

THE PEACEMAKER

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ॐ श्री सरस्वत्यै नमः

Preface



I wished to write a story about a near future. But the pace at which the world is changing, I am afraid by the time it reaches you, it may feel like an expository or a classic historical fiction rather than a futuristic Sci-fi thriller.

I leave it up to the interpretation of the readers as it all depends on when this work reaches you. But it is written at a time when we, human beings, are witnessing this revolutionary transition.

AI. The invention of the century. It is slowly seeping into our daily lives. Just like every new thing, it also comes with its share of hope, fear and speculation. At this current stage, in 2025, when I am writing this novel, I can try my best to predict all the possibilities. The Good. The Bad. And the evil. That has been purpose in writing this. To explore all possible prospects.

Another thing that I can observe right now (and what I tried to explore in my work too) is how its inception is affecting us. On personal as well as social levels. Although its long-term after-effects would be revealed only in the future. Just like it took us many years to realize that invisible radiation can penetrate deep into bones. Similarly, AI's effect on our mental faculties, attention span, emotional well-being, creativity etc., are yet to be seen.

I do hope for a brighter future. But we must be prepared for the darkness too.

Acknowledgement



This is one hard thing to do. So many people are involved in shaping me in one way or the other that gave me the strength and confidence to accomplish this task. So, if I somehow miss someone, trust me, I am still grateful to you from the depth of my heart.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents for their numerous sacrifices and unconditional support. Their constant love, guidance and wisdom made this dream possible.

I would thank the Almighty God for the blessings showered upon me.

I would thank all my teachers who have ever taught me. Your lessons and guidance chiseled me into the man I am. (Pardon me if you find any grammatical errors. You know, I tend to make silly mistakes. Trying to do better.)

I would like to thank my friends and family members.

I would especially thank all those kind-hearted people (Uttam, Joy, Shaunak, Ravinder and many others) who attended to my plea, read my work, and shared their honest reviews and gave me the confidence that my words can also touch hearts. Thanks a lot, brothers. It means a lot.

Thanks, to my publisher. And thanks to all those readers who put their faith in me. I hope I keep up with your expectations.

Chapter-1



The fifty-year-old lawyer found it a bit hard to keep his eyes straight and open for ten seconds while the newly installed biometric lock system read his retinal image. Not because of any malfunction of the lock system but due to excess alcohol content in his biological system. It was almost midnight when he finally entered his apartment. After a long time, he had such an amazing evening. It was the office party of a distant nephew. The very nephew who gifted him all the new hi-tech home appliances such as the biometric lock, automated light sensors and even software operated gas oven. These were not out of sudden generosity. Recently advocate Afzal Hassan proved quite helpful to his nephew and helped him with an important case. The service was reciprocated in almost all possible ways.

As Afzal walked into the drawing room the wall paneled LED lights automatically emitted milky white light and the moment he crashed on his sofa it turned into soothing yellow.

“Ah! I love technology...” the drunk lawyer said to himself.

The apartment was empty. His wife and kids went to his in-laws. Giving him more opportunity to have more of such amazing evenings. Just the next moment his phone rang. It was his daughter Ruhani. Afzal coughed a few times to shake off the drunk tone. At least he tried.

“Hello beta, how are you?” asked Afzal over beamingly.
“You’re not asleep yet?”

"I'm fine. No. I was waiting for you."

"What? I was home long ago. I was sleeping." Afzal faked a yawn. "Where's your mom?"

"Mom is angry at you. So won't talk." Ruhani replied.

"Why? What the..." asked Afzal. "But why?"

"Dad. We also get the live feed from the security cam," replied Ruhani. "I just got a notification that you've entered two minutes ago."

The baffled lawyer stood up. The lights turned white again.

I hate technology, he thought. "Umm... Actually..."

"Mom is saying it is your second time this week," Ruhani communicated. "And she... she is saying you promised not to have parties while we are gone."

"Beta it was an office party," explained Afzal. "It would be rude to say no."

"Remember when you said no to the Manali trip because of your 'high profile case', that was rude too," retorted Ruhani.

Afzal laughed. "Haha. Good one. You will be a good lawyer one day."

"I don't want to. Huh," replied Ruhani. "Anyway, I've ordered a chicken burger and salad. Eat that! Before you sleep on your sofa. It will take around half an hour."

"Oh. Thank you dear. So sweet of you," said Afzal.

"Goodnight!"

“Goodnight, beta,” replied Afzal. “And goodnight to your mother too.”

Within ten minutes the doorbell rang. Afzal walked to the door in an arrhythmic gait, opened it to find a young food delivery guy.

“You’re early today,” said Afzal.

“Thank you, sir,” the boy replied with a smile. “Here’s your order sir. Please give the rating.”

“Sure, sure.”

Afzal returned to the sofa. He was really hungry. The starters and snacks from the party were metabolized long ago.

Ah! Ruhani, you’re an angel, said to himself.

Afzal quickly took big bites from his burger. It was so soothing. At first. Soon he realized there was something different with the taste of patty. But his hunger was bigger than the doubt. So, he added some extra ketchup and kept on stuffing it. When he had more than half of it, he felt a strange sensation in his throat. Soon, an itchy sensation started spreading throughout his body. A grave thought made its way through his drunk mind. He quickly dissembled the layers of burger and was stunned. He threw it on the floor. The automated vacuum cleaner cum mop robot activated itself and went to clean the targeted spot. Afzal checked the receipt that came with the food.

One green salad – Rs. 275.00

One Chicken-prawn burger Rs. 450.00

Chicken and PRAWN!

Afzal was allergic to prawn. His throat started chocking. Lips swelled up. The entire body was itching. Eyes were teary.

The mind was also reacting to these symptoms. He remembered the last time when a similar episode triggered such symptoms. He was taken to the hospital. He remembered the doctor saying that a little more delay could have been fatal. The mere thought of that night elevated his heart rate even more.

That time, he was saved, but the condition was different. That time, he had house filled with people. Now, he was all alone in the middle of the night in an empty apartment with no first aid alternative available. He stood up to go to the bedroom to find for any anti-allergy pill. But to worsen the situation, the power went out. He searched through the shelves using his mobile. He searched his medical box. But to find no result.

Suddenly his mobile rang.

“Hel... Hello,” Afzal struggled to talk.

“Sir, I’m your food delivery partner. I’m on my way, is your apartment Galaxy Apartment Galactica or Galaxy Apartment Grand?”

“You... YOU Ass... ASSHOLE! You gave me wrong order?!” Afzal was furious.

“Sir. Please mind your language. I didn’t even come to your home yet. I just got out of the restaurant.”

Afzal was confused. The lawyer in him started connecting the dots to a whole new direction.

It isn’t an accident. Is it? He thought.

“Sir.. ,” the delivery executive continued on the other side. “...if you have any problem you may complain to customer care. I will cancel this delivery from my side.”

