi as its lead."

Chavi's breath caught.

For a fleeting moment, she forgot where she was.

"Sir " she began, then stopped herself. Protocol silenced the rest.

The intelligence officer stepped toward the projector, its harsh light cutting across his face.

"We are... impressed," he said. "Your hypothesis will be reviewed. If corroborated, we will proceed accordingly."

He smiled but there was something cold beneath it.

Then he turned to Chavi.

"Would you be willing," he asked, "to head the Anti-Crusader Task Force?"

The red eyes on the screen flickered once more.

Arya shook him awake gently.

"Hey. Wake up."

Vansh stirred on the narrow guest bed, his head pounding, his mouth dry. Arya stood beside him, holding a glass.

"Orange juice," he said.

Vansh blinked, memories leaking back in fragments.

Last night...

"What happened?" he muttered, more to himself than Arya.

Arya smirked. "Last night was amazing. You collapsed too early. I still had so much to say."

"I collapsed because I didn't want to hear another word," Vansh said, faintly smiling.

The smile didn't last.

Arya's tone hardened. "So when are you going to do it?"

Vansh sat up. "Do what?"

“Leak the tapes. Like Vanshika wanted.”

“After everything is recorded,” Vansh replied. “Intelligence agencies aren’t fools. Cloud mistakes get people killed. I don’t want even one.”

He paused, then added quietly,

“To go wrong in your own way is better than going right in someone else’s.”

Arya listened without interrupting, sipping his coffee. Steam rose, then vanished.

“The world isn’t ready for us,” Arya said. “What I’m doing I’m doing it for my sister. I was her elder brother. I was supposed to protect her.”

His grip tightened. The ceramic cup cracked in his hand.

“I failed,” he whispered. “So now I’ll avenge her.”

Blood mixed with coffee.

“I won’t stop,” Arya continued, his voice flat, resolved. “Not until I’m dead. I’ll tear apart anything that stands in my way.”

There was no heroism in his words.

Only inevitability.

“What happened to the girl?”

The old man entered the room slowly, his voice already tired. “Is she okay?”

Arya looked at him. Then at Vansh. No one answered.

“Let’s check the news,” Arya said.

They moved to the hall. The television glowed like an open wound. Arya flipped channels one after another. Debates. Politics. Markets. Celebrities. War somewhere far away.

Nothing.

“She should be here,” Arya muttered. “That was a big incident. She should be everywhere.”

But she wasn’t.

Vansh leaned forward. “Let me check.”

His fingers moved fast news sites, local portals, social feeds.

Nothing.

"No reports," he said quietly. "No name. No footage. No follow-up."

Arya frowned. "That doesn't make sense. I was there. Police arrived. I left after that."

The old man laughed once. Bitter. Sharp.

"You're missing something," he said. "You never cared about saving anyone. Not really."

Arya turned toward him.

"All you cared about," the old man continued, "was blowing up a city. Making noise. Because of my dead child."

Silence hardened the room.

"You should've stayed," the old man said. "You should've been there for her. But you ran. Just like you ran when your sister needed you."

Arya snapped. "What are you saying?"

He looked at Vansh, confused, angry. "Why are you blaming me? I'm not a savior. I'm not Batman this isn't a movie. I did what I could."

His voice rose.

"If I had stayed, I wouldn't be fighting street trash. I'd be facing armed police. Trained men. Guns. They weren't there for her. They were there for me."

The old man stepped closer.

"Then there's no difference between you and the system," he said.

"They never save people from falling. They don't listen to depression. They don't prevent deaths. They just punish after it's too late."

He pointed at Arya.

"And you? You beat people. Again and again. Not to change anything but to feel alive. To feel like you matter."

Arya clenched his fists.

"You think you're changing the world?" the old man went on. "You can't change. The system can't change. It will rot. It will blame. It will start wars in the name of peace and never listen to men like you."

Arya's voice cracked. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

The old man didn't hesitate.

"If you can't save someone completely," he said, "you have no right to destroy someone fully."

He turned and walked away.

"I AM NO HERO!" Arya screamed.

The words hit the walls and came back empty.

He looked at Vansh searching. Accusing. "Why did you even tell him about us?"

Vansh shrugged. "Freedom of speech."

They walked downstairs into the basement. The air grew colder.

Arya spoke again, calmer now. "I have questions about our first mission. Those other files what were they?"

"At least four," Vansh replied. "Different from Bansal."

Arya waited.

"Oh," Vansh smiled faintly. "Nothing interesting."

He moved ahead, ending the conversation.

They disappeared into the dark.

The chain gate slid shut behind them

breathing once,

then locking.

"I've got something for you," Vansh said. His voice carried weight. "A surprise."

"A surprise?" Arya frowned. "I'm only thinking about another tape. My sister "

He swallowed. "Listening to her is unbearable. I can't see her anymore. Never."

"You should be excited," Vansh snapped. "Motivated."

He stepped closer. "You're not here to listen to old men. Or anyone else."

"Look at me," Vansh said sharply. "We're not here to serve. Do you understand? We're here because of what Vanshika wanted. We're just doing it creating a spark."

He paused.

"Tomorrow doesn't matter. We could be arrested. You could be caught. You could die."

Arya said nothing.

"I'll give them what they deserve," he finally muttered. "I'll be justice. I'm here to end it."

Something in him shifted.

The darkness took over.

Arya started training.

His fists crashed into the bag again and again.

Footwork. Elbows. Knees. Breath control.

Gymnastics. Calisthenics. Ice-cold recovery baths.

Every discipline bleeding into the next.

With every strike, his mind sharpened.

Focused. Engaged. Lethal.

The rush surged through him.

Vanshika's voice echoed in his head soft, relentless.

She loved me.

He punched harder.

She told me she loved me.

The bag swung violently.

The darkness screamed back at him

but this time, Arya didn't listen.

He kept punching.

Chapter 31: Pride

The basement had a way of swallowing sound.

Not silence never silence but a dense, unmoving heaviness, as though the air itself remembered everything that had ever been suffered within its walls. The lights above hummed faintly, tired, indifferent witnesses. It was there that Vansh stood, unmoving, before a wooden box placed carefully on the table, as though it were something sacred or dangerous.

His hands trembled, not violently, but with the restrained tension of someone holding back a collapse.

Arya entered from the far end of the basement, fresh from recovery. His muscles still carried the burn of exertion, his breath controlled, body disciplined into obedience. Sweat clung to his skin; the smell of iron and effort followed him like a second shadow. He stopped the moment he saw Vansh.

Vansh did not notice him at first.

“What’s going on?” Arya asked, quietly. Not cold. Not sharp. Just real.

Vansh inhaled slowly, as if preparing himself to speak at all required courage.

“I’m just... looking,” he said. “At the box she left for me.”

Arya stepped closer. The wooden box sat between them aged, deliberate, patient. It did not look like something left behind accidentally. It looked planted.

“She invited us to that party,” Vansh continued, his voice uneven but steadying as he spoke. “Not because she wanted us there. Because she knew.”

“Knew what?” Arya asked.

“That we’d come looking. That after she was gone, we wouldn’t stop searching. And she knew...” He paused, eyes fixed

on the grain of the wood. "She knew I'd understand her signals. Even after death."

Arya said nothing. He had learned that grief did not require answers only space.

Vansh opened the box.

Inside, objects rested with unnatural neatness, as if each had been placed with a final thought, a final breath.

Arya reached in first, lifting a smooth, circular object cool to the touch, perfectly round.

"What is this?" he asked.

Vansh's lips curved faintly. A rare, fragile expression.

"It's a moon," he said. "Plug it into a socket. It glows."

Arya turned it slowly in his palm, studying its surface.

"A moon," he murmured. "That's... actually a beautiful gift."

"She always chose symbols," Vansh replied. "Not things."

Arya nodded. He understood that kind of language.

"Well, if you didn't know," Vansh continued, voice finding rhythm now, "she's the one who gave me the name Techman."

Arya raised an eyebrow.

"Mr. Techman," he repeated. "So that's what we tell the world, then?"

Vansh exhaled, almost laughing.

"She said names create direction. That once you name something, you give it responsibility."

Arya reached again into the box.

This time, his fingers closed around something heavier a large, pine-green metal object, its edges worn with use, its presence unmistakably nostalgic.

"And this?" Arya asked.

Vansh swallowed.

"A Carvaan radio," he said. "Pine green. I gave it to her on one of her birthdays."

He paused, then admitted, "It was mine."

Arya looked up.

"I couldn't afford a gift back then," Vansh continued. "So I gave her the only thing I had that mattered. Music. I thought I was sacrificing something."

He let out a breath that was almost a laugh.

"Turns out... she gave it back."

"Now you'll listen," Arya said softly.

"Yes," Vansh replied. "Now I'll listen while you break criminals."

For a moment, they shared a look. Not hope. Not peace. Something quieter. Something earned.

Arya reached into the box once more.

This time, it was smaller. Delicate. A ring box carved with golden leaf patterns, its craftsmanship intimate, personal.

"What's this?" Arya asked, already knowing the answer would hurt.

Vansh's voice dropped.

"A rose-gold leaf ring."

He closed his eyes briefly.

"I gave it to her at City Park. Jaipur. I didn't call it a promise. I called it a mark."

"A mark?" Arya echoed.

"A mole," Vansh corrected. "Something small. Something permanent. So she'd remember me."

He opened the box himself now, revealing the ring inside quiet, patient, waiting.

"And now," Vansh said, his voice breaking only slightly, "she's a ghost. And I'm the one carrying the reminder."

The basement seemed to lean inward, listening.

Pride lived here not arrogance, not vanity.

But attachment disguised as permanence.

Love refusing to accept its own ending.

Arya closed the box gently.

“She didn’t leave these behind,” he said at last. “She arranged them.”

Vansh nodded.

“What had she ever given you?” Arya asked suddenly.

Not accusing.

Not curious.

Just sharp enough to cut.

Vansh didn’t answer at first. His eyes stayed on the table, on the scattered remnants of a life that refused to stay buried. Then, as if the question had opened something long sealed, he spoke.

“Once,” he said quietly, “she gave me a suit.”

Arya turned slightly.

“A real one,” Vansh continued. “Tailored. Clean. Beautiful. The kind people wear when they belong somewhere.”

He smiled not proudly, not happily. Bitterly.

“You know I hacked that tech company,” he went on. “Their waiting list. Their glass towers. Their artificial morality. I needed a suit just to walk in without being invisible.”

His fingers clenched.

“I couldn’t afford one. I was angry at myself, at my family, at the world. Angry enough to mistake sympathy for beggars as philosophy. Angry enough to hate my own reflection.”

He looked up now.

“So I went to her. Not to ask for money. Just advice. I thought she’d tell me where to rent one.”

Vansh let out a breath that trembled.

“Instead, she took me to the biggest mall in the city.”

Arya didn’t interrupt.

“She walked straight past the rental stores,” Vansh said. “Straight into a showroom where I didn’t belong. The salesman looked at me like I was a mistake.”

A pause.

"She bought it. New. Not rented. Not borrowed. My first suit."

His voice softened, unguarded.

"That was the first time I ever wore one. I didn't know how to stand in it. Didn't know how to breathe."

His eyes glistened not with tears yet, but with memory pressing too hard.

"I started crying," he admitted. "Right there. Like a child. And she hugged me."

He swallowed.

"That's what poverty does. It doesn't just take things. It humiliates you for wanting them."

Silence followed. Heavy. Honest.

"You haven't seen that," Vansh finished quietly. "I bet."

Arya smiled.

Not warmly.

Not kindly.

A thin, crooked curve dangerously calm.

"Oh," he whispered, leaning closer, voice edged with sarcasm so smooth it almost sounded like humor. "I've seen worse days."

The basement seemed to listen.

Vansh glanced at him, then murmured, almost absent-mindedly,

"You still have that pineapple keychain, don't you?"

Arya's smile deepened.

"Oh yeah."

He reached into his pocket, fingers brushing past scars and secrets, then placed the headphones on the table. Carefully. Deliberately.

"Shall we?" he asked.

Vansh nodded.

They took their positions habitual, practiced, like a ritual neither of them had named but both obeyed.

The recorder sat between them.

Vansh pressed the button.

Click.

The red light blinked alive.

And whatever was about to be said

was never meant to forgive.

“Hello... you.”

It’s me.

A ghost.

Not the kind that rattles chains or haunts houses but the kind that stays lodged in your conscience, if you still have one.

And now... it has become a curse that you have to listen to this.

I don’t know what the world ever hoped you would become.

Or what it still pretends you are.

Will this system change?

Or has it already decided to rot beautifully polished, perfumed, televised while pretending decay is progress?

In this recording, I’m going to speak about a man.

Not a criminal in the way children imagine villains.

No masks. No knives. No blood on his cuffs.

His power doesn’t sit on the table.

It hangs from a keychain small, ordinary, always in your pocket close enough to forget, sharp enough to wound.

His strength is hidden.

But it bites like a cobra.

His strategies don’t roar.

They seep. Slow. Venomous. Invisible until paralysis sets in.

He has no enemies.

Because he is the one who decides who fights whom.

He arranges the war.

He sells both the weapons and the apology after.

And unlike fantasy villains he doesn't stand outside the system.

He is the system.

He is the owner of company I work – India. Info.

He didn't build his empire for innovation.

He built it for control.

Control of narratives.

Control of screens.

Control of what you see, what you forget, and what you're told never existed.

Behind the glowing studios and patriotic headlines, something else runs.

Quieter. Dirtier.

Smuggling doesn't march through the front door.

It moves through back corridors masked, hidden, protected by paperwork and applause.

And no one ever questioned him.

No one ever wondered how a man rose so fast, so clean, so untouchable.

Why?

Because wealth, when wrapped in nationalism and success stories, stops looking like suspicion and starts looking like destiny.

He inherited more than money.

He inherited permission.

A father's unfinished ambition.

A surname heavy with expectation.

And instead of responsibility he chose indulgence.

Debauchery disguised as entitlement.

Cruelty mistaken for confidence.

Silence bought with salaries.

Are you listening to me, Mr. Raghav Malhotra?

She pauses here.

Just long enough.
Teasing.
Almost amused.
Because she knows something you don't like to admit
You've never been powerful because you were right.
You've been powerful because no one ever dared to ask
questions that wouldn't survive the morning.
Because inspectors learn to look away.
Journalists learn which stories don't pay.
And the public learns that comfort is easier than truth.
So remember this.
Remember it clearly.
Raghav Malhotra is not powerful because he is clean.
He is powerful because no one dares to check his hands.
And hands that are never checked...
are free to do anything.
One day
an ordinary day. That's how these stories always begin.
I was entering my office, thinking about deadlines, coffee,
emails I didn't want to answer.
And you a man too prideful to check the machinery he owns
walked in.
You stopped.
Not because of surprise.
Because of disturbance.
You looked at me like I didn't belong in a room built by your
name.
You asked who I was.
Why I was doing this job.
Not curious.
Evaluating.
As if work itself required your permission.
You spoke softly. Charmed carefully.

You have a way of speaking that sounds like kindness until you realize it's an inspection.

"I could give you anything you want," you said once, casually as if wanting was the problem.

But what I was carrying wasn't something that could be handed over.

And what you press down on once is never easy to lift again.

You talked to me.

You listened.

You made me feel seen without being known.

You told me I didn't need anyone.

That independence was strength.

That attachment was weakness.

You said it like advice.

You meant it like ownership.

"Hello, Vanshika," you said one night

when the office was empty,

when the lights were low,

when it was just the two of us left behind.

You stepped closer.

And that was my first mistake.

Not because I trusted you

but because I felt safe.

You came around more often after that.

Too often to be coincidence.

Just enough to feel natural.

We hung out.

Sometimes.

"Can you not trust me?" you asked.

You took me to dinner.

Coffee at my favorite Italian café

as if remembering my taste was proof of care.

You smiled when I refused gifts.
“Now? You don’t want a gift?” you laughed.
And I said something that must have bruised you more than
you expected:
“People assume they own you,” I said.
“By counting what they’ve spent.”
“I don’t want to feel like a burden.”
“Oh, you won’t be,” you replied quickly.
Too quickly.
“Why can’t you just accept me?”
“You’re beautiful.”
“Your voice is... soothing.”
Compliments stacked like evidence.
As if admiration demanded consent.
“I don’t trust people,” I said.
“I don’t know them.”
And that’s when your pride spoke not loudly, but clearly.
“I’m not like other people,” you said.
Not reassurance.
Declaration.
“I’m stronger.”
“I’m smarter.”
“I’m better.”
Each word climbing over the last.
“There’s no girl who’s rejected me like this,” you continued.
“And here you are ”
You stopped.
Confused.
“I don’t understand what’s wrong.”
Sometimes
you have to understand, I said.
Not everything is meant to be taken.
Not everything bends.

You didn't like that tone.
You noticed it.
Attitude, you'd call it later.
Independence, when it disobeys.
"You're the daughter of Mr. Kumar," you said suddenly.
"My family would love you."
Ah.
Now we were talking legacy.
Now we were talking leverage.
"Oh," I said.
"Now we're talking family?"
I smiled not kindly.
I turned to leave.
That's when you grabbed my hand.
Not violently.
Confidently.
Like authority doesn't need force
only assumption.
I looked at you.
And your eyes couldn't accept it.
Rejection.
Not from a woman
but from a possibility you thought was guaranteed.
Something inside you cracked.
Or maybe it slipped.
You looked at me and said
"Well... to make you trust me
I can show you things."
The sentence hung there.
"Stay away from my sister."
Arya's boot struck the chair hard enough to send it skidding
back.

Plastic scraped concrete. The sound echoed longer than it should have.

“What the ”

He ripped the headphones off and hurled them across the room. They hit the wall and fell limp, like something silenced mid-confession.

“No,” he breathed.

Not loud.

Not angry.

Just final.

Vansh didn’t flinch. He had already lived this moment just not with sound.

“It is what it is,” he said quietly.

Arya turned on him, eyes burning.

“You know what?” he began, pacing. “As a brother you don’t get a choice. You have to see it. You have to hear it. Someone coming close to your sister. Talking to her like that. Touching space that isn’t theirs.”

He laughed once. Sharp. Hollow.

“I don’t know about other brothers,” he continued, “but mine? Overprotective. Obsessive. I wouldn’t let anyone near her. Not like that. Not ever.”

His voice dropped.

“I keep thinking about that girl... the one in the car. Somewhere out there, a brother must’ve felt this. Exactly this.”

Silence again.

Then Vansh spoke not gently, not cruelly.

“You have to acknowledge it,” he said.

“Accept it.”

Arya froze.

“She’s gone,” Vansh continued. “What’s left is memory. And that voice.”

He nodded toward the table.

“If you want to stay away from it you can. That’s your choice.”
Arya stood still.
Accepting consequences was harder than facing enemies.
He wasn’t afraid when he was outside
when he was running, fighting, cutting thumbs off predators
like broken branches.
But this
this reduced him.
Every time he heard her voice, something inside him erupted.
Not outward.
Inward.
A volcano with no exit.
Slowly, he walked back.
The ghost chair creaked as he sat.
He picked up the headphones from the floor, fingers
trembling just once.
Vansh rewound the tape.
Adjusted the levels.
Arya put them on.
He nodded.
The tape resumes.
Raghav took me to show me things.
Not places
proof.
Very classified things.
Things someone like me was never meant to see.
Not because I was special
but because you wanted to feel powerful.
Your pride wouldn’t let you accept defeat.
Not rejection.
Not distance.
So you decided to impress me.
You showed me screens.

Documents.
Warehouses that didn't exist on paper.
Routes that weren't supposed to connect.
Numbers that didn't make sense unless you stopped
pretending they were clean.
You spoke while walking.
Casual. Confident.
"This is how the world works," you said.
"As long as no one asks questions."
And you smiled
like you had just taught me a secret instead of confessing a
crime.
You made a mistake.
And so did I.
I went with you.
I told myself I was observing.
That I was gathering context.
That intelligence meant restraint.
But really
I underestimated what pride does when it feels challenged.
You weren't showing me the truth.
You were proving ownership.
Like a child screaming for chocolate at a fair
not because he's hungry,
but because someone told him no.
And pride doesn't hear no.
It collects it.
Sharpens it.
Turns it into entitlement.
You thought if I saw how big you were
how untouchable
I'd stop resisting.
You didn't realize something.

I wasn't afraid of power.
I was documenting it.
And every step you took forward
you left fingerprints behind.
Not on doors.
On people.
On me.
And the worst part?
You still thought you were in control.
"You ready to come up?"
Raghav asked calmly, fingers still on the steering wheel.
The car was parked where even shadows felt unemployed.
No traffic.
No pedestrians.
No witnesses.
A place where cities forget themselves.
"So you may trust me," he added, like trust was something
earned by isolation.
"I guess," I said.
I didn't like him.
Not even a little.
And I hated myself for going anyway.
Forgive me, God.
We walked upstairs.
The building was old older than intention.
Built on land that once burned bodies into silence.
"A crematorium," he reminded me, casually.
As if history was just another fun fact.
He took my hand.
Not roughly.
Not gently.
Possessively.
Three floors.

No sound but our steps.
H/22 was written on the wall.
Not painted scratched.
Like someone wanted it remembered even after the walls
peeled away.
He knocked.
We entered.
The apartment was small.
White paint trying and failing to look clean.
A narrow hall.
Two rooms.
A cramped kitchen.
A bathroom pressed awkwardly between them.
Everything divided.
Everything compartmentalized.
Just like guilt.
The first room came into view.
Glass jars.
Sealed packets.
Labels that spoke the language of legality while whispering
something else.
Medicinal cannabis.
Not rolled.
Not burned.
Refined.
Measured.
Sanitized.
“This is research,” he said.
“Ayurvedic innovation.”
He smiled.
Publicly, men like him condemned it as moral decay.
Privately, they prescribed it to themselves like absolution.
Illegal for the poor.

Therapeutic for the powerful.
I understood immediately.
This wasn't trafficking.
This was permission sold only to those who already had
everything.
Exported as wellness.
Imported as enlightenment.
Profit wrapped in purity.
Grey-zone hypocrisy, perfected.
The second room was darker.
Men inside.
Cigars burning slowly, like time itself had been drugged.
Files.
Vials.
Boxes that didn't scream danger but waited.
Opium-derived painkillers.
Not street drugs.
Not chaos.
Licensed dependency.
Relief that arrived quietly and never left.
"This isn't narcotics trafficking," I realized aloud.
Raghav laughed.
"This is healthcare," he said.
They didn't poison bodies.
They numbed them.
No overdoses in alleys.
No needles for headlines.
Just prescriptions.
Refills.
Lifetime customers.
Addiction without scandal.
Damage without blood.
"This is how you rule without violence," he told me.

"You make them grateful for the chains."

"See?"

He spread his arms wide, drunk not on alcohol, but dominance.

"This is just the first thing."

He leaned closer.

"I'm telling you my secrets."

His voice dropped.

"I'm the one behind this."

He smiled like a child confessing to breaking a toy he never intended to share.

"You know who I am now?"

He kicked one of the workers sleeping on the floor.

Hard.

"You know what happens if I don't manage these people?" he snapped.

"This business collapses."

He laughed again.

"A market bigger than hunger. Bigger than morality."

Then, quieter almost offended:

"I'm the kingpin here."

And in that moment, I understood.

This wasn't power.

This was pride

the kind that believes the world survives because you allow it to.

The kind that confuses control with responsibility.

Exploitation with order.

Cruelty with necessity.

And the worst part?

He wasn't afraid of being exposed.

He was proud to be seen.

I felt sick.

Not the dramatic kind no sudden collapse, no cinematic gasp.
Just that slow, invasive nausea that creeps in when something
inside you realizes it has walked into a place it cannot forgive itself
for entering.

The smell hit first.

Not rot worse.

The smell of money masking decay.

Chemicals sweetened just enough to pretend they were clean.

Cigars trying to overwrite guilt.

I wasn't ready for this cheapness.

For how small it all felt.

My mouth found courage before my spine did.

"What is this?" I asked.

Raghav didn't answer immediately.

He smiled pleased, almost proud.

"This," he said, stepping closer, "is trust."

The word landed wrong.

Like a gift wrapped around a knife.

He moved nearer, lowering his voice, as if intimacy could
sanitize confession.

"You're talking to one of the richest men on the list," he
continued.

"I had to make sure you understand what I'm offering."

Offering.

He gestured around him.

"And you," he said, eyes narrowing with certainty, "you're the
one I like. You could be the queen of all this."

Queen.

He lifted a hand, hovering testing distance.

"And look, Vanshika," he added softly, rehearsed calm in his
tone,

"This is nothing. I invest in things even your father couldn't."

That's when it cut deeper.

"I'm richer," he said plainly.

"I just don't understand what you're doing in my company when you should be sitting on my lap."

He stepped closer.

Too close.

I wanted to slap him.

Not metaphorically.

Not symbolically.

I wanted the sound of it to echo.

But I didn't.

Because shock is a strange paralysis.

And because somewhere inside me, something was trying desperately to understand before it broke.

"And my father?" I asked, my voice shaking despite my will.

"What did you just say about my father?"

"What?" he asked, genuinely confused.

As if confusion itself was a shield.

"This," he said again, spreading his arms,

"this is what I have to offer."

He looked almost offended now.

"This town this ghost town is filled with this. That's why I have status. I control the media. No police. No military. No one touches me."

Pride dripped from every syllable.

"Your father would have been impressed," he said, brows knitting.

"So why aren't you?"

Impressed.

The word felt obscene.

"What?" I whispered.

My thoughts began to stutter, collide.

"What did you say about my dad?"

He leaned in, chuckling now soft, amused, confident that the world had already agreed with him.

“Oh,” he said lightly, “you don’t know?”

He moved closer again.

“You don’t even know your own father, Mr. Kailash Kumar.”

The name felt like it had been pulled out of my chest.

“The greatest investor of India,” he continued, enjoying himself now.

“The Buffett of India, they call him.”

My ears rang.

“He invested in us,” Raghav said.

“In my father’s business too.”

His voice grew nostalgic.

“My father Rajiv Malhotra. They were partners. Friends. Always had time for each other.”

Friends.

Partners.

The room tilted.

I couldn’t hear the rest.

Couldn’t breathe properly.

The walls felt closer than he ever had.

I walked out.

I don’t remember how my feet found the door.

I don’t remember the stairs.

Just the sudden cold air against my face as I stepped onto the terrace.

I inhaled too fast.

Exhaled too slow.

Trying to convince my lungs that I was still allowed oxygen.

The city below didn’t know anything.

Didn’t care.

I stared up, not at God at space.

As if distance itself could save me.

That's when I heard footsteps.

Fast.

Urgent.

Raghav appeared behind me, breathless, holding a bottle of water like a peace offering.

"Hey," he said softly now.

Concern rehearsed into his voice.

He extended the bottle.

"You're overwhelmed. I get it."

He smiled again.

That same smile.

And in that moment, standing on the edge of the city, I realized something terrifying

This wasn't a mistake for him.

This was courtship.

And I had just learned what kind of world he believed he owned.

He sighed behind me.

Not loudly.

Not angrily.

A tired breath like a man disappointed that the world had refused to kneel.

"Were you always this soft?" he said. "To know the truth... he never did tell you."

I didn't turn around.

I was ashamed of myself not because of what he said, but because a part of me still wanted the ground to swallow this moment whole. My eyes clung to the distant fort, its ancient stones holding centuries of blood and pride and silence. History had learned how to stand without apology. I hadn't.

"No," I whispered. "I guess not."

My voice drained out of me like water from cracked clay.

"I can't be with you," I said then finally.

The words came heavy, bruised, but certain.

"I can't. You people " my throat closed, then forced itself open again, " you're criminals with standards. Hungry for status. For fame. And I could never never like you. You're the worst kind."

Silence.

Then

Glass.

The bottle shattered behind me, violent and sudden, like a gunshot without mercy.

I flinched.

I didn't turn.

But I felt it the rupture.

The moment when something inside him collapsed.

You were angry, Raghav.

Not ordinary anger.

The kind that comes when a lifetime of belief of entitlement gets scraped away by a single refusal.

"What did you just say to me?" he roared.

The word came next, spat like poison.

"Bitch."

I had never been spoken to like that.

Not once.

Not even in anger.

Fear slid under my skin not screaming yet, just crawling. But it was only the beginning.

"You think this is impure?" he continued, his voice rising, breaking its own polish.

"This? What your father built what he invested in was that pure?"

Each step he took toward me felt like the air tightening.

"You wore the fashion of this money," he sneered.

"If this is wrong, then your father's entire life was wrong. He craved status. Power. And now you dare judge us?"

His words lashed, fast and sharp.

"What you ate as a child," he went on, "the beautiful skincare, the makeup where do you think it came from? From this money. And now you look away?"

Then he said it.

That word.

"Nasty whore."

Something inside me melted not softly.

Collapsed.

My legs wanted to give up.

My body wanted to disappear.

But fear does something strange it forces motion.

He laughed then, a low, animal sound.

"I could fuck women like you every hour," he growled.

"Do you know that? And what the fuck are you doing in my office working like a servant when your insane father left you billions to fuck whoever you want?"

That was it.

The line broke.

Anger surged not loud, not dramatic but sharp enough to cut through fear.

"Don't you dare," I said.

Not my father.

Not him.

He lunged.

"Where are you going to run?" he shouted.

"This is a ghost town. It's all mine. This terrace mine."

He was close now. Too close.

"I could use you like a condom," he hissed, "and throw you off this building like that thin waste, and no one would touch me. I decide everything."

I had prepared for this.

Not consciously.

But instinctively.

My hand found the spray before my mind caught up.

He rushed me.

I sprayed.

The scream that came out of him was not human.

Red flooded his eyes. He collapsed, clawing at his face, howling, cursing, thrashing like a wounded animal. I froze for half a second half a second too long watching disbelief dance with horror.

Then I ran.

Keys.

Stairs.

Breath tearing my chest apart.

I didn't look back.

I didn't stop until I reached home.

That night, sleep never came.

I sat upright, clutching the chili spray like a talisman, heart pounding at every imagined footstep. Every shadow felt like a sentence being passed. I understood then why people hire guards. Why wealth buys walls of flesh.

I had wanted independence.

A simple life.

A middle-class quiet.

That night, even an army wouldn't have comforted me.

No human could.

I had been raised like a queen until my parents died, until the world cracked and now, because I refused to use my inheritance the way monsters expected, I had been shown the truth of power.

I was afraid.

Afraid of you, Raghav Malhotra.

And you didn't just try to win my trust you shattered my ability to trust at all.

To step outside.
To believe again.
The recording stopped.
Arya's fist came down like a verdict.
The table did not resist.
Plastic shattered.
Wires snapped like nerves.
Another headphone died sixth corpse in a silent row.
"Nah," Arya said, breath ragged, eyes burning. "I'm finding this motherfucker. And I'm killing him. That's all."
There was no poetry in his voice now.
No philosophy.
Just something ancient and feral crawling out of his chest.
He turned sharply, crossed the room, yanked open the steel trunk. The smell of rubber, oil, and metal rose like a confession. Gloves. Vest. Mask. The quiet armour of a man who had stopped believing in tomorrow.
Vansh came up behind him.
"You can't just kill him."
Arya froze mid-motion.
Slowly dangerously he turned.
"What the fuck are you even saying?" Arya snarled. "Didn't you even hear what it said? He abused my sister. He fucking yelled at her. He warned that he's gonna rape her."
His jaw clenched so hard it trembled.
"Now I'll teach him the lesson how condom falls off."
The words weren't clever.
They weren't symbolic.
They were pure, ugly rage spoken by a brother whose world had already burned once.

"I meant " Vansh stepped forward, voice steadier than it had any right to be. "You can't just go and kill him. He's rich. Wrapped in guards. Buried under money and law."

Arya laughed a short, broken sound.

"You stay shut the fuck up," he snapped. "Just track his phone with your hacking material, and I'll put a bullet in that fucker's head."

He said it like ordering tea.

But Vansh didn't flinch.

He didn't rush.

He didn't argue.

Something in him... shifted.

He stood still, hands sliding slowly into his pockets, shoulders loose, head slightly tilted like a man studying an insect before deciding how to end it.

"What's the fun in killing instantly with a gun?" Vansh asked softly.

Arya paused.

"I've studied this," Vansh continued. His smile surfaced not wide, not cruel, just wrong. Faded. Hollow. Like Johann Liebert's calm before a sentence that ends lives.

"They don't even have time to feel pain. The brain shuts down. Mercy disguised as violence."

Arya stared at him.

"When," Vansh went on, voice low and even, "you can torture without touching. When you can expose without bleeding. When you can peel a man alive without laying a finger on him."

The room felt colder.

"He was not Vansh anymore," Arya realised.

This wasn't the grieving hacker.

This was Mr. Techman fully awake.

"We don't kill him first," Vansh said. "We empty him."

Arya's breath slowed.

"We take his money. His companies. His shadow deals. His 'medical research.' His allies who laugh with him at dinners and pretend not to know where the blood comes from."

His eyes lifted sharp now, surgical.

"We strip his pride," Vansh said. "Publicly. Slowly. Until every screen that once protected him turns into a mirror."

Arya felt something terrible and intoxicating coil inside him.

"Until," Vansh continued, "there's nothing left. No guards. No influence. No name."

A pause.

"Just a body," he finished. "Like a naked man. And then we fire it. Bury deep."

Silence fell not peaceful, not empty.

It was the silence of agreement.

Arya closed the trunk.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

He looked at Vansh not as a friend, not as a partner but as something newly forged.

"Track him," Arya said.

Chapter 32: PRIDE (Act 2)

Arya opened another box.

This one did not creak like the others.

It breathed slow, sealed, deliberate like a coffin that knew it would be needed.

The gear inside was not designed for show. It was thick, layered, unforgiving. Black swallowed most of it, but beneath the darkness ran dull crimson seams, not decorative functional, reinforced at joints where bodies usually fail. The half-helmet rested like a severed thought, covering only to the bridge of the nose, leaving the eyes exposed. Not for intimidation. For awareness.

A hood followed dense fabric, almost architectural meant to collapse light around the head, to erase outline, to make recognition uncertain even to memory.

Arya lifted each piece with the care of a man handling evidence rather than equipment.

The backpack was thin, deceptively so pressed flat like a secret. Inside it, weight was distributed with intelligence: compact elements, contingencies folded into contingencies. Even the smallest additions had purpose. Nothing sentimental. Nothing unnecessary.

This was not armor.

This was intent, stitched together.

Vansh watched silently.

Arya checked the pockets each one deliberate. The electric pistol rested where instinct would reach before thought. Smoke capsules nestled like seeds of confusion. The compact sidearm was there too not a promise, not a plan just an acknowledgement that the world often refuses clean endings.

The knife was unassuming. No ornament. No fantasy.

The gloves were different.

They wrapped not only around the hands but around memory ropes integrated into the fabric, tested, practiced, worn smooth by repetition. The inner suit beneath it all was subtle, engineered with restraint, resisting cuts not by bravado but by understanding where violence usually lands.

It was the best suit they had ever opened.

Arya did not say that.

He simply breathed differently once it was on.

“The surprise I told you about,” Vansh said finally.

Arya stepped through the darkness, adjusting the fit as he moved. The material did not resist him it accepted him, like it had been waiting. His eyes were no longer wild. The rage was still there, yes but now it had edges.

They approached the far corner of the basement.

This place had been closed to Arya for weeks. Vansh had worked there alone, late nights bleeding into early mornings, refusing questions with the patience of a man who knew timing mattered more than explanation.

Arya stopped.

He sensed it before he saw it.

Vansh reached out, gripped the cloth draped over the shape, and pulled.

The fabric fell.

Arya stood still.

For a moment, the rage paused not gone, not forgiven but recruited.

Before him stood the machine.

An upgraded, bench-tuned Enfield Continental GT 650, stripped of nostalgia and rebuilt for purpose. Apex Black swallowed its frame, the finish matte enough to kill reflections, sharp enough to suggest movement even at rest. Every line had been adjusted not to impress, but to respond.

It did not look fast.

It looked certain.

Vansh watched Arya's face carefully. He didn't expect words. He didn't get them.

Arya nodded once.

That was enough.

"This will work," he said.

Vansh allowed himself a breath.

"I've recalibrated everything," Vansh said, his voice calm, clinical. "It won't behave like a showroom machine anymore. It listens now."

He tapped the console.

"The display's integrated no glare, no noise. You'll read it when you need it, not before. The sound profile is adjustable. Loud when you want fear. Silent when you want absence."

He paused, then pointed.

"And this don't touch it unless I tell you."

Arya followed his finger to a barely visible switch.

"When engaged," Vansh continued, "it overrides restraint. Temporary. Dangerous. It trades subtlety for escape."

Arya looked at him.

"Velocity button?" he asked.

Vansh smiled faintly.

"Velocity button," he confirmed. "But only when I guide you. This machine isn't meant to roar. It's meant to arrive and disappear."

Arya circled the bike slowly.

He placed a gloved hand on the tank.

It was cold.

Steady.

Alive in the way tools are alive not emotional, not moral just obedient to whoever understands them.

For the first time since the tape ended, Arya's thoughts aligned.

Not revenge.

Procedure.

Raghav Malhotra would not fall because of rage.

He would fall because pride always demands an audience and tonight, the audience was ready.

Vansh stepped back into the shadows.

"From here on," he said quietly, "we don't chase him."

Arya mounted the machine.

"We let him walk toward us."

Arya let his gloved fingers rest on the handlebar as if it were a living spine beneath his palm. The machine did not merely wait it listened. The low vibration beneath the metal was not impatience; it was recognition.

"It is great," Arya said at last, his voice steadier than the storm inside him.

"So this is why we were practising biking all along."

Vansh said nothing immediately. He watched the way Arya sat not recklessly, not eagerly but with the posture of someone who had already accepted that tonight would carve something permanent into him.

Arya leaned forward.

"Now I'm ready to unleash this beast."

The ignition responded before Vansh could. A deep, restrained roar crawled through the basement, not loud enough to alert the world, but violent enough to make the walls remember it.

"It has an eye-lock," Vansh said calmly, as though discussing a wristwatch.

"Only someone with red-spectrum retinal signature can start it. No duplication. No override. No thief."

Arya smirked faintly.

“So even if I die,” he said, “it stays loyal.”

The engine growled again almost offended by the suggestion.

“The helmet is automated,” Vansh continued. “Triggered by sudden torque imbalance, altitude drop, or cranial velocity exceeding human tolerance. There’s an airbag lining inside. Tested.”

Arya tilted his head.

“Tested how well?”

“Seventy-seven percent survival rate,” Vansh replied.

There was a pause.