“NO! No no. No need. I’m sorry,” Afzal apologized. “Please... Please come. And come fast. I’m having a medical emergency. Need your help. And... it is Galaxy Apartment Galactica.”

Hanging up the phone, Afzal ran through the drawing room to open the door. But only to get tripped by the robo-vacuum cleaner that was buzzing around on the dirty floor. Afzal fell on the glass coffee table and it shattered into pieces. Some even got pierced through his body. Blood was whooshing out on the floor. Vacuum cleaner cum mop started cleaning it simultaneously, leaving reddish stain on the white floor which was again getting wet by the fresh flow of blood. By the time the doorbell rang, Afzal was in no position to get up and answer that. The delivery guy was smart. He quickly called the security guards. They tried to ram open the door. But the new security lock was way too sophisticated to be opened by a physical blow. It took almost one hour to get the door open. Afzal was taken to the hospital. But it was too late.

One thing the lawyer deduced correctly before dying. It was no accident.

One Year before the Launch:

“Xanti?” Exclaimed Vaibhav.

“Yes...” replied Sangita with a stern look. “From root word Shanti. But instead of ‘Sh’ we are using ‘X’ as we did with our company name.”

Deep down, Sangita herself was bit doubtful but she didn't let that reflect on her confidence.

Sangita Sengupta, a thirty years old IIM Ahmedabad graduate and currently the product and marketing head of the Xenith Digital, was trying to convince the members present in the meeting about the name of the new AI interface they were planning to launch in a year.

Top officials of Xenith Digital sat together to decide the name of their amazing product. But the people sitting in the office room in the magnificent tower in the city of Bangalore had no idea that they were planting seeds of what was going to be the most dangerous invention that would threaten the very city it was created in.

"Look... I know it sounds a little peculiar. But... market is full of such weird product names."

"Name some..." remarked Vaibhav mischievously. Vaibhav Dutta, the Chief Sales Executive, was what one may call a 'funny guy'. Although this XLRI Jamshedpur guy in his late thirties was equally genius and a polymath.

Sangita prepared for this question just last night. But right now, her brain was blank.

"Umm... look," she said trying her best to recall some of the names. "There are many. I'll mail you the names."

"It's okay. It isn't that bad." An old blonde man sitting next to the young CEO calmly said.

"Thanks, John." Said Sangita. Her feeble confidence suddenly gained a little strength as the Chief Technical Officer appreciated her idea. "I was also thinking about some acronym kind of thing, for the word X.A.N.T.I. Something like: Xenial Assistant for... something. But seemed way too long and bland."

John laughed. "True."

She then turned to other members sitting on the table. She turned to the CEO, "Pulkit?"

"Not bad," said Pulkit. "People were once skeptical about a company being named after a fruit. But we all can see where it is now. So, it's good to me."

"And as long as it starts with the letter X, I think you will be okay with that," Arman Hassan, the technical expert next to Johnathan, remarked. Everyone joined with a laugh.

"Well... Can't deny that, I think," Pulkit laughed.

"But, why is that?" Johnathan Smith asked Pulkit.

This time Pulkit felt a bit embarrassed. "Well, my family is a little into superstitions. All kinds of it. I was not... At least back then. But when I was starting this company, a close uncle of mine, who happens to be a numerologist, insisted that I name it with letter X. At that time, I casually agreed. But... look at us now. In just one and a half years we are planning to install our own data centers and making our own AI. I'm not proud of it but I'm kind of convinced that there are some sciences beyond our logical understanding."

"It is just your hard work and guts, Pulkit," said Johnathan. "Nothing else."

"Thanks, John." Said Pulkit. "Anyway, Sangita, please continue."

Sangita turned to the screen where the product name along with a designed logo was shown. "So, Xanti, as we all know, is going to be India's first AI assistant that will assist the patients with physical as well as mental ailments. This will be the logo," she pointed to a logo that was just an overly decorated letter X. "And my team was

thinking of giving a caption.” Sangita clicked next and a caption was added just below the stylish X.

“Xanti: The peace maker.”

Vaibhav gave a small laugh to the last phrase.

“Now what?” Sangita asked trying best to control her fury.

“Do you know where the term Peacemaker was first used?” asked Vaibhav.

“It is some super hero character...,” said Sangita exchanging look with her research associate, Rita Bhatnagar, who was sitting next to Arman. “...I think.”

“May be. But that is not the first time the term was used.”

“Then, please enlighten me.”

“When the revolver was invented, by Samuel Colt, if I’m not wrong, he first called his invention the ‘Peace maker’ hoping that everyone having a gun would reduce the scope of conflict and thus maintain peace in society. But it turned out the other way round. So, it was a kind of misnomer.”

“I agree with Vaibhav on this one,” said John. “I don’t want media headlines on the day of the launch to be like: The next Peacemaker. A new weapon in town”.

“You must admit there’s an uncanny resemblance between the two,” Vaibhav added gleefully. But only to receive utter silence and darting looks from everybody. Jokes about AI were almost a taboo in the office.

Since the inception of the company, for obvious reasons, discussing about the possible future of AI was a common topic of discussion. Let it be coffee counter or lunch table. And often it would end up in a

'news-channel level' debate. Even the HR had to get involved in some of those disputes. HR, at last, had to mail an advisory instruction prohibiting staffs to indulge in any such debate jokingly or seriously as it may affect the mind set of people involved in the very same project. All the staff ignored that mail as they ignore spam in their inbox. But what they do maintain was avoiding any such discussion or joke in front of Pulkit or Johnathan.

"Don't start again," said Rita.

"Hey... I'm in team AI... I don't mind getting killed by a Terminator. I am just saying," explained Vaibhav.

"Not funny," said Pulkit. Trying to sound as strict as possible. But there was a slight curve on the lips of the young leader. Then turning to Sangita he continued, "Anyway. Nice presentation, Sangita. The name and logo seem fine. We can work on the caption later."

"Thanks, Pulkit." Nodded Sangita.

"Any other issue anyone wants to discuss about?" asked Pulkit.

"Yes. I'm tired. I need a technical hand ASAP," pleaded Arman.

"We are on that. Next week a new guy would join us for interview," said Pulkit. "Seems quite bright. John himself took the telephonic interview. Quite impressive."

"Yup," said John. "What else to expect from a MIT guy."

"MIT? You don't mean Malabar Institute of Technology, do you?" asked Vaibhav.

John laughed. "No, Vaibhav. I mean Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

The whole room filled with a sound of awe and amazement.

“What? Now IIT Bombay is no more good enough for you guys?” remarked Arman. “Such a colonial mindset!”

“Really? You are the one to say?” asked Sangita.

“What do you mean?” demanded the thirty-year-old coder.

“We all know, you yourself got a man-crush on the only white guy here,” said Sangita. “No offense John.”