“Seventy-seven?” Arya exhaled. “What about the rest?”

Vansh adjusted the tablet in his hand, deliberately avoiding eye contact.

“I’m afraid those were... unrecoverable outcomes.”

Arya laughed once. Short. Hollow.

“That explains the imports.”

“Yes,” Vansh said. “Other models are coming. Heavier. Louder. Less... sentimental.”

He stepped closer, resting a hand briefly on the fuel tank.

“But none like this. This one I didn’t design it. I raised it.”

Arya looked up.

On the front of the bike, carved into the metal with brutal simplicity, was the mark.

V

Not decorative.

Not symbolic.

Declarative.

“Just for you,” Vansh said softly.

“Mr. Vengeance.”

The basement lights dimmed slightly as the timer on the wall flickered into clearer focus.

00:15:00

Winter pressed against the concrete above them like a held breath. One a.m. had that quality too late for forgiveness, too early for mercy. Cold crept in through the seams, thick and deliberate, as though the night itself wished to witness what was about to leave this place.

Vansh straightened, professionalism returning like a switch flipped in his spine.

“Let’s revise,” he said.

Arya’s fist tightened unconsciously.

“You’re heading to the Ghost Town,” Vansh continued. “The same location mentioned in the recordings. Abandoned officially. Occupied unofficially. No civilians. No witnesses that matter.”

Arya didn’t speak. His jaw worked once.

“You strike there,” Vansh said. “No heroics. No improvisation. The cameras in your suit will do the talking. Everything will be captured in high-definition faces, voices, routes. The feed comes straight to me.”

He tapped the tablet.

“From there, you isolate someone. Not the loudest. Not the strongest. The one who knows where the money sleeps.”

Arya nodded slowly.

“The black reserves won’t be in banks,” Vansh went on. “They’ll be hidden where pride feels safest places no one suspects because no one wants to imagine them.”

He paused, then added quietly,

“The bike pack contains kerosene.”

Arya finally looked at him.

“I know what that means,” he said.

“Good,” Vansh replied. “Then you know what not to burn.”

The timer ticked.

00:07:40

“I don’t think the police are ready for you yet,” Vansh said. “Your shadow is still theoretical. To them, this is still noise. We have a boundary.”

Arya swung his leg fully over the bike now, settling in as though locking himself into a verdict.

“A clear boundary,” Vansh repeated. “Cross it only when I say.”

The engine quieted waiting.

Arya pulled the helmet on. The interior sealed with a soft hiss, the world narrowing into sharpened focus.

“Vansh,” he said.

“Yes?”

“If I don’t come back ”

“You will,” Vansh interrupted.

Not reassurance.

Calculation.

The timer hit zero.

The basement door began to rise.

Cold night air flooded in like judgment.

The garage doors yawned apart like the jaws of some obedient beast. Steel slid over steel with a low, funereal groan. The countdown bled itself dry on the concrete wall.

7.

6.

5.

4.

3.

2.

1.

Arya tightened his grip.

The clutch was eased not rushed, not trembled. His boot kicked the lever down with the confidence of ritual. First gear

engaged, and the machine answered him like it had been waiting its whole life to be awakened by this particular rage.

The bike surged forward.

It tore through the mansion's underbelly, headlights slicing pillars of dust and shadow. The night swallowed him whole as he burst past the iron gates and into the city's dying glow streetlamps flickering like exhausted witnesses. The road stretched ahead, empty, indifferent, wide as a confession no one wanted to hear.

Arya leaned in.

The engine didn't roar.

It spoke.

A deep, violent timbre like a throat clearing before a sentence meant to ruin lives.

Above him, the drones followed, silent guardians with unblinking eyes. Red dots danced across the asphalt, tracking his velocity, his heartbeat, his intent. The helmet's transparent visor shimmered faintly, then slid shut with a soft mechanical sigh.

Click.

The red-eye lock ignited.

A dull crimson glow pulsed inside the glass, reflecting back at him not eyes anymore, but intent sharpened into color. He twisted the throttle harder. Second gear. Third. The countryside opened like a black lung inhaling him.

Speed climbed.

210.

220.

The road screamed beneath the tires.

No headlights.

No houses.

No gods.

Just the wind clawing at his shoulders and the rhythm of the engine pounding time into his bones.

And then

Her voice.

Not real. Not playing. Not transmitted.

Memory had no respect for firewalls.

Vanshika.

Her breath.

Her pause before speaking.

That break in her voice where dignity bled into terror.

The terrace.

The smell.

The words.

The condom.

The humiliation didn't replay as sound it replayed as heat behind his eyes, as pressure in his jaw, as a sickness in his chest that wanted out through his fists.

Raghav's face surfaced in fragments. Smiling. Confused. Enraged. That moment where rejection cracked his pride and something ugly crawled out.

Arya's teeth clenched.

His scream never left his lungs but it tore through him all the same.

I'll burn it all, he thought.

Every room. Every lie. Every breath he thinks he owns.

The bike answered with more speed.

And then

A blur.

Small.

Brown.

Alive.

A puppy.

Right there.

Frozen in the beam of his headlight.

Time collapsed.

Arya's left hand clenched the clutch hard enough to hurt. His right slammed the rear brake with instinct, not calculation. The tires shrieked a high, terrified sound as rubber lost its argument with asphalt.

The bike slid.

Sideways.

The world tilted violently.

The helmet detonated outward not an explosion, but a sudden bloom. Airbags inflated around his skull, snapping his head back into brutal alignment. His body lifted, weightless for a breath that felt stolen, then

The backpack jerked.

Vansh's override engaged.

A sharp mechanical tug, perfectly timed.

Arya was flung.

Not gracefully.

Not heroically.

He tumbled.

Grass.

Dirt.

Sky.

Ground.

He rolled until the night itself seemed dizzy.

In the basement miles away, Vansh stood rigid before his screens.

"GET THE HELMET OFF!" he shouted into the mic, fingers white against the desk. "ARYA GET IT OFF, NOW!"

The drone feeds shook. Static hissed at the edges.

Arya lay still.

Too still.

Vansh slammed his fist down once. Twice.

"Get up," he muttered.

Then louder.

“Get up. Get up. GET UP.”

Seconds stretched like exposed nerves.

Then

Movement.

A hand.

Arya’s fingers twitched, then found the helmet latch. He tore it off and sucked air like it was new technology. His face was scraped, his breath uneven but his eyes burned, alive and furious.

He didn’t speak.

He stood.

Walked back to the bike.

The machine lay tilted, breathing hot metal into the cold night. He straightened it with a grunt, muscles screaming, rage steadying him like a spine.

Above, the sky was endless and empty.

A snake slid through the grass nearby, its body cutting a quiet S through the earth.

Arya didn’t look at it.

Didn’t care.

“Why did you stop?” Vansh asked, his voice lower now. Measured. Watching.

Arya swung a leg over the bike.

“The puppy,” he said simply.

Silence.

Vansh leaned back slowly, realization sinking its teeth in.

“You chose to risk yourself,” he said, almost to himself, “instead of killing something weaker.”

Arya didn’t respond.

The engine restarted.

But something lingered.

An old voice, buried deep ragged, unwanted.

If you can’t save someone completely,

you have no right to destroy someone completely.

Arya exhaled through his nose.

His answer was quiet. Final.

"I'm no hero."

The bike surged forward again, tearing itself back into the darkness toward the ghost town, toward pride, toward a man who had mistaken fearlessness for invincibility.

Vansh finally exhaled slow, deliberate, as though the breath itself had been held hostage by a thought he did not wish to confront. Relief came, but it was not clean. It arrived tangled with confusion, knotted tight around a single, irritating question.

Why?

Why would a man an atheist by conviction, a nihilist by temperament risk exposure, risk timing, risk everything, just to stop a puppy from being crushed beneath indifferent wheels? The logic refused to align. Vansh knew this man. Or at least, he knew the version of him that mattered. A man preparing to kill. A man who believed the universe owed nothing and offered no mercy. And yet

We both have blood on our hands, Vansh thought, the idea settling uneasily. Different kinds of blood, perhaps. Different excuses. But blood nonetheless.

The radar still glowed faintly on the console. Thirty minutes late. The delay should have annoyed him. Instead, it only deepened the fog in his mind. Too much time left to think. Too much silence. And so, almost instinctively, Vansh reached forward and turned the dial of the Carvaan radio, letting sound intrude where reason had begun to falter.

Music spilled out soft at first, then certain, like a voice that had always known it would be heard.

He leaned back, letting the rhythm settle in his chest, waiting as Arya closed the distance elsewhere, unseen, unstoppable.

Then

The velocity button clicked.

A sharp, decisive sound. Mechanical. Final.

Red nitro ignited behind him like a controlled explosion, a burst of fire tearing itself free from restraint. The bike surged forward, screaming in sudden fury, the rear wheel clawing at the asphalt as the front lifted clean off the ground. For a breathless second, Vansh rode the world balanced on a single spinning line of rubber and will.

Cold winter air tore at him, biting through fabric and skin, but beneath it bloomed a violent warmth the heat of combustion, of motion, of purpose. Fire against frost. Resolve against doubt.

The radio breathed behind him, steady, almost devotional:

“Jaakho rakhe saiyaan, maar sake na koi...”

The words followed him, wrapped themselves around the roar of the engine. Protected by something unnamed. Something unseen.

He leaned into the turn, body tilting, trusting momentum more than thought. The road curved away beneath him, lights stretching, blurring, dissolving into streaks of color as ambition pushed harder, faster.

“Baali ho na banka todd sake na koi...”

The gears answered, metal speaking to metal, each shift a declaration. The road was no longer a path it was motion itself, rushing to meet him.

“Prem ka dhaga baandh ke saiyaan, Rakhe apni chhaya...”

Speed became unreal, almost abstract. Focus sharpened until there was nothing left in the world but the line ahead, the hum of the machine, and the pulse in his wrists.

“Jo uske sang chal pade, uska kaun mitaaya...”

The words clung to him as the landscape thinned and darkened, civilization peeling away in reluctant layers.

“Kagaz ki naav na samjho isko, na paani ka khel...”

Then gates.

Rust-eaten iron stood open like a wound that had never healed. Vansh crossed the threshold without slowing.

The ghost town received him in silence.

Buildings loomed like abandoned thoughts, windows dark, streets hollow. This was no longer a place meant for the living. It was a holding ground for memories, for sins, for endings.

“Sankat aaye laakh bhale hi, par mann na ghabraaye...”

The engine softened as Vansh guided the bike inward, deeper, careful now. He flicked the silencer mode on; the roar collapsed into a muted growl, a predator learning restraint. He rolled to a stop near the quarter mid-block, shadows swallowing the bike almost immediately.

The radio crackled once, as if reluctant to let go, then offered its final line:

“Ant samay jab saans thame, tab saiyaan hi aaye.”

Silence followed.

Not empty silence expectant.

Vansh sat still, hands resting on the grips, eyes fixed ahead into the dark geometry of the ghost town. Somewhere beyond this stillness, Arya was arriving. Somewhere beyond morality, an end was being prepared.

And yet, the echo of the song lingered, stubborn as conscience, whispering of protection, of fate, of a hand that reaches out only at the very last breath.

As he stepped off the bike, boots meeting the dead earth of the street, Vansh was already ahead of the moment. The drone hovered before him like a trained instinct made metal silent, alert, obedient. Around them, the quarters stood hunched and brittle, their walls powdered with dust and neglect. Time had chewed at them patiently. The word crematorium no longer felt metaphorical here; it felt architectural. A place meant not to end life, but to store what remained after it had fled.

The drone's V-rays activated, thin invisible lines slicing through walls and floors, reading heat, movement, intent. Data spilled onto the monitor. Arya leaned forward over the bike's digital display, his eyes narrowing as he looked through the drone's lens, seeing the world stripped of illusion.

Third floor.

He lifted his gaze.

The street below lay still unnaturally so. Not the silence of sleep, but the silence of abandonment, like something had fled and forgotten to return. A negative pressure seemed to sit in the air, pressing against the lungs. And yet, above it all, the third floor ruptured the quiet.

DJ speakers thundered behind concrete walls. Bass shook windows that should have collapsed years ago. Noise without life. Celebration without joy.

Winter thickened as he focused upward. Purple lights pulsed behind the curtains unnatural, electric, staining the night like bruises. Flashes cut through the darkness, brief and violent, like trapped thunder.

"You know what to do," Vansh said, voice low, stripped of ornament. Strategy, not reassurance.

Arya nodded once.

He drew the rope lifter from his gear, compact and scarred from use. The device locked onto the balcony railing above with a soft mechanical confirmation. The cable tightened, then began to pull.

Up.

His boots left the ground.

For a fraction of a second, balance betrayed him. His feet slipped, the world yawed, and gravity reached up with greedy fingers. Arya corrected instantly core tight, jaw clenched forcing control back into his body. It was close. Too close. But he did not look down. Looking down was how fear learned your name.

“Don’t worry,” Vansh guided calmly through the comms. “You’re just up here. It works. I’ve tested it.”

Arya didn’t answer. He focused upward, muscles burning as the lift continued. The drone adjusted its path, hovering beside him, reading his breath rate, registering spikes in fear, cataloguing instinctive responses. It followed him not as a machine, but as a witness.

Just as his fingers brushed the balcony

The rope maintainer ejected.

A sharp mechanical snap. Sudden absence of tension.

Instinct took over.

Arya’s left hand shot out and caught the edge of the balcony railing. Metal bit into skin. His body swung once, hard, before he hauled himself up with a strained exhale that escaped him like laughter.

“It was... supposed... to... work,” he muttered, chuckling under his breath.

Below, Vansh had no excuses ready.

Above, Arya had no time to offer him blame.

He rolled onto the balcony, blood roaring in his ears, veins alive with heat. Before the moment could cool, the second drone moved silent, precise floating toward the third floor door. It hovered, then pressed the doorbell.

Once.

Inside, two men sat in a cramped hall, each occupying a chair like they owned the space by inertia alone. Money lay stacked between them, greasy with fingerprints. The DJ screamed cheap pop, louder than thought, louder than consequence.

Smugglers. Machines with human shapes.

The bell rang.

“Who’s that?” one asked, irritation leaking through his voice.

“Who am I to know?” the fatter one scoffed, not looking up. “You go see.”

The thinner man rose, annoyance outweighing caution. He opened the door.

Nothing.

He leaned out, peered down the corridor, glanced toward the terrace. Cold air met him. Emptiness stared back.

Confused, he shut the door and turned.

The DJ still screamed.

Then

Silence.

The music cut as if strangled.

The room greeted him transformed. Furniture overturned. Air heavy with violence. On the floor lay the other man, unmoving, his mouth stuffed obscenely with bundled cash currency gagging breath, wealth pressed where screams should have been.

From the shadows rose a figure.

A man in a thick suit.

He stood slowly, deliberately, squeezing the money in his hand as if testing how much pressure paper could take before it surrendered.

Fear struck the remaining man late but when it came, it came fully. He bolted for the red button mounted near the wall.

Too slow.

Arya emerged from behind him like a thought he could not suppress. He caught the man by the back, fingers locking into muscle and cloth. The man thrashed, desperation sharpening his movements, and somehow miraculously his finger struck the button.

A click.

Then pain.

Arya kicked his feet out from under him. The man screamed as the world inverted, his body hurled backward into a white wall. Impact. Breath crushed out of him.

“Where is the basement?” Vansh’s voice cut through the room, sharp, demanding.

The man tried to speak.

Couldn’t.

Arya stepped closer.

Red eyes burned not glowing, not supernatural, but focused with such intensity that it fractured the man’s mind. Something inside him misfired. Survival forgot its language.

“Tell me,” Arya said, his voice carrying weight, pressure, an opaque force that pushed against the man’s chest.

“What basement?” the man stammered, terror stripping honesty down to reflex. “I I don’t know.”

He was almost crying.

And Arya did not blink.

Vansh stayed where he was, mind moving faster than his fingers, calculations stacking over instinct. Routes, blind spots, response time he ran through them all in the narrow space behind his eyes. Then he spoke, voice steady through the mic, cutting cleanly into Arya’s ear.

“Well,” Vansh began, not bothering to soften it, “the drones are flagging danger. Multiple signatures. Guys from different quarters they’re moving. Running. Whatever he just pressed wasn’t panic. It was protocol.”

Arya listened.

And then he punched.

The man never saw it coming. Arya’s fist drove forward with controlled violence, smashing into the man’s face and carrying him backward. Bone met wall. Wall met floor. The man slid down, limp, his body collapsing like it had been emptied of intent.

“You are the danger,” Vansh said, realization sharpening his tone. “Rental pigs are mobilizing. They’re coming in fast. Far end assault rifles. You can handle blades, hands, close combat. But

you do not stay when the guns arrive. Automated response teams aren't brave. They're trained."

Arya didn't answer immediately.

He pulled out his camera.

Click.

One room.

Click.

Another.

The drone lights swept across the apartment as Arya documented everything with surgical precision trafficking material stacked like inventory, medicinal cannabis bundled and tagged, opium-derived painkillers sealed and labeled for distribution. Evidence, undeniable and damning.

Then documents.

He flipped through them quickly until he found what he needed.

Signatures.

Raghav Malhotra.

Clear. Legible. Intentional.

"According to my calculations," Vansh warned, urgency finally cracking through, "you have three minutes. Down the stairs, on the bike, out of the area. These men are not amateurs."

"I don't care," Arya replied flatly.

He took the last photographs in HD, ensuring angles, dates, everything clean. Then he folded the documents and secured them inside his jacket.

"Did you get everything?" Arya asked, already moving.

"Oh yes," Vansh confirmed. "But your margin is thin. Very thin."

Arya stepped out into the corridor and broke into a controlled jog toward the stairs. From above, he saw movement shadows shifting, boots scraping concrete. Men were already coming up.

One saw him.

Another shouted.

They rushed.

The first man came head-on.

Arya closed the distance instead of retreating.

A straight punch snapped out fast, compact connecting with the man's jaw. The impact jolted him backward, but he didn't fall. Ropes of muscle kept him upright. The second man lunged from the side, aiming for Arya's stomach.

Arya twisted.

The strike grazed fabric instead of flesh.

He countered immediately an elbow drove downward into the attacker's collarbone, sharp and precise. Bone cracked. The man howled, clutching his shoulder as Arya followed with a knee to the ribs, folding him inward.

The first man recovered enough to swing again.

Too slow.

Arya caught the punch, rolled his wrist, and slammed a Muay Thai elbow into the man's temple. The sound was dull. Final. The man collapsed where he stood.

Arya exhaled once.

Heavy now.

Fatigue began to whisper.

Then two more emerged from the stairwell ahead.

Together.

They didn't hesitate.

Arya didn't give them space.

He sprinted forward and jumped.

His knee smashed into the chest of the nearer man, knocking the wind out of him as they both crashed into the railing. Before gravity could decide the outcome, Arya twisted mid-air, landing cleanly.

The second man swung wildly.

Arya raised his guard, forearms absorbing the blows thud, thud each strike measured, each defense economical. He stepped inside the man's reach and unleashed a rapid combination: jab, cross, elbow. The elbow split skin.

The man staggered.

From behind, the first one recovered enough to grab Arya's shoulder.

Bad choice.

Arya dropped his weight, hooked the arm, and executed a sharp Muay Thai sweep. The man hit the stairs hard, head bouncing once before going still.

The last man rushed in desperation.

Arya met him with calm.

A teep kick drove into the man's abdomen, sending him backward. As he reeled, Arya advanced fists flying now, fast and ruthless. Punches snapped into face and ribs, each one placed with intent, not anger.

The man fell.

Arya stood still for a moment longer than he should have.

Breathing heavier now.

Blood warm under his knuckles.

As Arya reached the open stairwell of the second floor, the space widened briefly just enough to feel exposed.

"You have one minute," Vansh reminded him, the words clipped, precise.

Arya drew his electric pistol. His grip was steady, but before he could raise it fully, a man appeared descending the stairs.

Not sloppy.

Not desperate.

This one moved like a professional.

The man closed the distance instantly. Arya tried to fire

The pistol was struck from his hand mid-motion, skidding across concrete and disappearing into shadow. The man's fist

followed, crashing into Arya's mouth. Teeth rang. Arya reeled back, vision stuttering.

He countered on instinct punch, kick, another forcing space while maintaining forward motion. But the man absorbed it, answered with two brutal punches in quick succession. The second landed deep.

Pain erupted.

A sharp, tearing agony as blue blood spilled free.

"Aaah !" Arya screamed, raw and unfiltered.

Rage surged, hot and blinding.

He lunged.

The rope lifter was still looped around his forearm. Arya twisted the man's arm, rolled the rope around it in one violent motion, and used his entire weight. The man was yanked off balance and hurled sideways

Over the edge.

The body vanished downward, the sound of impact arriving late and final.

Vansh stared at the monitor.

"Oh " he breathed. "Ohh."

Arya stood there for half a second, chest heaving, blood dripping. Anger vibrated through him, but beneath it ambition still burned. This was not the end. It could not be.

He slammed the rope lifter into the stair railing, anchoring it, then dropped down while it retracted, controlling the descent as he jogged downward. Below, more men surged upward amateurs this time. Desperate.

Arya met them in motion.

The shocker flared crackling blue and he drove it into the first man's chest. The body stiffened and collapsed. A punch followed for the next. Elbow. Knee. Keep moving.

"Time's over," Vansh said sharply.

Gunfire answered.

The unmistakable buzz of an assault rifle ripped through the air.

Arya dove behind concrete as rounds shredded the wall, chips of stone exploding outward.

“Get out of there!” Vansh yelled.

A voice barked from below, mocking, confident.

“Where you gonna run, huh? You here to bust the underground bunker?”

Arya laughed despite the blood in his mouth.

“A bunker?” he repeated. “A bunker?”

Even Vansh snorted.

Gunmen poured in from below.

“What should I do?” Arya asked, already knowing the answer would be ugly.

There was a pause.

Then Vansh muttered, “Why didn’t I think of that earlier... You go up. Again.”

Arya didn’t argue.

He turned and sprinted upward, boots pounding steps as the man in the thick suit charged ahead of him. Arya pressed a hand to his mouth, controlling the bleeding, forcing air in and out. Behind him, gunfire chased his shadow, bullets hammering walls as men pursued relentlessly.

The chase stretched tight and vertical.

Arya’s lungs burned. Each breath tasted of iron.

Then terrace.

He burst through the gate.

A man was already there, turning

Arya dropped low and kicked his feet out from under him. The gun clattered away. Arya rose into him with a storm of punches, knuckles smashing bone, rearranging biology with ruthless intent. The man crumpled.

Vansh watched in silence now.

Arya seized the fallen assault rifle and pressed the barrel to the man's head.

The man closed his eyes.

Accepted it.

Arya's finger tightened

Then he shifted the aim.

The shot cracked.

The bullet tore into the man's foot.

"AHHH!" he screamed, collapsing, clutching the wound.

Arya leaned in, eyes burning.

"Where is the bunker?" he roared. "The underground bunker!"

The man sobbed, words tumbling over blood and pain.

"It's at the farmhouse nearby right side please "

Arya straightened.

"Mr. Techman," he said into the mic, "look where he's pointing."

The drones swept outward, scanning the surrounding land. Within seconds, a structure lit up on the display a farmhouse, ordinary on the surface. One door read wrong. Too clean. Too reinforced.

"Confirmed," Vansh said. "Hidden access. Likely leads underground."

More men reached the terrace.

Arya turned, electric pistol back in hand, and fired in rapid succession. Blue arcs snapped across bodies. One by one, the gunmen fell, twitching and unconscious.

The pistol whined a warning.

"Charge is dying," Arya said through clenched teeth. "I'll need something... different."

"You need to get off this quarter," Vansh replied immediately.

"How?" Arya snapped. "They're waiting downstairs. All of them."

Arya stood at the terrace edge, chest heaving.

Then

He noticed it.

Something extraordinary.

Something only desperation reveals.

"I might have to get off from here," Arya said, eyes fixed on the distance. "The bike's parked two quarter slots ahead."

Vansh didn't reply immediately. He studied the gap measured it, recalculated it, mistrusted it. His fingers moved behind Arya's back, adjusting the compact parachute harness with practiced precision.

"What exactly are you willing to do?" Vansh asked, curiosity threading through concern.

Arya didn't hesitate.

"Jump."

He broke into a run before the word had fully settled in the air.

Boots struck concrete hard once, twice then there was nothing beneath him.

Arya launched himself toward the next quarter, arms slicing through the cold air. For a brief, impossible moment, he was flying. The world dropped away beneath him, gravity holding its breath. His ambition burned brighter than physics his eyes locked onto the second quarter's edge, willing it closer.

But the length was wrong.

Too far.

His fingers clawed at empty air.

He didn't reach it.

He began to fall.

"Shit !" Vansh snapped.

The compact parachute detonated open mid-descent, forced wide in the narrow throat between the quarters. It deployed but imperfectly. The air caught it violently, yanking Arya sideways.

His body slammed into the walls dhamm dhamm concrete ripping sound from bone as he ricocheted through the slot like a discarded weapon.

Then

Impact.

The ground rushed up and met him with brutal certainty.

The gravity resister absorbed most of it, humming angrily beneath his suit, dispersing force just enough to keep his spine intact. Arya lay there for a second too long, breath knocked out of him, vision pulsing.

"Oh... I didn't know," he muttered weakly, laughing through the pain as consciousness wavered. "You had... this kind of something. At least I'm not dead."

Vansh exhaled hard.

"It helped me once," he said. "Same principle as the parachute."

Arya rolled onto his side, forcing himself up.

"Well," Vansh continued dryly, "I couldn't trust you with everything. I knew you'd do something stupid like that. So I installed it."

"Thank God," Arya breathed, already moving again.

He staggered, then ran low, fast staying close to shadows until the bike came into view. He slipped behind it, hands gripping metal like a promise. Safe. For now.

Then

Vansh froze.

"Oh my god," he whispered, staring at the monitor. "We're fucked."

Arya looked up sharply. "What happened?"

Vansh didn't answer.

His face had gone still the kind of still that meant something had crossed from dangerous into catastrophic.

"What is that?" Arya pressed.

“I can see it through the system,” Vansh said slowly. “A force organized. Multiple vehicles. There’s a heavy carrier leading them... and behind it fan support. Black outfits. Coordinated movement.”

The drone feed zoomed in.

A large vehicle too armored to be police. Too quiet to be military. Behind it, three black heavy vans, each capable of carrying six or seven armed men. Assault rifles visible even through tinted glass.

“They’re coming here,” Vansh said. “Possibly tracking us.”

“How do you know?” Arya asked.

The drone sharpened focus.

Red letters on matte black steel.

ACTF

Arya’s breath caught.

“What the fuck is that?” Vansh muttered, fingers flying across the keyboard. “How do I not know about this?”

Search.

Nothing.

No records. No leaks. No public trace.

“What the fuck...?”

Arya stayed silent, leaning forward on the bike, chest rising and falling. The night felt tighter now like it was closing in.

Then Arya switched networks.

A different web.

The one beneath the web.

Encrypted forums. Shadow channels. Pre-release intelligence scraped before it ever saw daylight. He typed fast, ignoring the ache in his hands.

Then his screen loaded.

Arya froze.

He screamed into the microphone.

“ANTI-CRUSADER TASK FORCE.”

Vansh's head snapped up.

Arya kept reading, voice hardening.

"About to be institutionalized by state police. Objective: dismantle, expose, and terminate vigilante operations. No arrests. No negotiations."

Silence swallowed the channel.

"They're here for us," Arya said quietly.

Vansh closed his eyes.

"They're not responding," he said. "They're executing."

The engines in the distance grew louder.

Closer.

The masquerade was over.

And the hunt had begun.

Chapter 33: Pride (Act 3)

The ACTF vans breached the perimeter like a verdict being delivered.

Headlights cut through the ghost town's stale darkness, engines disciplined, synchronized. Black metal rolled past the rusted gate as if the town had been waiting for them all along waiting to be judged, catalogued, erased.

"How'd they even track us?" Vansh said, disbelief cracking through his usually measured tone.

"There's no time to think," Arya replied.

He kicked the gear down and twisted the throttle in the same motion. The bike answered instantly, snarling awake. The suppressor clicked off no restraint now, no subtlety. Acceleration mattered more than silence. The Continental GT surged forward, exhaust tearing through the dead streets like a declaration of war.

"What do you think?" Arya asked, leaning into the machine as speed climbed. "Can I fight them?"

Vansh didn't hesitate.

"According to my calculations no." His voice sharpened. "You're exhausted. You're bleeding. They have guns, formations, protocols. This isn't a mob. This is a crew trained specifically to hunt you."

The road blurred beneath Arya as the bike took a hard right, tires screaming briefly before gripping again.

"You have to run," Vansh finished.

"Okay," Arya said, breath steady despite the pain lacing his ribs. "We've got the bunker location. You guide me."

"Copy," Vansh replied instantly. "Go straight. There's a big exit gate ahead."

The Continental GT screamed louder, speed climbing dangerously high as the final stretch opened before him. Cold air cut across Arya's face, stinging the open wounds, but he didn't slow. He couldn't.

"They've seen me," Arya said suddenly.

Behind him, engines rose in chorus.

The black vans were already in motion fast, disciplined, closing distance with frightening efficiency. Not reckless pursuit. Controlled pressure.

Arya shot toward the exit gate

And slowed.

His instincts screamed before his eyes fully processed it.

"They're waiting for me," he said into the mic, disbelief and fury colliding. "They're already there."

Vansh stared at the monitor, fingers frozen mid-calculation. His intellect strained, searching for an error, a blind spot, a miracle.

Then

Movement.

From the main gate, two police bikes burst forward sleek, lightweight, purpose-built for pursuit. Riders leaned low, faces hidden behind visors, movements precise. These weren't city cops. These were chasers. Trained. Conditioned.

The exit gate began to close.

Metal screamed against metal as it descended.

Vansh's heart dropped.

"They cut you off," he said quietly.

The road ahead narrowed into inevitability.

Behind him, engines roared closer.

Above him, the night offered no mercy.

Arya tightened his grip on the handlebars.

Arya trusted instinct over instruction.

He veered hard toward the helicopter ground, the open stretch revealing itself on the bike's digital display like a reluctant confession. Floodlights stood dead, concrete cracked and uneven, but there past the helipad was space. A possible line. A maybe.

"Just go," Vansh said, voice low but certain. "Get to it."

Arya cut across the ground in a brutal parallel slide, tires spitting dust and gravel as he fought to keep traction. Behind him, the police bikes closed in too close. He could hear them now, engines sharp, predatory, breathing down his spine.

"Should I use velocity?" Arya asked, thumb hovering near the button.

"No," Vansh snapped. "Not here."

Arya zigzagged violently, forcing the bikes to mirror his chaos. The crew behind them tightened formation, headlights slicing through the dust cloud like teeth.

"If you can't use it within the next kilometer," Vansh continued, thinking aloud, "there's a sharp exit turn ahead. Velocity will throw you straight into the wall before you can even think about turning."

Gunfire cracked behind him.

"So endure them," Vansh finished.

Arya didn't argue.

He pushed the bike harder, muscles screaming, lungs burning, the road narrowing into a single violent line. His left hand slipped off the handlebar, fumbling blindly for the gun while his right fought to keep the bike stable.

They were on him now.

Close enough that he could hear the shift in their gears.

Arya slowed deliberately for the sharp turn speed bleeding away, second by second, every instinct screaming not to. The bikes surged closer, their riders lifting one hand

Too late.

Arya's fingers closed around the gun.

He twisted his torso just enough and fired.

The shot cracked clean.

The bullet slammed into the front bike's handle assembly. Metal sparked. Control vanished. The rider pitched forward, body skidding violently across the concrete, rolling, tumbling, until he disappeared behind a curtain of dust and wreckage. The bike cartwheeled, shattering itself against the ground.

Arya took the turn sharply, leaning impossibly low, catching the second rider off guard.

But the second held.

Barely.

The chase continued.

Vansh's eyes darted across the radar and map, mind tearing itself apart with probability trees. Ahead three routes.

Right: a road that could lead home. Familiar. Safe.

Too safe.

If they followed that path, the intelligence risked exposure. Techman. Vigilante. Identities bleeding into coordinates.

Left: narrower. Twisted. Forgotten.

Dangerous but chaotic.

"Guide me," Arya said, breath ragged. "Right or left. The display isn't suggesting anything."

"I don't know," Vansh muttered, panic clawing through his discipline. "I don't know..."

He stared at the map, hands shaking.

"Where should where should "

"Tell me!" Arya shouted.

He glanced back. The systems around him began to resist warnings flaring, stability fighting his aggression. The moment to decide was collapsing fast.

Vansh stayed silent.

He couldn't speak.

Arya made the choice himself swerving left, then correcting right, then straightening out, threading through the uncertainty like a blade through cloth.

“Am I going right?” Arya asked.

Vansh stared again at the map.

Something shifted.

One probability line glowed brighter than the others not certainty, but hope. Thin. Fragile. Enough.

“Keep straight,” Vansh said finally, voice tight but resolved. “For now.”

The straight road carried them into something ancient.

Stone rose on either side as the bike tore through the night, its engine echoing against walls that had watched centuries pass without blinking. The biggest fort in Asia loomed ahead silent, massive, unbothered by modern chaos.

“Yes,” Vansh said, almost to himself. Almost confident.

Arya didn’t reply. The road tilted upward now, the climb beginning to tax both machine and body. The engine growled deeper, heavier. For the first time since the chase began, doubt crept in not fear, but calculation.

Then it vanished.

He remembered her.

His sister’s face cut through the noise like a blade through smoke. This wasn’t about escape anymore. It wasn’t even about survival. It was about making sure the world didn’t swallow the few people he still allowed himself to care about.

The only men he trusted were himself and Vansh.

So he didn’t hesitate.

He leaned forward and focused harder.

From behind, the ACTF head commander’s voice cut cleanly through the comms.

“He’s going uphill. Toward Rana Pratap Fort,” Chavi reported calmly. “There’s only one way in and the same way out. No units stationed above.”

Arya crossed beneath the first ancient pillars the Padan Gate its architecture swallowing the sound of his engine. The incline steepened. The bike began to complain. Behind him, the chase vehicles surged, engines straining to keep pace.

Arya asked again, voice tight.

“Can I use the velocity button?”

“No,” Vansh answered instantly. “You’re riding two hundred uphill. You don’t boost here. That’s not acceleration that’s suicide.”

The Bhairon Gate rushed past in a blur of stone and shadow.

Inside the lead ACTF vehicle, Chavi sat in the shotgun seat, watching the feed with narrowed eyes.

“What’s he thinking?” she murmured. “How does he plan to escape?”

Arya asked the same question aloud.

“How do I get out, Vansh? Where’s the exit?”

But he didn’t slow.

Ambition carried him now, raw and undeniable. And Vansh heard it in his breathing.

“We’re going to be fine,” Vansh said firmly. “Don’t you worry.”

Arya crossed Hanuman Gate, the road narrowing, the air thinning. Fear had abandoned him completely. Focus had taken its place. The bike skidded dangerously close to the wall once stone sparks kissing metal but he corrected without panic.

Then came the narrow streets.

Homes pressed close to the road, balconies nearly brushing his shoulders. Here, the heavy vehicles struggled. Here, Arya gained an edge.

One bike remained behind him closer than before.

“Damn it,” Arya muttered. “This one knows the routes.”
They tore past Ganesh Gate together.
Arya leaned hard into a right turn, hugging the wall with impossible precision.
“There’s a truck coming up ahead,” Vansh warned.
Arya already knew.
The rider behind him wasn’t good at leaning too upright, too confident. When the biker tried to kick Arya’s rear tire, Arya shifted left instinctively.
The truck exploded into view.
Metal met metal.
The police rider vanished under the truck’s momentum, the collision brutal and immediate.
Arya surged forward, relief slicing through his chest as he crossed Lakshman Gate.
In the ACTF car, Chavi chuckled darkly.
“Our men aren’t safe,” she said. She ordered one vehicle to break off, ensuring the fallen rider was rushed to hospital. No more casualties here.
Now only her car and one heavy ACTF van remained.
She leaned forward, eyes burning as she spotted Arya in the distance.
“He’s getting away,” she snapped. “Hit the accelerator. We don’t let him go. Not after this much damage.”
Arya crossed the second-to-last pole Jorla Gate
And the bike faltered.
Just slightly.
Enough to notice.
Arya glanced down.
The digital dashboard blinked a warning.
LOW FUEL.
“Aahhhh !”
“You don’t have time to refill,” Vansh said immediately.

“So what do I do?” Arya shouted. “I have to go down the same way I came. That’s the only exit!”

Vansh smiled just a little.

“Now,” he said, voice suddenly steady, “it’s time.”

“Time for what?” Arya asked.

The fort loomed above them, ancient and patient.

Chavi did not lower the microphone immediately after speaking. She waited half a second longer than required listening to the faint echo of her own authority bounce through the channel. When she finally did lower it, her expression had not changed. Calm. Measured. The kind of calm that came not from hope, but from certainty.

“He’ll be coming down in a few minutes,” she had said. “Seal the lower stretch. All nearby units stand ready.”

Static answered first.

Then a voice, crisp and obedient. “We’re ready, ma’am. Onboard.”

The word ready settled into the night like a verdict.

Far above, where the fort’s ancient stones leaned into the darkness, Vansh stood motionless before his screens. The glow reflected faintly in his eyes maps layered over elevation charts, fuel depletion curves breathing downward like a dying pulse, probability models collapsing into narrower paths.

“They’re waiting for you,” he said at last, his voice steady but sharpened by urgency. “Every exit below the fort is sealed.”

Arya did not respond. He did not need to.

“You don’t have enough fuel to outrun them conventionally,” Vansh continued. “You can’t stop. You can’t refill. You can’t hesitate.”

The numbers on Arya’s digital display confirmed every word.

Each reduction felt heavier than the last, as though the bike itself were protesting the inevitability of exhaustion.

“A few minutes from now,” Vansh said, “you’ll reach an angular right turn the standard descent route. That’s what they expect you to take.”

The wind clawed at Arya’s shoulders as the engines behind him grew louder, closer, more confident.

“But you won’t,” Vansh added quietly.

Arya’s jaw tightened.

“You’ll go straight. There’s a velocity system built for emergency displacement. It uses an alternate fuel batch. It’s unstable. It’s violent. And it will give you exactly one chance.”

Arya listened without blinking, without comment. Pain flared in his ribs as the bike vibrated beneath him blood warm against skin, sweat stinging his eyes. He did not interrupt. He absorbed the plan the way one absorbs gravity: fully, without argument.