John laughed blushing. “None taken.”

“What?!” exclaimed Arman. “That guy had worked in Tesla. And then in Amazon. That’s called admiration, you creepy people.”

“C’mon. Stop you two,” said Pulkit. “You are making John red, again.”

John kept giggling.

“But seriously. What are you offering them that they couldn’t refuse?” asked Vaibhav. “First the Tesla guy. Now the MIT-ian.”

“Yeah... A reverse brain-drain.” Added Arman. “How?”

“By naming the company with X.” replied Pulkit with a satisfactory smile.

In a distant part of the city, a young student leader went to meet his old mentor, Ex-MP Jayshankar Fernandez to take some guidance for his new career change.

“Ah, Kundan, welcome. Have a seat,” greeted Fernandez as Kundan Kumar, his old student settled on the sofa. “What would you like to have? Tea, coffee, scotch?”

“Ah. Just coffee would do, sir. Thanks.”

“You sure? You know you do not have to feel shy.”

"Yes, sir. Thanks. But coffee will be fine."

"Very well," saying that Fernandez ordered his houseboy to bring one coffee and one scotch. Turning back to Kundan, he began, "So, what's new with your life?"

"Well so far nothing much. But wish to start something new."

"New? As in?"

Kundan hunched forward and excitedly said, "I want to join politics. Full-fledged."

Fernandez laughed. "That's amazing. So, which party?"

"A new one!" beamed Kundan.

"A new one?" asked Fernandez, bit skeptically.

"Yeah. Isn't it obvious," said Kundan, with conviction. "Look. Frankly speaking, your old party, or any party on that line is as good as extinct. There's no future in joining them. So, me, few friends from my college and some party member from your old party agreed to join hands to form a new forum."

"Ah. That's great."

"And I want you to join me," proposed Kundan.

"Haha!" laughed Fernandez. "Really sweet of you. But no. I have retired. And would like to stay that way."

The houseboy brought the beverages and served them to the guest and the host, respectively

"But we will need someone experienced. Someone to guide us, like you," pleaded Kundan.

“Well, Kundan, I can be Krishna for you,” said Fernandez. “I can guide you as much as possible. But won’t jump into the battlefield. Those days are over for me.”

Kundan look disappointed. “Very well then. So, give me that. Your precious guidance. Tell me your honest opinion.”

“Well, since you asked,” said Fernandez taking sip from his glass, “Don’t you feel that creating a new team with the same old people will look bit, odd? I mean, it’s just old wine in a new bottle. People will notice that. And mind you, creating and organizing a new party is a not an easy task.”

“That I agree,” said Kundan. “But joining your old party is waste of time. And if once I join that, I will be tainted. After that if I change party or create one, I will be branded as Ex-party member of some old party. And don’t you worry about people. They are way too stupid to think.”

The last phrase did not impressed Fernandez. He stared at Kundan from over the glass as he swallowed his discontentment with a bit of scotch. “Never, and I mean it, never be so arrogant to insult the people on whose back you are planning to build your empire. By the way, you finished your PhD, right?”

“Yes. Just two months back.”

“What was your thesis about?”

“Umm... ‘Effect of South American folklore on mainstream Brazilian cinema’.”

Fernandez raised his eyebrows. “Wow,” he said. With a slight tinge of sarcasm. “And you got stipend for five years for doing this research?”

"Six years." Kundan slowly said. As if feeling ashamed.

"Sorry? I beg your pardon."

"Six years, sir," said Kundan. Bit louder. "Due to my father's health condition, I could not focus for few months. So... University officials were bit reluctant but our union managed to... you know."

"Anyway," exhaled Fernandez, "So, the so-called your stupid common people paid for your course, that was aimed on some alien subject that won't even serve them, ever. So, be grateful for that. No need to show it. But acknowledge it."

Kundan nodded.

"I know. They are innocent, emotional and somewhat naïve," said Fernandez. "But without them, neither you would have earned your doctorate nor I would have been enjoying this scotch, even after claiming my entire life that I'm the most frugal, minimalist, socialist man to walk on this planet."

"Yeah. That's true. Everyone in college used to admire your simplistic clothing and humble lifestyle. Even I used to believe you to be some kind of modern-day Gandhi until I visited your home for the first time."

Fernandez laughed. Then suddenly he turned grim and asked, "So, you think I am a hypocrite?"

Kundan got startled by the sudden mood swing. "What? No! I... I didn't mean that."

Fernandez broke into louder fit of laughter. "Relax. Just messing with you. You see, often your actions would contradict your so-called belief system. Often you would face this very question about being a hypocrite. More often by yourself than the other people. You must do

what is needed for the survival and expansion of your political goals. Or your personal goals, for that matter. However contradictory it may seem. At the same time, you must maintain a constant image of an altruist, philanthropic man. Maintaining that balance, between your image and your action, is the most skillful job of a politician.” Saying that he emptied his glass.

Kundan nodded as he absorbed the wise words.

“So, you are planning to begin from here, right? Bangalore and the suburbs area?” asked Fernandez.

“Yes. And, that’s the problem. I have spent most of my time here. I have connections and all,” explained Kundan. “But there seem to be not much problem we can cater to. No religion issue, no caste issue... Little bit of language-based tension but that’s minimal.”

“Hmm. Your target vote bank is the elite urban folks,” agreed Fernandez. “But there were, are and will always be, groups of ‘have’ and ‘have nots’.”

Kundan nodded. “Yes. There are. Even among the white-collar corporate workforce, some are getting way too many perks. And also, there are people who are really furious about the fourteen-hours per day work hour law. We are planning to repeal that.”

“Don’t go for solution right away,” warned the minister. “No. Let that be. We have ruled for decades, promising everyone that we will eradicate poverty. When we left, there still was poverty. Why? So that we can return, assuring them that we will remove the same poverty.”

Kundan laughed. “Well said, sir.”

“Don’t work like this current government. Every tenure they are delivering some of their agendas. Soon they will run out of rabbits to pull out of their magic hat.”

"So, what to do?" asked Kundan.

"Play with the issue," said Fernandez. "Give them hope. Keep the carrot in front of Donkey. But don't feed it. Once you do that, your journey will end. And they will forget about it the very next day."

Kundan nodded.

"And... your research is really poor. I hope you did a better work in your dissertation," commented Fernandez. "You missed the biggest problem the corporate world is facing: the advent of AI."

"Yeah. I... I read about it. But... didn't felt much like a problem," said Kundan meekly. "I mean people are claiming it would make several sectors more efficient. More secure..."

"Definitely it will!" said Fernandez. "It is an amazing thing. It will change the dynamics of workplace. My own grandson is researching on AI in the US. But... that doesn't mean it won't have problems. And the biggest problem will be rampant sacking of irrelevant jobs."

"But they said it will create some jobs too," said Kundan, in even meeker tone.