Behind him, the ACTF vehicles surged forward as a single organism headlights slicing the road, engines synchronized, distance shrinking with professional inevitability.

In the heavy van, the driver leaned forward, his grin broadening as the bike grew larger in the windshield.

“We got him,” he said. “He’s done.”

Arya heard none of it.

His world had narrowed to breath, balance, and a single button beneath his thumb.

C’mo...

C’mo, man...

“Now,” Vansh said. “Click it.”

Arya pressed the button.

Nothing.

Again.

Nothing.

The bike shuddered. The speed dipped further.

“Click it,” Vansh ordered again sharper this time.

Arya pressed harder, as though pressure itself might convince the machine.

Still nothing.

The impact came suddenly a calculated nudge from behind. Metal kissed metal. Not enough to destroy him. Enough to remind him he was no longer alone on the road.

They were near the back of the fort now.

Arya muttered under his breath, frustration rising like heat. He pressed again.

Once.

Twice.

And then

The machine answered:

BOOOOOOMMM

The explosion of force was immediate and feral. Smoke erupted. The bike lunged forward as though released from restraint, tearing through the final Ram Gate in a violent blur of stone and wind.

Arya did not turn right.

He went straight.

Down the offroad.

The choice shattered every expectation.

Below, Chavi froze.

So did the crew.

For a fraction of a second, no one spoke. No one moved.

The silencer roared not a sound but a declaration of defiance. The front tire lifted. The road vanished. Gravity paused, confused.

And then Arya was airborne.

The fort fell away beneath him. His fingers loosened. The bike floated like a thought finally freed from consequence.

The parachute deployed with a sharp, authoritative snap fabric blooming against the night.

Arya descended not as a fugitive, but as a man who had refused the ending written for him gliding silently over the sleeping country roads below.

The chase was over.

Not with capture.

But with disbelief.

“Jaako rakhe saiya, maar sake na koi.

Bann ke ik dhaal sa saath chalega woh hi.”

In the quiet aftermath, Vansh exhaled.

Not relief calculation completed.

He reached for the keys resting beside the console. The pineapple keychain swayed briefly before settling. Outside, the green Bentley came alive, headlights cutting through the dark.

Time to retrieve the wounded warrior.

The masquerade remained unbroken.

Days blurred into each other after the chase.

Not days in the sense of time but days in the sense of pain, silence, and the slow discipline of recovery.

Two weeks.

Two weeks since the city had almost caught a ghost.

Arya lay half-upright on the wide bed that did not feel like his. Silk sheets, imported wood, money embedded into every corner of the room yet none of it softened the weight pressing on his ribs. The bruises had turned yellow, then dull purple. The cuts had sealed, though they still burned when he inhaled too deeply. His body had recovered enough to lie convincingly still. Not enough to be forgiven.

The television murmured in the background.

Arya wasn't watching it.

He was listening.

“...despite extensive pursuit, the ACTF has failed to apprehend the unidentified vigilante...”

The anchor's voice was trained neutral, rehearsed, calm in the way only people far from danger can afford to be.

“...forensic teams continue to analyze residue samples recovered from the motorcycle believed to have been used during the escape...”

Arya’s lips tightened.

“...experts state that even if the materials are fully identified, they may not provide sufficient leads to track the individual now being referred to as ‘the Red-Eyed Man’...”

A pause. A graphic flashed on screen an artist’s impression that resembled nothing and everything at once.

“...Head Commander Chavi addressed the media earlier today...”

The camera cut.

Chavi stood straight, uniform precise, eyes sharp with a restraint that was either discipline or something far more personal.

“This failure will not weaken our commitment to law and constitutional order,” she said.

“No individual no matter how justified he believes himself to be has the right to take the law into his own hands.”

Arya exhaled slowly.

“No,” he said aloud, voice dry.

“It’s not right.”

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, the movement deliberate but impatient. Pain flared up his side like a warning flare. He ignored it.

Behind him, footsteps approached.

Vansh entered the room quietly, as if noise itself might provoke Arya into motion.

“You’re not cleared yet,” Vansh said, calm but firm.

Arya didn’t turn. His eyes stayed on the screen.

“I can’t stay here resting,” Arya replied. His voice wasn’t loud. It didn’t need to be.

“Why won’t you just let me go?”

Vansh crossed his arms. “Your anger is ready,” he said.

"Your rage is ready."

He paused.

"But your body isn't."

"It's been two weeks," Arya snapped, finally turning. Frustration cracked through his restraint.

"I'm fine."

Vansh didn't argue immediately. He studied Arya the way doctors study scans looking not for what's visible, but for what's being hidden.

"You're standing," Vansh said.

"That doesn't mean you're healed."

Arya clenched his jaw. Then, suddenly, he laughed a sharp, humorless sound.

"Okay," he said, lifting his hands in mock surrender.

"I'm fine enough to think."

He walked closer to the television and grabbed the remote, switching channels with restless precision.

"I can't just let Raghav breathe air," Arya continued.

"I want to know how he felt when he heard about this."

A thin smile crept in.

"I'd love to hear that news."

The screen flickered.

A new segment appeared.

"Breaking update cybercrime units are currently analyzing a series of anonymous online posts that surfaced overnight..."

Images flashed warehouse interiors, shipment ledgers, medical-grade containers stacked like coffins.

"...the accounts appear to document the dismantling of an illegal pharmaceutical smuggling network..."

Arya leaned forward slightly.

"...authorities suspect the operation may be connected to the same vigilante figure..."

The anchor hesitated before delivering the name.

“...initial investigations point toward businessman Sanjay Singhal as the primary financier behind the operation...”

Arya froze.

“Sanjay... Singhanian?” he repeated slowly.

His brows knitted together not in recognition, but in disbelief.

“Who the fuck is that?”

The room fell quiet.

Vansh didn’t answer.

He remained where he was, standing near the doorway, arms loosely folded, eyes fixed not on Arya but on the television screen that continued to speak in indifferent loops. The room smelled faintly of antiseptic and old wood recovery never truly erased the scent of violence, it only disguised it.

Arya noticed the silence.

It wasn’t refusal.

It wasn’t ignorance.

It was realization.

“I’ve been searching for Raghav Malhotra’s name,” Arya said finally, his voice low, controlled, but strained in a way that betrayed exhaustion rather than anger. “For two weeks.”

He pushed himself upright against the headboard, muscles protesting, stitches pulling like reminders.

“Every channel. Every archive. Digital, print everything.”

He exhaled sharply through his nose.

“There’s nothing.”

His eyes shifted to Vansh now searching, almost pleading.

“And the moment,” Arya continued, slower, “the moment I find something connected to what I bled for something that cost bones, skin, consciousness ”

His jaw tightened.

“A different name appears.”

He let the silence linger, then asked quietly:

“What is this, Vansh?”

Vansh closed his eyes for a second.

When he opened them, something had settled. Not certainty but acceptance.

"It's his co-partner," Vansh said at last.

"From another wing of his business."

Arya didn't speak.

"Malhotra's empire isn't vertical," Vansh continued. "It's horizontal. Spread. Compartmentalized."

A pause.

"Sacrificial."

Arya's fingers dug into the bedsheet.

"His influence," Vansh added, "won't even allow his name to be whispered in courtrooms."

He looked away.

"Arrests are for intermediaries. Trials are for names that can be erased."

Arya laughed.

Not loudly.

Not bitterly.

It was the laugh of someone who had finally understood the joke and realized he was the punchline.

"So I took punches," Arya said softly.

"For nothing."

He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees.

"For this man Sanjay there's a trial. His family will suffer. Society will tear him apart."

A pause.

"People will celebrate."

He looked up.

"And the real man breathes freely."

Vansh stepped closer.

"This," he said, voice firm now, "is one case."

He gestured vaguely, as if pointing beyond the walls, beyond the city.

"This is just what reaches us."

“A small world.”

His tone hardened.

“Now imagine how many richer, more powerful than more powerful than that people exist.”

“Not just here.”

“Everywhere.”

“They don’t fight the system,” Vansh said.

“They own it.”

He stopped.

Then, as if remembering something distant yet vivid

“Do you remember the Pune car accident?”

Arya looked up slowly.

“A seventeen-year-old,” Vansh continued. “Drunk. Driving a Porsche.”

He swallowed.

“Two people on a motorcycle.”

Dead.

“When the police caught him,” Vansh said, a humorless smile curling his lips, “they didn’t treat him like a criminal.”

He laughed once.

“They treated him like a child.”

“Asked him to write an essay.”

“Promise he wouldn’t do it again.”

His laughter died abruptly.

“A death,” Vansh said, voice rising, sharp now, cracking the calm.

“I’m talking about death punished by handwriting.”

Arya stared at the floor.

“You were right,” Vansh said more quietly.

“That day at the traffic stop.”

He shook his head.

“You changed my psychology without even trying.”

He clenched his fists.

“The system is written for the wise,” Vansh said.

“But it serves the powerful.”
He looked directly at Arya now.
“And the powerless?”
“They’re insects.”
Silence returned.
Thicker this time.
“The movies taught us to enjoy killing,” Vansh continued.
“Shows made it stylish. History reduced it to statistics.”
He breathed out.
“So when it happens in real life...”
“It feels normal.”
A pause.
“Are we living,” he asked softly, “or just waiting our turn to disappear?”
His voice faltered.
“Now I understand why Vanshika couldn’t fight.”
Arya’s throat tightened.
“She knew,” Vansh said.
“She knew it was lost.”
“This system killed thousands before her.”
“It will kill thousands after.”
His eyes dropped to the floor.
“She was just one name.”
Hope didn’t scream when it died.
It simply stopped trying.
Arya stood slowly.
“This system,” he said, calm in a way that frightened even himself,
“is rotten.”
He turned toward the television, then back to Vansh.
“People misunderstand nihilism,” Arya said.
“They think it’s destruction.”
He shook his head.
“It’s clarity.”

“No decoration.”
“No false meaning.”
He gestured outward.
“Colonial-era sedition laws still silence dissent.”
“Emergency-era loopholes still protect power.”
“Land acquisition policies still displace the weak.”
His voice sharpened.
“And the common man?”
“He applies.”
“Studies.”
“Waits.”
“Exams delayed.”
“Postponed.”
“Cancelled.”
“SSC scams futures.”
“UPSC sells hope.”
He laughed softly.
“Parents send children to coaching prisons.”
“Hostels become graves of ambition.”
“And people blame dogs for surviving on streets,” Arya continued,
“while crores are burned chasing the cosmos.”
He stopped.
“It’s rotten.”
He looked at Vansh.
“If I can’t clean it,” Arya said quietly,
“don’t worry.”
A pause.
“Vanshika ”
His voice steadied.
“I won’t fix the system.”
He met Vansh’s eyes.
“I’ll end it.”
The basement breathed again.

Not with air but with intent.

Cold LED lights hummed softly above concrete walls, casting sharp reflections across metal surfaces, glass screens, and the long table that stood at the center like an altar. In the dimness, ambition glittered quiet, dangerous, patient. This place had once been silent recovery. Now it was ignition.

Vansh stood near the table, sleeves rolled, eyes alive.

“Exposure won’t work anymore,” he said calmly, almost casually, as if discussing weather patterns instead of war.

Arya leaned against the pillar, arms folded, listening.

“No one will give justice,” Vansh continued. “Even if the truth is delivered to them wrapped, verified, bleeding.”

He smiled faintly.

“The rich don’t touch fire. They make others hold it.”

He tapped the table once.

“So we stop screaming at the court.”

“We stop begging the system.”

Arya straightened.

“We cut the network.”

Silence followed not disagreement, but alignment.

“Their management,” Vansh went on, stepping closer to the table. “Their logistics. The veins that keep pride alive.”

Arya’s eyes narrowed.

“And how,” he asked, voice steady, “did you find them?”

Vansh smiled.

Not wide.

Not playful.

It was the smile of someone who had already won half the game.

“Good question.”

He reached beneath the table and pulled out a slim metallic case. With a soft click, it opened documents, drives, printed schematics spilling out like exposed organs.

“You remember those four files you asked me about,” Vansh said.

“The ones that didn’t make sense.”

Arya nodded slowly.

“I studied them,” Vansh continued. “Not like evidence. Like confessions.”

He spread the documents across the table. Then one decisive motion unrolled a large blueprint map.

It covered the entire surface.

Railway grids. Financial nodes. Transit corridors. Storage units. Red lines intersected black ones. Codes layered over codes.

Arya stepped closer.

“These,” Vansh said, pointing, “all trace back to Raghav Malhotra.”

“But they’re adjusted,” Arya muttered, scanning the details.

“Masked.”

“Exactly,” Vansh replied. “Smartly fragmented. Split across shells. Pride does that it believes secrecy is protection.”

He paused.

“But pride also makes one mistake.”

He looked up at Arya.

“It only trusts one person.”

“Vanshika,” Arya said quietly.

Vansh nodded.

“He never risked anything beyond her.”

“But my intellect suggested otherwise.”

He tapped a section of the map small, unassuming.

“I decoded it.”

Arya’s eyes followed.

“Lakshyraj Singh,” Vansh said. “His manager.”

“He operates at Indian railway stations. Transit. Movement. Cash flow.”

Arya’s jaw tightened.

“If we reach him ” Arya began.

“ we don’t interrogate,” Vansh finished.
“We extract.”
“He’ll give us bank access. Offshore keys. Vault coordinates.”
“And the bunker?” Vansh shrugged. “That’s trivial.”
Arya exhaled slowly.
“And the money?”
Vansh’s eyes gleamed.
“We don’t keep it.”
Arya looked up sharply.
“We distribute it,” Vansh continued. “Charities. Shelters.
Anonymous channels.”
“Burn it into the public bloodstream.”
He leaned closer to Arya now.
“Without money,” Vansh said, voice low, deliberate,
“there is no power.”
“Without power,” he added,
“there is no pride.”
Arya stared at the blueprint.
Then, softly
“Without pride,” he said,
“there is no need for the body.”
Vansh smiled.
“Exactly.”
Arya straightened, voice firm again.
“Don’t fear powerful men,” Arya said.
“Fear those with the capability to steal the power.”

Chapter 34: PRIDE (Act 4)

Midnight had settled like a bruise over the city.

What was meant to happen earlier born from Arya's rage and sharpened by Vansh's intellect had been postponed, delayed just enough to rot in silence before execution. The railway station's endside lay ahead: a forgotten stretch where trains slowed only to exhale dust, where garbage was dumped like unwanted truths, where no one came unless they had nowhere else to go.

Arya stood at the farthest edge of it.

Not pacing.

Not restless.

Not dramatic.

Still.

An angular stillness shoulders squared, spine aligned, weight balanced as if the earth itself had agreed to hold him there. He observed without blinking, unbothered by the rats that skittered near the tracks or the distant howl of a freight engine warming its lungs. The night breathed around him. Arya did not respond.

From between his lips, pale vapour escaped tobacco smoke dissolving into the cold like a confession that never reached God.

Vansh's voice crackled through the earpiece, irritation barely masked beneath concern.

"How did you even get a cigarette there?"

A pause.

"Where did you hide it? Don't tell me you smuggled that thing inside the suit."

No reply.

Arya's fingers rested loosely at his side, the cigarette glowing faintly an ember refusing to die. He was listening, but not to Vansh. He was listening to timing. To the city's pulse. To the approaching weight of steel somewhere beyond the curve.

“You’re about to run straight into hell,” Vansh continued, exhaling sharply, “and that thing in your hand ”

A brief scoff.

“ it doesn’t look cool, brother.”

Arya finally moved.

He brought the cigarette to his lips, drew one last breath from it not hurried, not indulgent, but deliberate. Then, with a flick of his fingers, he sent it spinning into the dark. The ember traced a brief arc before dying against the dirt.

Smoked.

Finished.

Decided.

“You know,” Arya said at last, his voice calm enough to be mistaken for mercy, “I think about it every day.”

He scanned the tracks now, eyes narrowing, searching for the freight train’s silhouette watching the bend where steel would soon announce itself.

“If I just kill him,” Arya continued, “this world is too stupid to recognise the truth.”

Vansh leaned back wherever he was control room, van, shadow and let the silence stretch before replying.

“Yes,” he said finally, tone low, precise. “Killing him would be pleasure. Nothing more.”

A pause.

“But he’d still live on billboards. In headlines. In edited memories.”

A sharper edge entered his voice.

“We’re not fantasies like Batman. We’re not symbols for children. We are the disaster people pretend doesn’t exist.”

Arya’s jaw tightened.

“You don’t cut the head first,” Vansh went on. “You strip the body. You undress the lie. You expose the man until there’s nothing left but skin and rot ”

Then, colder:

“and only then do you melt him down.”

“So people don’t praise them,” Arya said quietly.

Vansh almost laughed.

“Some still will.”

Arya’s gaze hardened, memories surfacing like oil on water.

“Some will call it propaganda,” he replied. “Some will say it’s an agenda. You remember that man the one who ran a religious ashram? Raped young girls for years? Convicted. Proven.”

His voice didn’t rise. That was worse.

“People still adored that old motherfucker,” Arya said. “Touched his feet. Called him holy.”

A distant rumble echoed the freight train, closer now.

“These people won’t change,” Arya continued. “The system raised them this way. Fed them lies until lies tasted like faith.”

The rails began to hum.

Steel whispering to steel.

Arya adjusted his stance, every muscle aligning with purpose. Vansh’s breathing slowed on the other end not fear, not excitement, but readiness.

“This isn’t justice,” Vansh said softly.

“It’s correction.”

Arya didn’t respond.

The freight yard was not asleep.

It never truly slept only pretended to.

Huge containers were being loaded with mechanical patience, metal screaming softly as chains tightened and hooks locked into place. Floodlights stood tall like indifferent sentinels, casting long, distorted shadows across gravel soaked with oil and rainwater older than memory. The air smelled of rust, diesel, and waste human and industrial, inseparable.

Near one of the wagons, a guard paused.

He wasn’t trained to sense danger. He wasn’t special.

He simply noticed red.

A reflection brief, unnatural flickering against the black glass of a container. Not a light. Not a signal. Something... watching.

He turned his face toward it.

His eyes narrowed.

Then widened.

He raised his hand sharply and gestured to three men nearby men who did not wear uniforms, men whose posture betrayed that they didn't belong to the railways. They followed his gaze.

And they saw him.

The Vigilante.

Still. Upright. Red eyes breathing beneath the floodlights like a wound that refused to close.

One of them stepped back instinctively. Another reached for his radio.

"It's him," the man hissed. "Call the higher guards. He's here."

The order moved faster than fear.

Boots scraped gravel as they broke into a run, shouting now, voices echoing between containers.

"Go get him!"

Arya did not move.

At the far end of the station where tracks thinned, where garbage piled into small hills, where the city forgot its own bones he stood as if nailed into the ground. His coat barely shifted in the breeze. His hands remained relaxed. Open.

Vansh's voice came through, calm, precise.

"They've seen you. They're coming."

Arya nodded once.

He did not look away from the tracks.

He continued the conversation exactly where it had been left like death itself had paused out of courtesy.

"Vanshika died," Arya said, quietly, "because she lost hope."

The approaching footsteps grew louder. Seven sets now. Spreading.

"I'm not the one who dies," he continued. "Not yet."

One of the men lunged forward, rage overtaking caution. Another raised his fist, aiming for the back of Arya's head.

Arya turned.

Slowly.

"I'm the one who kills."

The first punch came.