"OH GOD!" exclaimed Fernandez. "When computer came in late eighties, it became easier to type a letter. But what about all those numerous typists? They had gone through expensive courses to learn that skill... and few years later they were declared obsolete. You have to look for those typists. That's what we did in our time. The rest is history."

"Understood, sir," said Kundan. "They will be my new prey. Thanks sir."

Chapter-2



“**Y**ou ready to go?” Arman asked Pulkit.

The CEO was getting ready for a public presentation on the TEDx platform, sharing the achievement of his newly formed company. Arman, John and Vaibhav were there to support their leader.

“Yes. I think so.” Replied Pulkit in a nervous tone.

“You’ll do just fine.” Said John.

“Yes,” said Vaibhav. “Just think of this as one of your weekly Monday morning meetings. Just like SRK from Chak De!”

Everyone giggled.

“Well said,” said Arman. “Pulkit’s gonna...” Arman got interrupted by an incoming call. “...excuse me guys. Got to take this.” Saying that Arman went aside to attend his call.

Meanwhile, John took on to himself the responsibility of grooming Pulkit for the presentation.

“It will be all fine, Pulkit,” assured John. “Just keep in mind, this is not just a presentation of your idea. But also, the best platform to endorse your product. Your performance here would dictate our upcoming marketing schemes.”

“Ah. Don’t pressurize him, John,” Vaibhav cut in. “Moreover, they gave clear instructions not to promote your own business or product.”

“Pulkit is our product. Or at least the face of it. Not that Bollywood guy you hired,” said John. “Our target group knows the new dynamic CEO of India. And the way he would present himself would decide how they would engage with his product.”

Pulkit nodded in affirmation.

“Guys,” said Arman as he rejoined the group. “I need to go.”

“What? Where?”

“Remember that uncle of mine? Lawyer who helped us with...”

“Mr. Afzal?” asked Pulkit.

“Yeah.” Said Arman. “He died.”

“What?! How?”

“Well... I’m bit confused as I couldn’t understand completely over the phone... he fell into a glass table. But also had some food poisoning or something...”

“How couldn’t you get that over the phone? That’s like the most basic question to ask,” said Vaibhav.

“C’mon... his daughter was crying like... and there’s so much noise here,” explained Arman. “Anyway, Pulkit, I think I should go. Although he was not so close but he did help us a lot.”

“Yeah yeah... I understand. And you must,” agreed Pulkit. “But I was thinking of introducing you all...”

“C’mon it’s a TED talk. Not Sharktank.” Joked Arman. “You just stay focused. And rock the stage.”

“Thanks, man.”

A little after Arman bid goodbye the announcer called Pulkit’s name. Taking a deep breath, he walked on the stage. His entry was accompanied by huge round of applause. In last few days, Pulkit had been in quite a few news headlines. Especially of those business magazines which were obsessed with the launch of Xanti. Getting on the stage, all he could see were some dark silhouettes of over hundred people.

“Thank you. Thanks.” Said Pulkit joining his hands.

“So... AI! The hotcake of this decade. The controversial invention. So many speculations. So many theories. You see, a similar environment was created by many intellectuals during the late eighties in India. And even before that in the US and Europe. When some people speculated that computer would take their jobs. Well, it did take some jobs. There are no more typewriters now. But there are even more coders today. We cease to have few particular jobs but at the same time we create vacancies for numerous new ones. That is the purpose of technology. To make our lives easier. Better. Now you can’t fight saying “I like to wash my clothes by hand so you must ban washing machines.”

“You must admit the world is changing. This change is inevitable. Now we can either upgrade ourselves. Evolve with it. Or get crushed under this virtual wheel of technology. Let me draw a picture for you about what this AI can bring to you. Suppose... a farmer. In sub rural India. Thanks to the telecom revolution he now owns a smartphone. Traditionally, he needs to spray pesticides throughout the fields in order to prevent plants from diseases. Or he, traditionally, spread

fertilizer almost uniformly throughout the field. Now, the soil conditions or insect density may vary tremendously within the same field,” Pulkit stopped for moment to check the reaction of the city folks. But he couldn’t make out anything out of the dark shadows. He continued, “... so, what he can do now, he can insert these small sensors throughout his fields. These sensors would send timely reports to his smartphone about the soil conditions, or the infestation in that particular grid. Then the farmer can apply his insecticide accordingly. Saving a huge chunk of his resources.”

There was a mild applause. Pulkit realized he needed to switch to more urban examples.

“Then... there’s marketing. I believe many of you sitting here are associated with Marketing.” A unified hooting from a small group affirmed his comment. “So, you must know the pain of analyzing market trends, campaign reports, target audiences from that pile of Big Data. Well, using AI, these can be done in minutes.”

This time a better connection was made. Applaud grew louder.

“Research and Development. Population analysis. Meteorology! Till now, all the computer models were based on repetitive pattern of past data. But we all know; climate patterns are changing at an alarming rate. So many factors, local and global, are contributing to the weather around the world. But with AI, we are no more restricted to the fixed model rather AI algorithm can evolve itself and predict the possible changes using the constantly changing pile of data.”

“Another sector that AI can revolutionize is the health sector. Just imagine what wonders AI can do in virology and genetic studies. In neurological research. In understanding unexplored territory of the human mind.”

“Now imagine, having an AI companion in your smartphone. Or on your personal computer. Which can read the data from your smartwatch, analyze your diet, study your medical history up to your parents and notify you before any probable anomaly. And not just that. If it feels..., yes, I say *feel*... If it feels that you are unable to seek help for whatever reason, it will find the nearest medical emergency service and alert the available personnel.”

A thundering applause followed.

“It can read your retina and predict the possibility of cataracts. It can study your blood pressure fluctuations and your sleep cycle and pinpoint any biological or even possible psychological problem. And not just that. It can search the database of the entire internet and prescribe you a first aid or any preventive measure suited for your need in your locality.”

“If it is connected to your home appliances, it can create magic. Suppose you are feeling cold at night, it will automatically increase the temperature by reading your body’s uneasiness. If you have a fever, it can measure your body temperature and sourness in your muscles and order your favorite yet healthy food so that you don’t sleep on an empty stomach. If you are driving a smart car and you feel any uneasiness or sudden severe pain, it will at once take control of the wheel and drive you to the nearest recovery centre.”

“I have seen people, who can “feel”,” Pulkit air coated the word feel, “abandon another human being at the time of crisis for their personal agendas. Petty differences. But now we have access to a selfless, resourceful friend who is unbiased, incorruptible, and driven by pure logic and purpose to serve humanity. My friends, that is AI! The best friend of your future.”

Arman, away from the inspirational speech of his friend, drove back from his late uncle’s house in his new Tesla. Arman was the biggest gadget freak in his circle. Probably in the entire city. Whatever new tech gets launched, Arman would own one the next day. At least those which he could afford.