Arya slipped half a step to the side just enough. The fist cut air. Arya's elbow came up, sharp and compact, smashing into the attacker's forearm. Bone met bone. The man screamed.

Before the sound finished, Arya drove his shoulder forward Muay Thai, raw and brutal crashing into the man's chest. The impact folded him inward like a broken crate.

The second attacker grabbed Arya's coat.

Bad choice.

Arya pivoted, twisted the wrist, snapped the elbow backward. A crack. A scream. Arya followed with a knee to the ribs, then another short, vicious, efficient.

A third man rushed from the side.

Arya let him.

He ducked under the swing, drove a palm strike into the throat not crushing, not killing just enough to steal breath. As the man staggered, Arya pulled out the electric shocker and pressed it into the man's neck.

The body locked.

Teeth clenched.

The man collapsed like a puppet with cut strings.

Two more came together now learning, adapting.

One aimed low. One aimed high.

Arya blocked the high strike with his forearm, absorbing the pain, while his boot slammed backward into the knee of the low

attacker. The knee bent the wrong way. The scream echoed off steel.

The remaining man hesitated.

Arya didn't.

He closed the distance in two steps, grabbed the collar, and head-butted him once, twice. The third time sent blood spraying onto the gravel.

Another grabbed Arya from behind.

Arya reached back blindly, caught fabric, flipped his weight forward, and threw the man over his shoulder. The man landed hard, air exploding from his lungs.

The seventh man raised a metal rod.

Arya saw it.

He welcomed it.

The rod struck his shoulder pain blooming sharp and hot. Arya growled, stepped inside the swing, and drove the shocker straight into the man's chest. The electricity danced. The rod fell.

Silence followed.

Seven men lay scattered across the yard moaning, twitching, bleeding, broken.

Arya stood among them, chest rising and falling, blood mixing with rainwater at his feet.

The freight train continued loading.

Indifferent.

Vansh spoke softly now.

"Still standing."

Arya wiped blood from his knuckles.

"Always."

The red in his eyes reflected once more against steel.

And this time, the steel looked afraid.

Vansh's voice dropped an octave.

Not urgency calculation.

“Arya... eyes up. Drone’s locked. You’ve got armed movement ahead.”

High above, barely audible, the drone clung to the night like an insect its lens cutting through darkness, heat signatures blooming across Vansh’s radar. Small white figures. Red dots for weapons. Angles. Distances. Blind spots.

“Three on the left platform. Two behind the freight wagons. Automatic rifles. One man covering the stairs.”

Arya adjusted his posture instinctively. His shoulders rolled back. His breathing slowed. The chaos around him sirens, shouts, scattered civilians collapsed inward until there was only path and purpose.

“Stay in shadow,” Vansh instructed. “They’re scanning for movement, not stillness.”

Arya stepped back into darkness.

The station lights were harsh, brutal but they created mercy too. Between every floodlight lay pockets of black where the eye refused to settle. Arya moved through those voids like a thought no one wanted to finish.

A guard passed close.

Too close.

Arya waited.

The man turned his head at the wrong moment and Arya’s hand closed around his mouth, dragging him backward into shadow. A sharp elbow to the spine. A controlled choke. The body sagged, unconscious before panic could form.

Arya laid him down gently.

No noise. No spectacle.

“Good,” Vansh murmured. “Two more ahead. Armed.”

The men stood laughing, rifles slung casually, arrogance heavy in their posture. They believed the station belonged to them.

Arya picked up a loose bolt from the ground.

He threw it not at them, but past them.

Clink.

Both men turned.

Arya moved.

The first rifle was ripped free and smashed sideways into its owner's jaw. Bone cracked. The second man raised his weapon too slow. Arya drove his knee into the stomach, yanked the gun upward, and fired once into the ceiling.

The echo sent panic rippling across the platform.

Arya disappeared again.

"Train's loading is complete," Vansh said sharply. "Smuggling tracker's active. Medicine crates. It's moving."

Metal screamed as the freight train began to roll.

"Go. Go he's coming!" someone shouted.

Arya broke into a sprint.

The platform exploded into motion. People screamed. Vendors abandoned carts. Suitcases toppled. Fear became a living thing, stampeding blindly.

Arya cut through it.

The freight train was already pulling away, slow but unstoppable, its massive weight dragging destiny behind it.

Then

An old T.T. stepped forward.

Railway uniform. Authority worn like armor. His chest puffed with borrowed power as he raised a hand.

"Stop!" the man shouted. "You think you own this place?"

Arya didn't slow.

He didn't argue.

He slapped the man hard, sharp, precise not in rage, but in dismissal. The T.T. spun, shocked more than hurt, collapsing into confusion as Arya surged past him. Only obstacles.

Arya ran.

Boots hit metal as he leapt, fingers catching the edge of an open freight door. His body swung once before he hauled himself inside, muscles screaming as the train gained speed.

He landed hard.

Inside, darkness swallowed him.

Crates loomed like tombstones, strapped tight, humming with stolen medicine and blood money. The smell of chemicals burned his lungs.

Arya leaned against the wall, chest heaving, sweat dripping down his spine.

For a moment just a moment he closed his eyes.

The train roared on.

And somewhere ahead, the hunt was far from over.

The train gathered speed.

Not violently deliberately, like a beast that had finally decided to move. Metal groaned beneath Arya's boots as the wheels synchronized into a steady, merciless rhythm. The world outside blurred into streaks of sodium light and shadow, but inside the freight carriage, time thickened.

Arya walked.

Not hurried. Not cautious.

His left hand brushed against a giant crate cold steel, industrial paint scratched and dented from careless loading. He leaned into it, grounding himself as the vibration of the train travelled up his arm and into his chest.

Then

He heard it.

At first, it didn't register as language. Just noise muffled, irregular, human. The kind of sound the mind tries to classify as machinery because the alternative is unbearable.

A thud.

A scrape.

A voice hoarse, cracking.

“Please... please... get us out...”

Arya froze.

Another voice followed. Angrier. Raw.

“Hey! Whoever you are open this! Bastards open it!”

The crate beneath his hand... moved.

Not much. Just enough.

Arya pulled back sharply, eyes narrowing. He stepped away, boots echoing softly against the metal floor, and scanned the carriage. What he saw unraveled him not explosively, but quietly, the way something inside breaks without making a sound.

Crates.

Rows of them.

Not marked for pharmaceuticals. Not logistics. Not export.

Vents poorly drilled. Scratches around locks. Dried stains at the edges.

Crying rose from somewhere deeper. Soft. Childlike. Interrupted by coughing. By fists hitting metal until skin gave up before steel did.

Arya’s fingers curled slowly.

He approached one crate and pried open the inspection latch just enough to peer inside.

The darkness stared back.

Then eyes.

Too many.

People pressed together knees to chests, bodies overlapping, skin bruised, lips cracked. Children clinging to strangers. A woman shielding a boy with her own body. An old man staring blankly, already somewhere else.

Kidnapped kids.

Lost people.

Unidentified beggars.

Women sold and resold until names no longer mattered.

Human inventory.

Arya stepped back.

For the first time that night, his breath stuttered.

He raised his finger slowly, pointing no, accusing at the crates around him, as if the steel itself were guilty.

“What... is going on here, Vansh?”

His voice wasn’t angry.

It was disturbed.

Vansh didn’t answer immediately.

Data scrolled across his monitors shipping manifests, shell companies, fake NGOs, “rehabilitation programs,” “transit shelters.” Words that wore kindness like a disguise.

“Arya...” Vansh said finally, quieter than before. “This isn’t just drugs.”

Arya laughed once. A short, hollow sound that surprised even him.

“I know,” he said. “I’m looking at it.”

His nihilism so carefully cultivated, so often a shield cracked under the sheer absurdity of it. He had always believed the world was cruel. Indifferent. Rotten.

But this

This was organization.

This was planning.

This was cruelty with spreadsheets.

“So this is it,” Arya murmured, eyes moving from crate to crate. “This is what they call a system.”

The train roared louder, as if proud of itself.

Somewhere inside the crates, someone screamed.

Arya closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the softness was gone.

“What’s the route?” he asked.

Vansh understood immediately.

“Two armed squads ahead. One at the engine. If you stop this train ”

"I'm not stopping it," Arya interrupted.

He tightened his gloves.

"I'm opening it."

And for the first time that night, the freight train wasn't carrying contraband anymore.

The rails were fully connected now.

Steel kissed steel beneath the speeding train, the sound sharp and final like a verdict being delivered. One of the men at the far end of the carriage caught the reflection first: a flash of red in the metal skin of a crate, unmoving, watching.

"Oi " he muttered, eyes narrowing.

Recognition hit him a second later.

"It's him."

The word travelled faster than the train itself.

Boots scraped against iron as men poured in from both ends of the carriage, weapons half-raised, panic fighting discipline. Arya did not retreat. He stepped closer to the crate instead placing his body between the steel walls and the lives sealed inside them.

Behind him, something banged from within. A child cried out.

Arya planted his feet.

The train screamed louder, accelerating into the dark, wind tearing through the open slats. The first guard rushed him head-on, swinging wildly, fear thick in his breath.

Arya caught the punch.

Not blocked absorbed.

The fist slammed into his forearm, pain rippling up his bones, but he stepped into it, closing distance instantly. His elbow rose like a blade and crashed into the man's jaw. Teeth clicked together violently as the guard stumbled back, stunned.

Another rushed in.

Arya didn't turn fully he felt him. Instinct over thought.

A punch landed in his ribs. Another clipped his cheek. Knuckles scraped skin. Arya grunted, the impact knocking breath from his lungs, but the moment the man leaned in for more, Arya's knee came up hard, driving into the attacker's thigh.

Bone met bone.

The leg buckled with a dry crack.

The man screamed but the sound was swallowed as Arya's right hand snapped forward, fist smashing into his face, nose folding grotesquely inward. Blood sprayed across the crate like spilled ink.

The train suddenly lurched into a sharp turn.

Gravity betrayed everyone at once.

Bodies lifted, weightless for a fraction of a second, then slammed violently to the right. Arya rolled with it, shoulder skidding across the metal floor, sparks flashing as a dropped weapon scraped uselessly away.

The guards weren't so lucky.

One crashed headfirst into a crate, skull ringing like struck iron. Another lost his footing entirely, smashing ribs against the wall with a wet, breathless sound.

Arya was already up.

He grabbed the nearest man by the collar and drove him backward again and again into the massive crate.

Dhamm.

Dhamm.

Dhamm.

Each impact echoed inside the box. From within came muffled screams panic, confusion but Arya didn't stop. He twisted, shifting leverage, and slammed the man sideways, spine-first, until the body went limp and slid down like discarded clothing.

More footsteps.

Armed this time.

Vansh's voice cut through the chaos, low and urgent in his ear.

"Two ahead. Firearms. Low ammo. Use the shadows."

Arya exhaled once and vanished between crates as a muzzle flashed where his head had been a moment earlier. The shot ricocheted wildly, screaming off metal.

He came out of the dark behind the shooter.

Arya grabbed the gun barrel, yanked it upward, and drove his forehead into the man's temple. The impact dropped him instantly. Arya tore the weapon free and smashed it against the crate edge until it was useless.

Another guard charged, baton raised.

Arya ducked the swing, stepped inside the man's reach, and unleashed a brutal sequence elbow to sternum, palm strike to throat, knee to gut. As the man folded, Arya hooked an arm around his neck and twisted sharply.

The snap was quiet.

The body fell.

The train roared on, faster now, reckless, as if trying to outrun what was happening inside it. Somewhere ahead, more men were shouting. Somewhere behind, people were still trapped still alive.

Arya stood amid broken bodies, blood streaking his gloves, chest heaving.

Inside the crates, fists banged harder now not in fear, but in hope.

He turned toward the next carriage.

"Keep the drones tight," Arya said calmly. "I'm not stopping."

Vansh didn't argue.

The Vigilante stepped forward into the shaking darkness, every strike now no longer about rage

but about freedom catching up to speed.

Tired now, truly tired, Arya walked toward the crate.

Vansh watched everything unfold on the monitor, not blinking, not breathing properly. The red silhouettes of bodies lay scattered behind him, pride reduced to broken bone and leaking blue blood.

Arya placed his palm on the cold metal.

“You sure you want to do this?” Vansh asked quietly.

Arya did not turn. “What kind of question is that?” he replied, as his fingers found the latch.

The container door opened with a heavy metallic groan, sliding aside to reveal darkness that smelled of fear, sweat, hunger, and despair.

Inside, ten or fifteen figures huddled together instinctively, shrinking backward. They did not scream. They did not move. They simply stared.

Red eyes stared back at them.

Some cried instantly. Others froze, mouths open, hands shielding children. One woman clutched two kids so tightly they whimpered in pain.

“Please... don’t hurt us,” she said, her voice barely audible over the rattling train.

Arya stopped.

Something inside him fractured. Not rage. Confusion.

“They’re afraid of me,” he said softly into the mic, an almost amused smile touching his lips. “Look at that, Vansh.”

Vansh did not smile. He had seen too much of what people were capable of doing to each other. This was not fear of Arya. This was survival reflex, burned into bone.

“They always are,” Arya said, more to himself than anyone else.

On the mic embedded into Arya’s suit, Vansh spoke again, steadier now. “You’re lost in this moment. Let me help.”

Arya nodded once and tapped the side control.

The speaker activated.

Vansh's voice filled the carriage, loud, clear, human.

"Everyone, calm down. You are safe now."

The words cut through panic like a blade through cloth.

A thin man stepped forward slightly. His ribs showed through his shirt. His lips were cracked. His eyes were hollow with hunger.

"Who... who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Mr. Techman," Vansh answered. "And what you are seeing is my friend. He came to get you out."

Arya shifted aside deliberately, allowing them to see the fallen men. The guards lay unconscious or worse, their weapons useless, their arrogance drained out onto steel floors.

A collective breath escaped the group.

"God help us," someone whispered.

Vansh continued. "Listen carefully. This train will stop in exactly forty nine minutes. Not at a station. Nowhere. That is your window."

The people leaned in.

"But before that," Vansh said, "I need your help."

"Help?" the thin man echoed, uncertain.

"This freight is filled with drugs," Vansh said. "Medicines turned into poison by rich men who play with power. They export you, sell you, lock you away like cargo, while they sit in clean rooms and call it business."

Arya stood still, silent, the embodiment of consequence.

"I want all of you," Vansh went on, "to help him dump every package out of this train. Every box. Every packet."

"And when the train stops," he continued, "you run. You go to the nearest police station. You speak to the media. And you say one name."

"What name?" the thin man asked.

"Raghav Malhotra."

The carriage seemed to shrink at the sound of it.

“He is the one who feeds on fear,” Vansh said, voice cold now. “He believes you are objects. That your children belong to him. That no law applies to him. He believes hunger keeps you obedient.”

Silence followed.

“You run,” Vansh finished. “You will be heard. You will be protected. Do not be afraid.”

Something shifted among them. Fear remained, but something else rose alongside it. Resolve. Rage. Purpose.

Arya picked up one sealed packet from the table, walked to the open door, and threw it into the rushing darkness below.

Another followed.

Then another.

The people joined in, hands shaking at first, then stronger, throwing poison into the void. The act felt ceremonial, almost sacred.

The train screamed onward into the night.

“Forty two minutes,” Vansh reminded quietly.

Arya watched the darkness swallow the last package.

The men, the women, the children who moments ago had been nothing more than abandoned cargo, now moved with purpose.

Hope had entered them quietly. Not loudly. Not heroically. It slipped in the way warmth returns to numb fingers.

They worked alongside Arya without asking who he was. Without questioning why he wore darkness like skin. They lifted crates, tore seals, dragged boxes to the open doors and pushed them into the roaring night. One by one. Together.

It was the first time Arya was not alone in destruction.

And the irony did not escape him.

The man who never believed in hope now stood among people who had found it because of him.

He watched a small boy struggle with a package nearly as heavy as his own body. The child’s hands trembled. His eyes darted

constantly, expecting punishment. His mother noticed and stepped beside him, guiding his arms gently.

“It will be okay,” she whispered. “I promise.”

The words struck him like a blow to the chest.

For a moment the moving train vanished.

He was no longer there.

He was back in that hospital room. White walls. The smell of antiseptic and burnt flesh. Machines breathing where lungs could not. His mother lay there, face ruined, pain carved into every breath, yet her voice had been calm.

“It will be okay,” she had said, her fingers barely able to move as his red, terrified eyes stared back at her. “I promise.”

His heart pounded now. Not from violence. Not from adrenaline.

From memory.

From love.

The train began to slow.

Metal screamed against metal as resistance fought momentum. The dumping was almost complete. The last of the poison vanished into darkness.

Then the train stopped.

Not a station. Not a platform. Just open land and night.

“Now,” Vansh said through the mic.

They did not hesitate.

People ran. Some stumbled. Some carried children. Some cried as they ran, not from fear but from disbelief. The shore side swallowed them, scattering them into freedom.

Arya remained behind, watching until the last silhouette disappeared.

Only then did he move.

Dawn crept in quietly.

Arya stood again in the basement, shadows clinging to concrete walls. His body ached. His wounds burned. He removed

his gloves slowly, one finger at a time, as though delay could keep the night alive a little longer.

Vansh had not slept. Screens glowed around him. Anonymous posts. Leaks. Footage. Coordinates. The system had been fed poison all night.

"You know," Arya said finally, voice hollow, "we never talked much about my father's empire. About what she said in that recording."

He leaned back against the wall.

"My sister stood on that terrace defending it," he continued. "And I spilled blood there."

His voice cracked.

"But this," he said, eyes glistening in a way they almost never did, "this answers everything."

He slid down to the floor and sat there.

"So this is where the money came from," he whispered. "Human trafficking. That was his legacy."

Silence filled the room.

"It was just one box," Arya went on, shaking his head. "There could be hundreds. Thousands."

He buried his face in his hands.

"I don't know," he said, his voice breaking into something raw and childlike. "I don't know what to do."

Vansh stepped closer.

"It's done," he said softly. "Now you do exactly what we planned all along."

Arya looked up.

The smile that had once lived easily on his face did not return. Unease replaced it.

"What did I tell you to do?" Vansh asked.

The question hung in the air.

Heavy.

Inevitable.

And irreversible.

The ACTF headquarters did not sleep that night.

A separate wing had been carved out for it, glass walls, dimmed lights, screens glowing with maps, timelines, red markers blinking like open wounds. Coffee went cold on desks. Cigarettes burned down to filters untouched. No one spoke casually anymore.

They were past disbelief.

"I still can't wrap my head around it," one officer said finally, rubbing his eyes. "He flew off a fort. A bloody fort. Parachute deployed midair and vanished."

Chavi stood near the main display, arms crossed, eyes fixed on the paused drone footage. A shadow lifting into nothing.

"And now," she replied quietly, "he's done it again. Before we could even reach the site."

A man burst into the room carrying a thick stack of papers, breath uneven. "Railway reports," he said, dropping them on the table. "Compiled, analysed, whatever we could salvage."

Chavi turned. "What did the people say?" she asked. "The ones who showed up at the station."

"They came in at dawn," another officer answered. "Sariska police station. Hungry. Half of them barefoot. Kids crying. Old men barely standing."

Chavi closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "And now?"

"Now it's chaos," he continued. "Media vans everywhere. Reporters surrounding them. Cameras in their faces."

"They're being called rescuers," the man with the report said carefully. "Victims of human trafficking. They were inside a freight train we were tracking overnight."

Chavi's jaw tightened.