The new Tesla was little over his reach. But the CTO sold some of his company shares to his colleagues to own this hi-tech car. Even the showroom executive confirmed that he was one of the few in the city to own that.

Troubled by the sudden death of his uncle, that too in a strange way, Arman desperately needed some time out.

“Auto Drive mode!” commanded Arman and slowly removed his hands off the steering wheel. However proud he was of this new technology; his forty years old conditioning couldn’t let go of the inbuilt caution. The car ran equally smooth without a human master. All it needed was a well working GPS and the smart AI. With the freed hands, Arman reached for the cigarette pack in his pocket. Took out one and lit it up. Hardly the smoke left his lips, the sunshade on the car’s roof opened-up automatically. More than the cigarette, Arman was intoxicated and amazed by the features of his car.

The car ran smoothly at a uniform speed. Maintained its lane. Although it was late at night and comparatively empty roads helped with that.

Arman lit another cigarette, accompanied by some music this time. His eyelids were desperately wishing to join hands. At last, he held himself back and took nap sitting in a driver seat of a running car. But hardly after ten minutes a loud horn noise and a beam of headlight kicked him off his sleep and he was stunned to see a truck coming from the other side heading towards a head on collision. He grabbed the wheel and turned it with all his might. He had to fight the AI instructed maneuver which, although bit later, agreed with him. The car made a sharp turn, but it was too close to leave totally unaffected. An impact was made. The giant vehicle scratched the little Tesla leaving ugly dent at the rear end and the middle and shattered glass on the back seat and pushed aside the car like a kid kicks a stray stone. Thankfully, Arman wasn't injured much. But he was shaken to the core. It took him several minutes to process the event. Then he moved out of the car and did the damage assessment. He was furious.

"What can technology do," he said to himself, "If there are drunk drivers driving in the wrong way! ASSHOLE!" His breathing was still above normal. He was in the middle of the road still undertaking damage check when his phone rang. It was Pulkit.

"Hey, what happened? Are you okay?" asked Pulkit.

"Yea... I mean. No. Who told you?"

"I just received a notification. Arman had an accident."

"But I didn't send you anything."

“Then how...” then it hit Pulkit. “Oh. Obviously... It’s Xanti app. It must have sent you SOS message. How we forget that.”

“Oh... Yeah. Isn’t it amazing.” Said Arman beamingly.

“Brother don’t celebrate; you just had an accident.”

Arman laughed. For a moment his fear of dying, grief of damaged car all just vanished. A sense accomplishment and pride filled him as he realized that he also had created something as genius as this smart vehicle. And it works amazing.

“Anyway, you okay?”

“Yeah... Kind of. It’s a drunk truck driver.”

“Just truck driver would do. They all drive drunk.”

Arman chuckled. “But the car is damaged, man. And...” Arman stopped as he noticed some emergency vehicle coming on his way. “Oh God. Xanti must’ve alerted local hospital and police. Now hell lot of documentation and all...”

“By the way, I hope you are sober.”

“Yeah... Had that beer in the evening... Damn. I hope that won’t matter.”

“Don’t worry. I’m coming down.”

“Thanks man. I’m right now at...”

“I’ve your location. Xanti told me.”

“Damn. It’s way too good, man,” said Arman. “Anyway. Come fast.”

Arman hung his phone. Checked his breath. Mentally prepared the story.

'I was driving from....' Arman muttered to himself. *"And I was on autopilot. Maintaining my lane. But the truck..."* Arman suddenly stopped as he noticed a peculiar thing. His car was not on the same lane as it was before he went for the nap.

Eleven months before the Launch

Sitting in the metro with an MIT sweatshirt on and a constantly fidgeting leg, Ryan was too busy acting busy. A pair of air pods were stuck into his ears, and his head was softly rocking on the beat of some imaginary tune as nothing was being played on those air pods. It was his old trick to cut himself off from the surroundings. So that no one tried to call him, greet him or talk to him. His fear of facing a person was the reason he boarded the crowded metro rather than hiring a cab, as cab drivers throughout the world were some of the most talkative people. That's what he believed. He intently fixed his gaze on his iPhone and rigorously typed something. But only the ones sitting next to him could see that he was busy with nothing but an online Sudoku game. This game usually soothed him. Today, he needed a lot of it.

Ryan Malik, a computer science engineer in his mid-twenties, was born in Delhi to a Punjabi father, Rajeev Malik and a Bengali mother, Dr. Anjali Bose. A little before his tenth birthday the family shifted to the United States of America. Since then, Ryan had been living in the US till last year, when his mother shifted back to India after winning a year-long divorce case. America had blessed them with a meteoric economic gain. But the family shattered to the core. Ryan

was the child of a really bad marriage. And it had left an unseen yet significant scar on his life.

“Next station is Electronic City.” The computer-generated voice in the metro announced.

The announcement churned Ryan’s stomach like a washing machine. The intensity of fidgeting of his legs and banging of his head escalated quite a bit. Usually, a candidate gets worried by the probable questions to be asked in an interview. But Ryan wasn’t bothered by the interview. But the interviewer.

Even Sudoku seized to ease his mind today. He went back to doing what billions of people do for most of the time their days: scrolling through unlimited, often purposeless, content on social media. That kept him engaged for several minutes. But amidst comic reels, suddenly a motivational video about family and friends, demotivated him back.

At last, he opted for something his therapist had suggested and something he had not been doing for several weeks. Keeping a journal of his thoughts. He pushed out the stylus from the side of his smartphone, opened up the Notepad app and started writing. He always enjoyed writing more than typing.

‘Today...’ he wrote on his screen. Then thought for a few seconds. Searching in his mind what exactly to write down. What exactly was bothering him. He continued, ‘...is my first day. There will be... new people. Hope it’s better than my new day in school.’

Ryan looked up and looked out of the window. India was a little better than what he had imagined. His childhood memories were almost buried by the numerous layers of new experiences he had in the foreign land. Rather more of a home for young Ryan than his own motherland. Ryan turned back to his screen.

'Mom is still the same. Better. But... Still unhappy from the divorce, I guess. She keeps herself busier now... Hope she finds new friends. Hope I, too, find the same.'

Ryan kept back the stylus. He didn't even realize but his legs were no more fidgeting. He turned back to look outside the window.

A week before bidding goodbye to the US, he started researching about his roots. Trying to know the reality before experiencing it. And however smart and wise he was about his academic research methodologies; in this particular case, he chose the most popular source: Bollywood. He binge-watched classic to contemporary movies. All the way from Mother India to Swadesh. But the India outside the train's window was different. Quite different from the one in mainstream Bollywood. Rather more like the ones they show in those OTT shows. And one thing that even those shows couldn't depict in its entirety was the inception of the West into this oriental culture. Ryan didn't expect any turban or snake charmers. But the frequency and intensity of the foreign language among the native crowd was surprisingly amazing. It was hard to locate the locals, in the words or wears of the street. It was rather beneficial to Ryan. Earlier, he was worried that people may make fun of his accented Hindi. But he was now revered for his US-accented English.

Deboarding the train, he followed the instructions of Google to find his way to his new work place.

His first hurdle was booking a cab. Something he was avoiding to do but looking at the remaining amount of distance and available means of communications, taxi seemed the most viable option. After fifteen minutes and three rejections, one cab driver agreed to Ryan's plea. If cab booking was hard, the crawling traffic was painful. GPS suggested that he could reach one minute earlier if he started walking.

Adding to that, Ryan made the mistake of sparking a conversation with the driver.

The only question Ryan asked was: "The cab service isn't so good in here. Plus, the traffic. Is it always like this or there's some occasion today?"

This triggered a never-ending blabbering and self-explanation.

"Actually, most of our drivers are busy in protest...", explained the driver. Ryan wished to ask what the protest was about, but the driver clarified it the next moment. "...actually, the company is planning to launch self-driven cars. Now you tell me, sir. Where will we go..."

Ryan answered with silent nods and an occasional humming sound.

"... they say the driver cancels the ride... but it is very rare, you see. One or two minutes of inconvenience. But that does not mean you should sack all of us. And... There... there you see, sir." The driver pointed to a small stage over the nearest footpath. Around fifteen to twenty people were gathered and a person who looked like some local leader was speaking on the microphone. There were several red flags and a big banner that read "STOP AI from Taking our jobs!"

The scenario triggered multiple emotions in Ryan's mind. He felt sorry for the drivers, annoyed by the extra traffic it caused and amazed to see it. Ryan never expected to see an anti-AI protest in India.

A WhatsApp message popped over the Google map screen that swayed Ryan's mind away from the political rants and traffic troubles. It was from his mother.

"Don't call me. I will be in a meeting." The message read.

Ryan swiped it left. "As mechanical as always," he thought.

The next moment two more messages popped on the screen.

"Jst txt me once u reach there."

"And don't worry. It's a new place. You'll find new friends."

Ryan stopped for a second and re-read the message again.

It wasn't that Ryan's mother, Dr. Anjali Bose, wasn't a kind mother. But she was more ambitious and highly practical woman. She often blamed Ryan for her lag in career growth. Not to insult the boy. But just to state the fact. She liked doing that a lot. She never believed in showing what she called 'lovey-dovey' displays of affection. Ryan knew that those two texts were the most 'lovey-dovey' her mother could get. Although she meant well, it reminded him of an old traumatic experience.

The text reminded him of his first visit to the Junior High School in Boston. His mother used the exact same words, "Don't worry, you'll find new friends", while dropping him at the school gate. He was beaten by the bully named Mike, on the very first day. Even after almost a decade, the thought gave Ryan a slight shiver. He just hoped there's no Mike in here.

Even after such a tedious cab ride, Ryan reached the office around fifteen minutes before the scheduled time. The young girl at the reception asked him to wait in the waiting area. Sitting on the sofa, his already buzzing mind went on to what he called 'hyper analysis mode'. He would look and analyze and presume a rough sketch of every single person passing in front of him. Dress, language or body language. Anything and everything. Basically, trying to look for a probable Mike and measuring the hostility of the new environment.

So far, around half a dozen people passed by him. Out of them, one person stood out on his radar. A security guard, over six feet tall and obese in an almost equal proportion. The man had a little heated dialogue exchange with the receptionist and then stamped his feet and

stormed away blabbering some really bad Hindi cuss words Ryan had ever heard. That man went quite high on his Mike-o-meter.

“Sir...” the receptionist called. But Ryan was looking the other way. Analyzing that security guard.

“Mr. Ryan!”

“Oh. Yes. Present.” Ryan hurriedly turned his attention towards the reception.

“Sir, the CEO Sir is waiting for you in his office room.”

Ryan and his heart rate, both rose up. He slowly walked to the room shown by the receptionist and entered the room. Two men sat across the lavish teak wood office table. One was an Indian guy in his early forties, while the other one was a blonde old man who looked almost sixty.

“Hi, Ryan,” the Indian man greeted with a warm smile. “Please have a seat.”

“Hello. Good morning,” replied Ryan as he made himself comfortable on the seat.

“Ryan, I’m Pulkit Goel, CEO of Xenith Digital. And,” turning to the blonde man, he said, “This is Johnathan Smith. Basically our Mr. Wallet. Also, currently the Chief Technical Officer. He was the one who took your second round of telephonic interview.”

Johnathan smiled and turned to Ryan. “You were really impressive there, son. Here we would like to know more about, you. I heard you lived in America.”

“Yes, sir, I was...”

Johnathan frowned. The expression jolted Ryan's heart for a moment. Then, with a smile, he said, "Just Johnathan. Or John, as most guys here call me."

Ryan exhaled in relief. "Very well. Yeah. John. Yes, I lived in the US. For five years I was in Queens. Then we moved to Chicago. Then I went to live in Massachusetts."

"Impressive. I am from Boston myself." Said John in a prideful tone. "So, what brings you here young man?"

"Well... my parents' divorce." Said Ryan. "And... my mother got a good position in... this new Apollo Hospital. Bangalore. So, she took... rather I opted to come with her. You know, she's all alone after the divorce. And I thought someone should be with her in this phase. I will visit Dad once a year, or so..." Ryan made it sound like his mother needs him. But it was the other way round.

There was an awkward silence for a moment which was broken by Pulkit. "That's very, sensible and mature of you. And... Welcome back to India. I believe you will have a great time here."

Ryan nodded with a smile.

"So, Ryan, what I'm curious about is," said Pulkit. "You have an impressive CV here. No doubt. Why would you like to join a new startup like ours?"

"Well, Pulkit, I found your company very attractive. The thing you are working on. That's really amazing."

"So, among all the companies you opted for you found our work most attractive?" asked Pulkit.

"I didn't opt for any other company."

"You are saying, you have sent your application only to us?" John asked.

"Yes sir... I mean, John." Ryan quickly corrected.

"So, you are quite certain we will hire you?" Pulkit asked.

"Yes. If you want a good coder, you will." Ryan replied. The words were a bit pointy, but there was no sign of arrogance in his tone. He just, quite like his mother, stated a fact, that too in quite an innocent way.

Pulkit looked at John. Both of them smiled a bit. "I like your confidence, my son. But you should have a backup."

"So, you think you can help us launch the program within next twelve months?" asked Pulkit. This time with a little more serious tone.

"Well, as far as I know you people are already in process of installing your data centers, right. So, I think with proper support we can launch the AI in nine months. Maximum ten." Ryan said in the same mechanical yet convincing and polite tone.

"What do you think, about AI?"