"And they all say the same thing," he went on. "They cry, they shake, they hold their kids... and they blame only one man."

The room grew silent.

“The only name they could say,” he finished, “the only one they knew...”

Chavi looked up slowly.

“And what is it?” she asked.

The officer swallowed.

“Raghav Malhotra.”

The name landed like a gunshot.

Screens flickered. Someone cursed under their breath. Chavi stared at the wall, not at the name, but at what it implied.

She exhaled slowly.

“This is no longer a vigilante problem,” she said at last. “This is a war on rot.”

The bunker door opened with a dull, hydraulic sigh.

Night still ruled above ground.

Behind Arya, the guards lay scattered across the farmhouse perimeter, unconscious bodies frozen mid-collapse. Security cameras blinked dead, their red eyes extinguished. The smoke from the grenade hung low, thinning gradually, like a lie losing strength.

Arya descended the concrete steps slowly.

Each step echoed.

Curiosity replaced urgency now. The kind that settles in the chest, heavy and unavoidable.

“And here you are,” Vansh’s voice came through the mic. “Raghav Malhotra should be under police inspection by now. But there’s nothing. No arrest logs. No digital trace. It’s like he evaporated.”

Arya didn’t reply.

He reached the bottom.

The bunker revealed itself fully.

It was not crude. Not hidden like something illegal should be. It was refined. Expensive. Thoughtfully designed. Warm lighting spilled across polished floors. Sofas arranged with care. A modern

kitchen embedded seamlessly into one wall. Shelves of books, real books, not decoration.

A place meant to be lived in.

At the center of it all stood a massive concrete structure, rectangular, bordered with steel. It resembled a pool sealed shut, industrial and deliberate.

Arya's eyes locked onto it immediately.

"What is that?" he asked.

"What do you think?" Vansh chuckled, though there was tension beneath it.

Arya walked closer. "Can you scan it? X-ray it or something? Use your V-rays."

A pause. "The drones can," Vansh replied. "But not in here. Signal won't penetrate this deep."

Arya exhaled softly.

His attention drifted.

A bookshelf stood to the side, accompanied by a small table and a single chair. The space carried a quiet energy, familiar, almost comforting. Against his better judgment, he felt drawn to it.

He reached out and pulled a book from the shelf.

Crime and Punishment. Fyodor Dostoevsky.

A faint smile touched his lips. "Of course," he murmured. "My favourite."

He opened it casually.

And then he saw it.

Just beyond the book, resting on the small table, was a framed photograph.

Arya froze.

He stared at it longer than necessary. Seconds stretched into minutes.

Vansh, distracted by schematics and readings, finally noticed the silence. "Why are you stuck there?" he asked. "Look around. This place is of"

Arya didn't answer.

"What is it?" Vansh pressed. "Who's in the photo?"

Arya swallowed.

"My father," he said quietly.

Vansh stopped speaking.

For a moment, even the bunker felt like it was holding its breath.

"This isn't Raghav's bookshelf," Arya continued, voice low, controlled. "It was his father's. He used to read here. They were friends. Close ones."

His fingers tightened around the book.

"Look at them," he added bitterly. "Men who stole from people who had nothing left to give."

He scoffed, sharp and humorless.

"Ahh, fuck it."

He grabbed the frame and threw it to the floor.

Glass shattered, the sound echoing louder than it should have. He turned away, refusing to look at the broken image.

"Doesn't matter," he said flatly.

There was a pause.

"Arya," Vansh whispered suddenly. "Wait."

"What?" Arya asked, irritated.

"Look down," Vansh said carefully. "Just... look."

Arya glanced at the shattered frame.

Beneath it lay something folded.

Paper.

He crouched slowly and picked it up.

The weight of it felt wrong. He knew that instinctively.

He unfolded it.

It was a letter.

Addressed to Vikrant Mehra.

And as Arya held it, the bunker no longer felt like a shelter.

To Mr. Vikrant Mehra,

There are moments in a man's life when commerce ceases to be a ledger of numbers and becomes instead a reckoning of survival. I write to you from such a moment.

You and I have long understood that partnerships of consequence are never built on virtue alone. They are sustained by silence, by discretion, and when required by decisive correction. It is in this spirit, not in malice, that I bring to your attention the growing inconvenience presented by Mr. Kailash Kumar.

My association with him, once profitable and mutually advantageous, has begun to rot at its roots. His conscience, an indulgence I once mistook for discipline, has turned erratic. He speaks of withdrawal. Of distance. Of disentangling himself from undertakings that have enriched him as much as they have shielded him. Men like that do not merely leave; they unravel everything they have touched.

You are aware of the percentage he holds. You are also aware that such percentages, when left in unstable hands, become liabilities. Should he choose confession over loyalty, the consequences would not discriminate between us.

Accidents, however, are mercifully impartial.

A mechanical failure on a rain-slicked road. A moment's misjudgment at an unlit crossing. Fate has a way of absolving men of intent, provided the planning is immaculate.

I do not ask this lightly, nor without offering due recompense. The sum discussed earlier, adjusted to reflect the finality of the act, shall be transferred through the usual channels. Upon completion, his stake, his silence, and his future complications will be resolved permanently, reverting in entirety to those who remain capable of stewardship.

There is, of course, the matter of his family. Tragic, but unavoidable. Widows and orphans draw sympathy, not suspicion. Time will see to the rest.

I trust your judgment as I have before, because men like us cannot afford hesitation masquerading as morality. History does not remember the careful only the survivors.

Burn this letter after reading. Let it exist only as intent fulfilled.

Yours in confidence and necessity,

Rajiv Malhotra

Arya had a terrible realisation while reading all of it.

The words did not merely register in his mind, they settled, like dust after an explosion.

“Your father died,” Vansh said quietly, almost cautiously, “because of his partner. Rajiv. The father of Raghav.”

He paused.

“A copy of that letter was sent through telegram. It stayed here. Like a trophy.”

“Aaahhhh!”

Arya screamed.

He punched the bookshelf.

Once.

Twice.

Again and again, until pain stopped making sense and rage became the only language left.

“My mother...” he muttered, his voice cracking, drowning in something far uglier than grief. Rage mixed with memory. Memory mixed with guilt.

The bookshelf trembled.

Unbeknownst to him, one of the blows struck something hollow. Something deliberate.

There was a low mechanical groan.

The concrete wall behind him began to roar, shifting with a precision too modern to be accidental. Steel slid against steel. Locks disengaged. The entire structure moved like a living thing.

And then it opened.

Stacks.

Blocks.

Crores upon crores of money.

Perfectly arranged. Brutally silent.

Arya stepped back, stunned, watching as the concrete receded and revealed the enormous mass. A single colossal chunk of wealth, compressed into geometry.

“So this is it,” Vansh said slowly. “All the black money. Safely hidden. Preserved. Like a monument.”

Arya stared.

“These people earn it,” Vansh continued, bitterness seeping through his voice, “and then they just store it for years. For nothing. While the poor die for a thousand. Cry for every single rupee.”

The bunker felt heavier now. Like it was breathing greed.

Suddenly, Vansh stiffened.

“Oh Lord... he’s coming.”

“Who?” Arya asked, not turning around.

“He. Raghav Malhotra,” Vansh said urgently. “But he should be under investigation. In custody. Something.”

“It’s alright,” Arya replied calmly. Too calmly. “Let him come.”

“He has guards,” Vansh warned. “Armed.”

Arya didn’t move.

“You go and hide,” Vansh said. “He’s acting angry but hasn’t done anything yet. He’s entering.”

Footsteps echoed.

Raghav Malhotra walked in, flanked by two guards carrying assault rifles. Their boots hit the floor with authority, the kind bought by money and enforced by fear.

“What are you doing?” Vansh screamed. “Get off. Hide.”

But Arya stood still.

Waiting.

“Hide, hide,” Vansh whispered frantically, almost chanting, as if saying it enough times might make it real.

Arya didn't even blink.

The guards raised their rifles, pointing them straight at him.

Raghav looked at Arya from a distance. Studied him. Measured him.

Then, slowly, he raised his hand.

The guards lowered their weapons.

Raghav waved again, a gesture soaked in domination, ownership, certainty.

He stepped forward, his eyes scanning the money, then returning to Arya.

A faint smile appeared.

"So here you are," he announced, his voice calm, almost amused.

"Mr. Vigilante."

His expressions twisted, skin folding into sharp wrinkles of rage.

"So you're here to expose me?" Raghav said, almost laughing. "Well, things like that don't work."

He tilted his head, pretending to think.

"You exposed... who was that again?" He snapped his fingers. "Ah yes. The Chief Justice. Then you picked up the lady. Then I stopped giving a fuck."

He walked a little closer, voice casual, poisonous.

"They called me for an inquiry. I delayed it. You know why?"

He smirked.

"I was in a sauna. Massage. No time to get ready."

He shrugged.

"Then I went there. They talked. Blah blah. Procedures. Ethics. Whatever."

He waved his hand dismissively.

"I made a call. Set up a few things. Everything went smooth."

Raghav leaned forward slightly.

"And then I hear that I am getting exposed by none other than Mr. Vigilante."

A slow smile crept across his face.
“So I thought, why not come myself? Have a chat.”
He spread his arms.
“I always wanted a villain in my story.”
His eyes locked on Arya.
“And here you are.”
His smile vanished.
“But there’s one problem.”
He stepped closer.
“You can’t.”
A pause.
“You can’t touch me.”
Another pause.
“You can’t expose me. No matter how hard you try.”
Arya stood wrapped in fury. His red eyes burned, unblinking, fixed on a man who did not flinch, did not rush, did not fear. Raghav spoke with pure pride.
“And why is that?” Arya asked, his voice low.
Raghav smiled wider.
“Because,” he said arrogantly, spreading his arms toward the money, “I own you.”
He pointed at the stacked blocks.
“I own this. I own everyone here. These people.”
His voice darkened.
“I am the only man who can walk into any city, enter any house I like, and fuck whoever the hell I want.”
He sneered.
“In front of a boyfriend. In front of a father.”
He paused, eyes narrowing.
“In front of a brother.”
He straightened.
“So I suggest you get the fuck off me.”
Arya moved.
In one fluid motion, he pulled the electric gun.

The first shot hit the guard.

The second shot dropped the other.

Arya rushed forward.

Combat exploded.

He used speed, leverage, precision. Elbows. Knees. Disarms. Bodies hit the floor hard. One screamed. Then silence.

Arya stood up, breathing heavy, eyes blazing, turning slowly toward Raghav.

"All my guards are upstairs," Raghav said calmly, ego intact. "You think you're just walking out of here?"

Above them, something hummed.

Vansh dropped the drone.

But this time, it wasn't surveillance.

Within seconds, the device released thick smoke. Specialized payloads. M99 smokers. One by one, the guards outside collapsed like puppets with cut strings.

Arya walked closer to Raghav, picking up the phone from the first guard.

"Who?" Arya asked casually.

He tossed the phone to Raghav. The live feed showed bodies scattered on the floor. Unconscious. Motionless.

Raghav's face snapped.

"What the fuck are you all doing?" he yelled into the screen. "Sleeping?"

"Yes," Arya replied calmly. "Sleeping."

He leaned in.

"And what you just said to me?"

He tapped his temple.

"Recorded. Clear audio."

Raghav froze.

"You know," Arya continued, "I see things."

He straightened.

"And my guy?"

A pause.

"He already uploaded it."

Raghav's eyes widened.

"Social media. Multiple platforms. You, confessing. Bribery. Threats."

A faint smile.

"And that beautiful line of yours."

"You think you can beat me?" Raghav snarled, ripping off his suit jacket, then his shirt. His body was built. Trained. Ready.

"Come on," he growled. "Now."

Raghav roared and charged at the Vigilante, rage overflowing, pride blinding him. It was not strategy anymore. It was arrogance running on adrenaline.

He swung a wild right hand.

Arya blocked it clean.

The counter came instantly.

A sharp combo. Elbow. Knee. Then a full force punch straight into Raghav's mouth. The impact lifted him off balance. He crashed onto the concrete, blue blood spilling from his lips.

Arya did not pause.

He pulled out his knife and drove it hard into Raghav's right hand, pinning it to the floor.

"Aaaahhhhh!" Raghav screamed.

Arya stood over him, red eyes burning.

"You think," Arya began slowly, "this is a movie?"

He grabbed Raghav by the collar and slammed his fist into his face.

"That I fight all the bad guys easily," punch,

"And then struggle with the final boss?" punch.

Bone cracked.

Raghav's jaw broke under the pressure.

Arya kept going.

"You," punch.

"Don't," punch.

"Fuck," punch.

“With,” punch.

“My,” punch.

“Only,” punch.

“Sister,” punch.

“Aaaahhhhhhh!” Raghav screamed, voice tearing apart.

“Who the fuck are you?” he yelled through blood and broken teeth. “Motherfucker!”

Arya straightened, chest rising.

“I am a son to a dead mother,” Arya said.

His eyes scanned the room.

Alcohol bottles.

Plenty of them.

He grabbed one and smashed it open, pouring it over the stacked money.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Raghav cried, panic finally leaking out. “Stop. Please.”

Arya grabbed another bottle. Then another.

He poured everything. Whiskey. Vodka. Wine. Luxury burning into sin.

“I am a brother to a dead sister.”

He flicked the lighter.

The fire caught instantly.

The money ignited, yellow flames swallowing black wealth, turning pride into ash. Heat exploded through the bunker, licking skin, suffocating air.

Raghav screamed, crying, crawling, begging.

“Don’t. Don’t. Please.”

His pride was gone. Only flesh remained.

Arya picked up the last bottle and walked toward him.

“What are you gonna do about it now?” Vansh said softly, relief breaking through his voice.

The memories of Vanshika, the tapes, the truth, had hardened him beyond pain.

Arya raised the bottle.

“I’m going to make sure,” he said calmly, sweat reflecting off his face, knife still buried in Raghav’s hand, “that he never fucks up anyone again.”

The bottle came down.

Hard.

Glass shattered. Bone shattered. The face collapsed under the impact.

Flames climbed higher.

Fire reached Raghav’s skin, consuming him with the money he worshipped.

Arya stared at the body.

The first man he killed.

A voice echoed in his head. A recording.

“Bhaiya... bhaiya...”

Vanshika’s voice.

“Are you okay? Are you really fine?”

“I’m totally fine,” Arya whispered back into the memory.

He exhaled.

“I guess I shouldn’t have lied that day.”

Arya turned and walked away.

Behind him, the basement burned.

Some fires do not stop on their own.

Chapter 35: Blue Right Hand

The dream did not arrive gently.

It did not ease its way in like sleep usually does. It flooded him.

A vast, endless ocean churned beneath his feet, black and metallic, heavy with noise and memory. Arya stood nowhere and everywhere at once, suspended above the water, his body weightless, his mind crushed. Voices came from behind him, not one, not two, but layered, overlapping, as if the world itself had learned how to whisper.

No matter what decisions you take.

What choices you make.

What others have to offer you.

The butterfly effect.

The words echoed, folding into themselves, circling him.

They all lead you to the same place.

Arya turned, though there was nothing to turn toward.

And what's that?

The answer arrived without urgency, without mercy.

Death.

The ocean stilled.

The sky dimmed.

From the darkness above, she appeared.

Vanshika.

Her body hung from the ceiling, motionless, suspended like an unfinished sentence. Her hair covered part of her face, but he knew it was her. He always did. The rope bit into her neck, cruel and exact, the kind of detail the mind never forgets. Her feet did not touch the ground. They never did in his dreams.

The voices returned, colder now, almost amused.

What fortune were you born with?

A pause.

A really bad one.

The ocean roared.

Waves rose like walls, towering, violent, rushing toward him with the intent to erase. The world bent under their weight. Just before they crashed, another voice cut through, calmer, practiced, clinical.

The therapist.

Somebody once told me there's no good or bad in this accursed world. I guess there are only unlucky people.

The wave struck.

Now you are the one unlucky.

Water swallowed him whole. It filled his mouth, his lungs, his chest. Pressure crushed him from all sides. He sank, deeper and deeper, the surface disappearing like a forgotten promise. In the silence beneath, the voices softened, slowed, stretched thin.

The world doesn't know your pain.

A pause.

And it never will.

Arya woke up.

His body jerked upright as if pulled from drowning. Breath tore into his lungs, sharp and desperate. His chest heaved. Sweat clung to his skin. His heart hammered, not fast, but heavy, each beat a reminder that he was still here.

The room was dim. Quiet. Real.

Vansh sat at the far table, calm as ever, one arm resting beside a glass of orange juice. He did not rush. He never did. He simply observed.

Another nightmare? he said, casually, as if asking about the weather.

Arya didn't answer.

He slid off the bed and walked toward the table, movements slow, controlled, like a man making sure the ground still existed

beneath him. He sat down opposite Vansh and gave a small nod. Nothing more.

Yes.

Vansh didn't push. He never asked what he already knew would hurt to say. He just watched Arya's hands. The way they trembled for a moment before going still. The way his jaw tightened, locking the scream back inside.

Vansh broke the silence slowly, as if stepping onto thin ice. His breath was heavier than usual, not from fear, but from carrying the weight of the question itself.

"It's been a week," he said. "How did it feel?"

Arya did not hesitate.

"It felt..." he paused, searching not for the right word, but for an honest one. "It felt terrific."

Vansh looked up, surprised not by the word, but by the calm with which it was delivered.

"But it still doesn't make a difference," Arya continued. "Not to me."

"What difference?" Vansh asked quietly.

Arya leaned back, eyes unfocused, as if staring at something only he could see.

"I was nothing before," he said. "I'm nothing after."

He lifted his hands slightly, fingers trembling, trying to carve meaning out of air. The gesture failed him. The words refused to align.

"There's something inside me. I don't know how to explain it. I never do, because I just can't."

He exhaled, slow and heavy, like letting go of a burden that never truly leaves.

"This emptiness. This feeling of nothing. No matter what I do. No matter what I become. It doesn't go away. What the universe has to offer me... this absurdity I carry... I've accepted it."

He looked at Vansh now.

"I'll always be alone. Always lonely. And despite everything, I'll keep losing things. Time by time. Until one day, I finally lose myself completely."

Vansh listened without interruption. No judgment. No attempt to fix. He observed the man not as a friend, but as a study. A living contradiction of rage and clarity.

"You say all this," Vansh said at last. "And yet you go out there with me. You help me punish them. Why?"

Arya's head tilted slightly. The hidden cowl rested beside him, dusty, unforgiving, like a discarded skin.

"Every time I'm out there," Arya said slowly, "I'm not there to kill."

He paused.

"I'm there to die."

Vansh's eyes narrowed.

"They're all my suicide attempts," Arya continued. "I just get lucky every time. Lucky with death. Unlucky with life."

Vansh let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"You're a masquerade without morals," he said. "Or maybe a morality without a masquerade."

He looked directly at Arya.

"You wear a mask. But out of everyone I've ever met, you're the only one without one."

Arya did not react.

"Another reason I didn't let you hear all the recordings," Vansh continued. "You would have broken. When a man has only one thing to live for and that gets taken away, how does he keep breathing?"

He tapped the table lightly.

"You are that question."

For a moment, Arya's face softened. Just for a moment.

"I wish," he said, "I had been ordinary. Ordinary like other social people."

He smiled faintly, humorless.

"Yet I'm still just another ordinary creature. Nothing special."

Vansh reached into his pocket and placed a folded letter on the table between them.

"Are you ready for your second party?"