"AI is inevitable. It will affect our day-to-day life. It already is. Now the one who are first to accept this fact and act accordingly will be the pioneers of this new coming era."

The answer drew a broad smile on Pulkit's face. That was exactly what he believed in. And now, at last he was meeting someone who shared the same zeal.

Without looking at John for any nod of consent, Pulkit extended his hand and said, "Welcome to Xenith Digital."

Chapter-3



“Good evening, sir. How are you now?” the security guard asked as Arman rushed into the office without paying any attention to the poor man’s call. He looked all tensed and focused as if he was in some other zone, mentally. He went straight towards Pulkit’s office where Pulkit was wrapping up a meeting with Sangita and Rita.

“Arman?” asked Pulkit.

“Pulkit... Needed to have a word. You finish it. I’ll wait here.” Arman walked towards the sofa. But did not sit. Rather was busy in murmuring something. As if lost in deep thought.

“Arman! Are you okay...?” Rita stood up and enquired in concern. “Pulkit told but your phone was...”

Arman still didn’t reply. He paced around for a few seconds and then sat on the sofa at the side of the cabin.

“Arman!” Pulkit asked. Little louder. “All good?”

This time Arman turned. “Sorry... What?”

“Rita is asking something,” said Pulkit. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. All good.” Arman assured.

“Weren’t you on two-days’ leave?”

“Yes. Just wanted to talk about something urgent. So...”

“Could’ve called me.”

“Nah. It’s important,” said Arman. “You finish it off. I’ll wait. No worry.”

“Yeah. Give me a minute.” Pulkit then turned to Sangita and Rita but Rita was still anxiously looking at Arman. “Rita, shall we conclude?”

“Yes, sir. Yes. Pulkit. Please.”

“So, as discussed you go with the new market report. Internet engagement has increased significantly after the TED talk. So, make sure the investors see those new stats in tomorrow’s presentation,” said Pulkit.

“Sure,” Sangita and Rita replied in an almost unison.

“Okay then. You might leave. I’ll see you tomorrow,” said Pulkit. “And best of luck.”

“Thanks.” Thanked Sangita. Then, turning to Arman, she said, “I hope you are okay, Arman. Take care. See you.”

“Yeah. See you.” Arman replied in the most carefree manner. Not even making eye contact with those two.

As soon as they left the room, Arman got up and hopped into the chair opposite to Pulkit.

“Yeah. What’s bothering you?” asked Pulkit.

Arman, still lost in his thoughts, tried to process proper vocabulary to express his thoughts. “Well... don’t know how to say.... You may consider I’m getting mad...”

“Well, I’m already considering that...” remarked Pulkit jokingly.

Arman chuckled. “Good one. Anyway... You see, after John, I’m the Chief Technical Officer of Xanti. Right? In a way, I made it...”

“Do you want more shares?”

“No! I’m just saying. Officially I’m in charge of creating the core of the AI called Xanti.”

“Yes. That you are,” said Pulkit. After a moment of thinking he added, “Ryan was there. But yeah, after John you are the man in command. And you have done a commendable job. The sales are really high and...”

“Oh, FUCK THE SALES!” Arman exclaimed. Then calming himself down, he said, “I’m sorry. But... what if I have created a bad thing?”

Pulkit took a deep breath and replied in an absolute calm fashion, “You have created an amazing product. And... don’t react... but sales are the sign that people are liking it and buying it.”

“Oh, people are stupid!” remarked Arman impatiently. “They will buy shit if it’s marketed well.”

Pulkit went back on his chair. Thought for a second. He took the copper water bottle that was kept on his table and slowly pushed it towards Arman. “Here. Drink it.”

Arman first hesitated, then took a few gulps from it. Pulkit didn’t utter any word and waited for Arman to cool down. As expected, Arman looked slightly better. He then looked at Pulkit, hunched forward a little, and slowly said, “Okay... Pulkit. You are probably the biggest AI enthusiast in this company...”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

Arman smiled and continued, “So, you know right, about different stages of AI? Reactive Machine AI, then... Limited Memory AI, Theory of Mind AI...”

“Yes, then there’s Self Aware AI. Yes.”

“Do you believe in their possibility? Honestly.” Demanded Arman.

“Well. Honestly. I don’t see a reason not to,” replied Pulkit plainly. “The way the AI industry has evolved in the last two decades, it is quite possible to achieve such a remarkable feat in the next...” Pulkit halted as something hit his mind. “Wait. Are you inferring that...”

“XANTI IS THAT REMARKABLE FEAT!” Arman said, “It... rather *she* is self-aware.”

“That... will be impressive,” said Pulkit.

“NO! Not impressive,” retorted Arman. “Think Terminator. Not Wall-e.”

Pulkit couldn’t resist a laugh but pulled back himself quickly because Arman was in no mood to joke. “Okay. Tell me why do you think she is self-aware?”

“A self-driven car does not change lanes while driving on an empty straight road. Last night, when I dozed off, I was in a different lane than the lane I was driving on initially.”

“Is that it?” Pulkit looked disappointed. “There can be hundreds of reasons. Maybe it switched lanes due to some incoming vehicles or some dog or cat on the road but you

didn't realize because you were sleeping. Or something else it calculated to be more efficient."

"I too ignored it. Then I talked to Ruhani, daughter of Afzal uncle. She said someone sent the wrong order from her phone through the food delivery app. As if someone hacked into her system. She was..."

This turned Pulkit slightly grim. "Look, Arman. That could either be a mistake or a coincidence. Or it may be a cybercrime, but that shouldn't be linked to Xanti. Let's assume that she's self-aware. Why would she go on sending the wrong food orders to anyone? What's her motivation? Could you think of any reason?"

Arman stayed quiet. He could think but he couldn't say.

"You are overthinking this," said Pulkit. "And for God's sake do not go on blabbering such things to anyone else."

"Definitely, I won't Pulkit," assured Arman. "But, man, just think..., what if we have accidentally..."

"Created a Self-aware AI? An AGI? Then my friend you and Ryan have done an incredible work. And I think a self-aware AI in the health sector can only bring benefits to us."

Arman didn't look convinced.

Pulkit continued, "Look. It has a set of algorithms. A set of code you and your team wrote. It can never do anything beyond those, can it?"

"No... it should not."

"Exactly. Because it cannot. Now, these few glitches that may seem to be the work of a "self-aware AI" are nothing but

coincidence, or work of a cybercriminal or an overthinking mind.” Concluded Pulkit.

Arman nodded. “Maybe you’re right. Actually, when I thought of the possibility I just freaked out.”

“Well, that is a freaky possibility.”

Arman laughed and stood up to leave. “Thanks, friend. Feeling quite relieved.”

“Glad that I could help,” said Pulkit. “Now go home. Have some healthy food. Watch a good movie... but nothing Sci-fi.”

“Your wish, my command, boss.” Saying that Arman opened the door to leave.