Arya frowned, picking it up.

"What party?"

"The Tehravin ritual," Vansh said. "For the tragic death of Raghav Malhotra."

Arya's gaze hardened.

"I won't be coming," he said flatly.

"I understand," Vansh replied. "But if we don't attend, it might draw attention."

"I don't think so," Arya answered. "If we were meant to draw attention, we would have already. Maybe the best move is to stay away."

He looked at the letter once more, then set it down.

"Family business doesn't matter anymore. Partnerships don't matter. Not even to the ordinary. Especially when we know who killed my parents."

The room fell silent again.

"I know," said Arya. His voice was steady, but not calm. It was the kind of steadiness that comes after something has already shattered inside. "I know what happened at the Terahvin of my sister."

He looked down, as if the floor itself carried memory.

"This culture, this tradition, whatever name people dress it with," he continued, "it's theatre now. Maybe it meant something thousands of years ago, when death was rare and silence was sacred. But today it's just performance. Polished grief. Scheduled sorrow."

"It was one day before the thirteenth day."

Arya inhaled slowly.

"I entered the main house of our Kumar residence. I don't remember my parents clearly. Faces fade when they leave too early. But what I saw for her," his throat tightened, "what I saw for Vanshika, it broke something permanent in me."

Vansh sat still. He did not nod. He did not interrupt. He knew moments like these were fragile. Any movement could collapse them.

"I was wearing a white kurta. A white cowl," Arya said. "Everyone else wore white too, but theirs felt clean. Mine felt stained. They sat on cheap white sheets, spread across the floor like someone had tried to imitate purity with fabric."

"And there it was," he said quietly. "A massive portrait of my sister. Bigger than she ever allowed herself to be in life. Framed. Decorated. Buried under flowers so large they felt aggressive."

"She was just sitting there," Arya whispered. "Still. Smiling in that frozen way photographs smile. As if she hadn't screamed silently for years."

"The people reacted the moment they saw me," he said, bitterness creeping in. "'Oh, there he is. Mr. Kumar's son.'"

He laughed once, dry and hollow.

"I was exhausted. Not physically. Spiritually. I had just lost my sister. I wanted space. I wanted air. But I had to go. The old men told me. Family values."

He looked at Vansh, eyes sharp.

"Values of drama, eh?"

"For hours I sat there," Arya continued. "Not present. Not absent. Just trapped. Wandering through fragments of Vanshika. Her voice. Her laugh. The way she used to pause before speaking, like she was afraid of saying too much."

"The women around me whispered endlessly. 'Oh, she was beautiful.' 'It was her marriage age.'"

His jaw clenched.

“Women,” Arya said, “are born here only to be married. To produce children. That’s their worth. That’s their beauty. Even in death, society couldn’t let her rest without measuring her against a husband she never had.”

“I wanted to scream. I wanted to stand up and throw them all out. Out of my house. Out of her space.”

“But you didn’t,” Vansh said softly. “You stayed.”

“And I had to,” Arya replied. “I had to control it. Rage is dangerous when it spills everywhere. I needed to store it. Channel it. Somewhere it could become sharp instead of destructive.”

“The world is angry now,” Vansh said after a pause. “ACTF has announced Raghav Malhotra’s death. They’ve named the red-eyed vigilante.”

“Every action has consequences.”

“I don’t care,” Arya said immediately. “How the world reacts is none of my concern. I have my story. Let them build myths around it. I don’t give a fuck about consequences because there never really are any. Only outcomes.”

“Out of thousands,” he continued, “out of lakhs, only one person sleeps with the truth. That’s the real tragedy of the butterfly effect. Everyone feels the wind. Only one knows who moved it.”

Vansh leaned forward slightly.

“What happened there,” he asked carefully, “that made you feel this sick?”

“These people,” Arya said. “They pretended to care. I don’t believe they ever did.”

“They never came when Vanshika was alive. They never asked. Never noticed. But suddenly they all appeared. At her house. After she killed herself.”

“If even one of them had been there earlier,” his voice cracked for the first time, “this might not have happened. At least not like this.”

“And the worst part,” he said, anger returning sharper now, “they couldn’t even stay silent. Silence is the only honest language of grief. But they replaced it with noise.”

“One old man sat at the front,” Arya recalled. “Like a conductor. Hosting the ceremony. Women arrived, sat down, adjusted their clothes.”

“I heard them whispering. ‘Oh, you came to cry too?’ ‘Oh, you’re here as well?’”

His lips curled in disgust.

“These people need appointments even to mourn.”

“I sat there, burning. Vanshika wouldn’t leave my mind. Her face kept overlapping with the portrait. Alive. Dead. Alive again.”

“The old man signaled with his eyes,” Arya said. “A simple gesture. And suddenly every woman sat straight. Row by row. Column by column.”

“They started crying. Together.”

“On command.”

“They needed permission even to feel pain.”

Arya’s hands trembled now.

“I was furious. If this is culture, if this is tradition, then it deserves sacrifice. All of it.”

“If I had even one percent of being what society calls a good man,” he said slowly, “I would have destroyed it from the inside.”

“They cried loudly. Together. The same rhythm. The same volume.”

“The silence my sister deserved vanished. Replaced by ritual. A ritual no one dares to question.”

“Why?” Arya asked, almost to himself.

“Because they’re afraid. Afraid of admitting their foolishness. Afraid of losing what they call identity.”

“I read the Gita once,” he said. “It said identity itself is an illusion.”

"And here I was," his voice lowered, "watching society kill truth to protect an illusion."

He looked up at Vansh.

"These women," he said quietly, "sitting in perfect lines, crying when told to cry. Is that identity?"

Vansh said nothing.

He didn't need to.

After an hour or so, Arya spoke again.

"The old man chuckled," he said quietly. "Another signal. And they all stopped."

Vansh frowned slightly, trying to place the memory. "I don't recall," he said. "Why did they stop?"

Arya lifted his gaze. His red eyes met Vansh's without blinking.

"To have a tea break."

The words landed heavier than anger. Heavier than grief.

There was a pause. A deliberate one. Not the kind filled with awkwardness, but the kind where speech itself feels insulting. Neither of them spoke. They did not need to. They had both seen enough of the world to recognize absurdity when it stripped itself bare.

"They had a tea break," Arya repeated, almost to convince himself it was real. "And after another hour, they came back. Sat down again. Same rows. Same faces. And they started performing the ritual again. Crying. Together. Like a resumed program."

"It went on like that," he said. "Again and again."

Vansh finally spoke, his voice low. "Was it really that important?"

Arya looked up, not at Vansh, but beyond him. Somewhere higher. Somewhere unreachable.

"I was asking God," Arya said. "If you are up there, wandering the sky, tell me something. Would you deny her moksha if these women didn't cry on schedule. Like a school period with breaks."

“Do you really care about this performance?” he asked, his voice sharpening. “About tea intervals and permission to grieve.”

“If yes,” he continued, “then it’s foolish. I don’t want that moksha. I’d rather settle my meeting with the devil. At least he doesn’t pretend.”

He lowered his gaze again.

“This,” Arya said, “this hypocrisy. These people. I never want to become like them.”

Vansh listened, then spoke with a strange calm. A maturity that had learned to smile at darkness.

“They all have excuses,” he said. He smiled, but it was not warm. It was sharp. Almost monstrous. “Excuses.”

He let out a short chuckle. Not amused. Just aware.

“And on the last day,” Arya said softly. “I saw her being burned.”

“Burned down on the wood. The fire reflecting off the sweat of the men standing close. Flames eating what was left.”

He paused.

“But I was mature enough by then,” Arya said. “I understood she was already gone.”

“She left long before that fire,” he added. “The moment I saw that black polymer sheet being dragged out of her apartment. That was when she died. The rest was just ceremony.”

Vansh’s eyes filled slightly. He did not wipe them away.

“And now,” he said quietly, “the only thing that can give her moksha is us.”

The room fell silent again.

Not the silence of ritual.

“ACTF is not happy with us,” Vansh said.

The room felt heavier after that. He continued, slower now. “The trafficking victims were there. Tired. Angry. Silent. I do not know what happened to them after. I genuinely do not.”

He waited, then asked, "Do you think this society, these people... what we are doing by exposing everything... would they ever accept us?"

"No," Arya said.

Nothing more.

Vansh nodded faintly. "I expected that."

After a pause, "Still... people are unpredictable. Their reactions. Their intentions."

Arya looked ahead, not at him. "They are not unpredictable."

"They will never accept us."

Vansh did not interrupt.

"People do not want truth," Arya continued. "Humans do not desire it."

"They want comfort."

The word settled heavily.

"Truth demands confrontation," Arya said. "It forces them to face their reflection. Their condition. Their weakness. Their responsibility."

"That is why a comforting lie is always chosen over a bitter truth."

"They live inside that lie. Not by accident. By instinct."

"A lie that makes them feel safe. Even when it empties them from within."

Arya paused, as if weighing whether to continue.

"The majority are not strong," he said. "They are fragments of a crowd. A system. Traditions mistaken for identity."

"It is easy to follow," he added quietly. "You do not have to think. You do not have to decide. You simply move with the mass and arrive somewhere you never questioned."

Arya exhaled.

Vansh listened, deliberately, without moving.

"But the one who walks alone," Arya said, his voice lower now, "who questions everything... who refuses blind belief... who chooses to fight... who chooses to expose..."

He finally turned.

"Like us."

A pause.

"Mr Techman."

It was the first time he said the name.

Arya's red, unsettling eyes met Vansh's calm blue ones. Rage and intellect standing face to face. Neither blinking. Neither yielding.

"They are dangerous to them," Arya said quietly. "We are."

"Because we did what this system allowed to rot."

"We exposed the justice man. Whatever the hell he was pretending to be."

"We took the thumb drive from a woman who would have let hundreds of thousands of children die slowly. Not by bullets. By medicine. By delay. By profit."

"We shut down scam centers that survived only by fear. We made them feel threatened for the first time."

He paused.

"And yet ACTF, or whatever intelligence name they wear today, follows us. They want to stop us. Not because we are wrong. But because we pointed at what they failed to see."

"They do not want to face their mistakes," Arya continued. "They want them buried."

Vansh spoke softly, "And no one wants responsibility."

"No one," Arya said. "Everyone blames the system. Even a criminal blames the system for what he became."

"Just like us," Vansh said.

"Yes," Arya replied, tired now. "Maybe."

He straightened.

"Men like us," he said, then corrected himself, sharper. "Men like me."

"They do not fear me because I am violent."

"They fear me because I am free."

"Free from their borrowed morality. Free from their fake responsibilities. Free from hope that was never honest."

"I am bound only to my ambition," he said. "And that is why they will conclude one thing."

"I am vengeance."

Arya's voice lowered.

"Humans hate the one who shows them reality. Even if he is a philosopher. Especially if he is honest."

"We showed them reality."

"That makes us a threat."

"And we always will be."

He looked at Vansh.

"There is no stopping it now."

A brief silence.

"We are not afraid of the truth," Arya said finally. "We are afraid of seeing our own face clearly."

"So what philosophy is it," Vansh asked quietly, "that you follow?"

Arya smiled.

Not warmly. Not proudly. Just enough to acknowledge the question.

"Oh. It has a name now," he said. "Aryanism."

He laughed once. Soft. Brief.

Vansh smiled too, but it was not relief. It was confusion tightening into caution. He waited. Arya did not rush to explain.

"Aryanism?" Vansh repeated, testing the word. "Is that what it's called now?"

"I think," Arya said, and the smile left his face as if it had never belonged there, "history should not be taught."

Vansh stiffened. "That's... controversial."

"History should not be taught as it is," Arya corrected, his voice slowing. "Not everyone studies it to observe human behaviour, or the evolution of the mind. Not everyone approaches it like Robert Greene does. Most people use it to justify what they already want to do."

He paused, letting the words settle.

"They use it to genocide. To feel pride. To worship identity. To fight for dead kings. And still, they never study politics."

Vansh exhaled slowly.

"So history isn't the problem," he said carefully. "The approach is."

"Exactly." Arya nodded. "History is not a waste. Our use of it is. It should sharpen intellect. Instead, we study it to say we are upper caste. They are lower. To label. To divide."

Vansh looked at him now, unsettled. "Is that really what you believe?"

"Yes."

The word came without hesitation.

"And some would argue," Vansh continued, trying to regain ground, "that if we don't study history, others will. And they'll use it against us."

Arya's eyes hardened.

"Fools," he said calmly. "When I say history should not be preached, I mean to everyone. Everyone."

Silence thickened between them.

"If for once," Arya continued, slower now, "we stopped approaching history the way we always have, we would realise how numb we are. Most terrorist groups would vanish. Political debates would collapse without borrowed wounds. Riots would have nothing to ignite."

Vansh felt a chill creep up his spine.

“The youth,” Arya went on, “would live like newborns. Innocent, yet curious. And the powerful would rot. Slowly. Quietly. And ambitious girls like Vanshika would not be driven to suicide in the name of a system.”

Vansh’s throat tightened.

“After all,” Arya said, almost absent-minded now, “we are going to die anyway. Maybe in thousands of years the sun will dissolve the earth. But we will be long gone. Reduced to names. To footnotes. No identity, caste, religious places would exist and the imaginary lines written by history.”

The answer was frightening.

Not because it was loud.

But because it was calm.

And yet, Vansh remained where he stood.

Still terrified.

Nothing matters to you,” said Vansh, curiosity overtaking caution. “Not how big something is. Not how small. While people line up before priests just to protect a name.”

He paused, then asked, almost casually, “What does your name mean. Arya.”

“It does not matter,” Arya answered. “Not to me.”

Vansh waited. Arya did not look at him.

“A name is not meant to reveal who you are,” Arya continued. A faint chuckle escaped him, not amused, not bitter. Thoughtful. As if the sentence itself required patience.

He smiled briefly, then finished.

“A name exists to hide who you really are.”

The words struck Vansh harder than expected.

He did not respond immediately. His intellect stalled, not from confusion, but from recognition. The kind that rearranges belief rather than opposing it.

Arya had been listening to all the talks, absorbing them without interruption, without reaction, yet not without

impression. Silence, for him, was never emptiness. It was a place where thoughts sharpened themselves.

“You don’t believe in anything, I see,” Vansh finally asked, his voice measured, curious rather than accusatory. “But why does this world need to believe in something at all?”

Arya did not answer immediately. His eyes stayed fixed somewhere beyond the room, as if the walls had dissolved and space itself had taken their place.

“I may have no answer to that,” Arya said at last, his tone calm, almost indifferent. “But I have something else.”

“And what’s that?” Vansh asked, leaning slightly forward.

“You know,” Arya began, “there was a great astronaut. Mr. James Arthur Lovell Junior.”

Vansh stayed silent, allowing the story to breathe.

“He was exceptional at his work. Disciplined. Relentless. He worked during the Apollo space programme, a man shaped by equations, precision, and responsibility. His greatness can be measured by a simple fact. He was the backup commander for Apollo 11, standing just behind Neil Armstrong. Close enough to history to touch it, yet never chosen to step into it.”

Arya paused briefly, as if weighing the cruelty of that truth.

“And yet,” he continued, “he always wanted the Moon. That was his goal. Not fame. Not applause. The Moon itself. To stand where humanity had never stood before.”

Vansh nodded slightly, listening.

“Then fate, or luck, or whatever name people like to give coincidence, selected him to lead Apollo 13. After two successful missions, this was it. The culmination of everything he had studied for. Years of preparation. Endless simulations. Sacrifices people never see.”

Arya’s voice grew quieter, steadier.

“He lifted off from Earth, leaving gravity behind, heading straight for his purpose. The world barely noticed. There was no

frenzy this time. No celebrations like Apollo 11. No Neil Armstrong. No historic soundbite waiting to be remembered forever.”

He exhaled slowly.

“But he still did his job.”

Vansh watched Arya closely now.

“He was focused,” Arya said. “Committed. Ambitious in the purest sense. Not greedy ambition. Purpose driven ambition.”

Then his eyes darkened.

“But whatever you call it, luck or destiny, had other plans.”

He paused.

“The oxygen tank exploded.”

His hand clenched slightly.

“Dhamm.”

The sound lingered in the air, heavy and final.

“And just like that,” Arya continued, “all his study, all his ambition, all his desire to land on the Moon shattered in a single moment. Not because he failed. Not because he was careless. But because the universe simply decided otherwise.”

“Shattered?” Vansh asked quietly. “So he didn’t land.”

“Not that he didn’t land,” Arya replied. “More like he couldn’t land.”

Vansh waited.

“And from that moment on,” Arya continued, “the mission was no longer about touching the Moon. It changed into something far more primitive. To come back home alive.”

He paused, letting that settle.

“It is still remembered in modern history as the successful failure.”

Vansh listened carefully now, not interrupting, sensing that this was not about space anymore.

“They chose to use the Moon’s orbit,” Arya said, “to swing around it and return. A slingshot back to Earth. No heroics. No triumph. Just survival.”

He folded his arms slowly.

“All power inside the cabin had to be cut to preserve what little energy remained. They lived in darkness. In silence. In cold so extreme it dropped to barely three degrees.”

Vansh exhaled through his nose. “That’s cold just to hear.”

Arya nodded faintly.

“And through all of that,” he said, “the pressure sat on Captain Jim Lovell. Not because he might die. Astronauts accept death the moment they leave Earth. But because he knew something worse.”

Vansh looked at him.

“He knew,” Arya continued, “that he would not be the one. Not the rare human who reached the Moon. Not the man history would carve into stone.”

“But,” Vansh asked carefully, “did he get back safely?”

Arya did not answer immediately.

“When he was up there,” he said instead, “he looked through the window.”

His voice softened.

“And there it was. The planet he came from. The same planet we are having this conversation right now. Somewhere down there, someone is probably reading a book.”

Arya raised his hand slowly.

“He placed his thumb over the Earth.”

He closed his fingers slightly.

“And just like that, the entire world disappeared.”

He lowered his hand.

“Only darkness remained.”

And then he realized it, as he placed his thumb over the glass.

“When I put my thumb up to the window, I could completely hide the Earth behind it. Everything I have ever known, my home, my loved ones, my fears, my victories, all of it vanished behind that thumb.”

Arya’s voice grew quieter.

“It made me understand how insignificant we truly are. And yet how absurdly fortunate we are to even have this planet.”

He looked at Vansh now.

“And from that, I realized how stupid we are to call ourselves special. We are nothing. Not chosen. Not divine. Just foolish.”

The room felt smaller.

“The system that martyrs die for,” Arya continued, “would regret what people like this have turned it into. The very people I have dealt with. Destroying it from inside.”

His jaw tightened.

“This forced nationalism. Religion worn like armor. Culture and tradition used as chains. I will not let it rot me.”

Vansh shifted uneasily. Those words were not comforting. They sounded too calm to be harmless.

“You say all this,” Vansh said carefully, worry slipping into his voice, “and yet you are out there hurting the bad and helping the good.”

Arya exhaled sharply, anger breaking through.

“I did not help any good.”

“Then tell me,” Vansh pushed, “why did you save that puppy that day?”

Arya paused.

His red eyes drifted away, not following any natural line, as if searching for something abstract, something intellectual rather than emotional.

“I did not save the puppy,” he said finally, leaning fully back into the chair. “I simply did not let my bike hit a living being.”

He stood up slowly.

The chair creaked behind him as he turned toward the exit.
And as he left the room, it became clear.
This was not a man who believed in goodness.
Only in refusing to become worse.