Pulkit was worried about Arman. But what was bothering him even more was what Arman speculated. Pulkit always believed that a self-aware AI was a possible thing in the near future. *In the near future*. Or had they already achieved it? Arman was a smart guy. And Ryan. He was exceptionally brilliant. And was probably the only person who was even more obsessed with the project than Pulkit himself. Led by Johnathan, the team was indeed ingenious. Could they pull it off? Did they pull it off?

Pulkit had a few reasons that didn’t let him let go of this possibility. His mind took him to a memory from last year. The day when his admiration for Ryan elevated even more.

It had been several months into the project. Pulkit and the entire technical team were brainstorming ways to devise an accurate and effective neural network system that would deal with the thousands of neurons with millions of connections.

Basically, modern engineers and scientists try to mimic the human brain to enhance the computing abilities of their computer-generated models. They create layers of interconnected neurons, which are basically mathematical functions that take certain inputs, process them, and give out desired outputs to the next neuron. It is believed that by creating a complex well connected neural network, a computer model can attain intelligence at par with human. That's called Artificial Intelligence!

At such a crucial juncture of project development, Arman, taking Ryan along with him, rushed to see Pulkit, who was working on a presentation along with Sangita.

"Pulkit! You got to see this!"

Arman's desperate tone scared the already tensed Pulkit. "What? All okay? Any problem?"

"No. Just check it out," Arman handed over his phone to Pulkit. Some Japanese anime girl with the biggest bosoms possible was giggling on the screen.

"What the hell is this?" Demanded Pulkit in a bit furious tone.

Arman, realizing the tension in the room, calmly began, "This genius," pointing to Ryan, "designed this neural algorithm in his college days. You see that girl," Arman gestured towards the anime character flashing on the mobile screen, "that girl can respond to your facial and physical expression damn accurately."

Pulkit was still clueless. "I still don't understand where are you going with this?"

Arman took the seat next to Sangita and began. "Look. In our beta version, what was the one thing lacking the most?"

"Accurate diagnosis?"

"NO!" Arman reacted. "I mean, we are working on that. But it lacked that human touch. Remember? You yourself told that."

"Yeah... It sounded like... Alexxa."

"Yes. Mechanical like Alexxa," added Arman. "Now you talk with that cartoon girl. She responds as per your mood."

"Alexxa and Siri also..."

"No. Not that accurately. It not only analyzes your vocal tone but also your facial expression. And if you just..."

Arman's enthusiasm was interrupted by John's arrival.

"Pulkit, the meeting is rescheduled to one. I think we should..." John noticed the screen of the mobile on Pulkit's hand, "hey, you are also trying that Japanese girl?"

"You know about this?" asked Pulkit.

"Yeah. Arman asked me to try it a few minutes ago."

Pulkit and John both turned to Arman.

"I have tested it on eight people in this office." Explained Arman.

"I didn't know I was part of an experiment," said John.

"A successful experiment," said Arman. Then turning to Pulkit he said, "Look. First, I thought it might be a repeating set of pre-stored modulated voice samples. But I checked his

algorithm. And I have checked the user reaction and the corresponding results. There's no way that anime girl is following any pattern. It is self-generated. She is reading facial expressions so accurately. Your lips, your eye movements, your eyebrows everything. That security guy, Naresh, doesn't even have eyebrows. But it accurately measured his voice tone and other facial aspects and responded beautifully."

"And you are suggesting..." asked John, although he knew what Arman meant.

"That we should add this feature into Xanti."

Everyone paused for a few seconds. Busy in the thought process. Sangita was the first one to break the silence, "That seems quite cool."

Without responding to Sangita, Pulkit looked straight at Arman and slowly asked, "You know what that mean, right? Even more complex neural network. More layers. More weight. More... everything."

"Yes. Definitely. And it is worth it," said Arman beamingly. "Don't you see?"

"I kind of agree. It would add an edge to our product," added John.

Pulkit gave a darting look at John. "Look. You are the CTO. It is your territory. If you want to add some more features to your product, you are most welcome, but as the CEO, I want to remind you that we are on a tight schedule. We were already late launching our Beta. I'm running haywire to convince the investors that we will deliver on time and now

you want to add this.” Pulkit said in a respectful polite way at same time explaining the urgent nature of the situation.

The silence again prevailed.

“Anyway, who made this stuff?” asked John.

Arman pointed to Ryan who was silently standing next to him.

“I was working on my college project about ‘HUMAN LIKE NEURON NETWORKING IN DEEP LEARNING.’ So, while working on that I casually made this algorithm.”

“You casually made this?” chuckled John.

“Yeah. I wanted to make an AI bot that could communicate with people, especially the guys suffering from loneliness.”

Sangita laughed. “Really? Why?”

“Because... I was also a guy suffering from loneliness,” replied Ryan in the same serious tone. Sangita realized, however simple it may seem, the issue was quite grave. “Besides that, anyone feeling a little depressed or anxious should feel a bit of solace. But when my friend, Kenji, looked at it he loved it. He was working on some Japanese Dating app. He said he needed something like that for his app. So. I gave him with little alterations. Making it more... seductive.”

“God! Boys...” commented Sangita rolling over her eyes.

“What boys? That’s biology,” retorted Arman. “Why else do you think Pulkit takes you to meetings and not a technical guy.”

“What do you mean?” Sangita turned furious.

“I mean... you are beautiful and it helps. Ask Pulkit.”

Sangita turned to Pulkit instantly. Pulkit, who himself was stuck in another mental dilemma, didn't know how to react. “What? Yes. I mean... No. I mean, you're beautiful...” Reading Sangita's changing reaction, Pulkit course corrected his words, “But that isn't the reason I take you to the meetings. It's because you understand the business world better. Now stop you two!”

“Sorry. My bad.” Said Arman trying best to conceal his giggles.

“That was offensive!” highlighted Sangita.

“C'mon. That was a compliment.”

“Oh. Save those for...” Sangita stopped as something crossed her mind. “Anyway. Are we doing this or not?”

Arman, gulping in all the giggles, transformed into his no nonsense mode. “Look Pulkit. You wish to cater not only the people with physical ailment but people with mental health issues too. Just wonder how much better assistance it could provide with this addition.”

“That's exactly and the only reason I'm tempted to go for it,” admitted Pulkit. “But that is definitely a bunch of complex tedious set of codes. Isn't it already Black-box enough? That we are thinking of complicating it even more!”

“What?! We are making Blackbox?” Sangita freaked out. Her gaze turned from Pulkit to John to Arman like a football match viewer. “I don't know what it is. But it sounds dangerous!”

John laughed. “Well, yes and no. Look. Often while creating an AI bot or an LLM, we end up creating something that makes accurate predictions and gives desired results but we can NOT comprehend its exact internal working.”

“What? How?” Sangita looked perplexed. “But we made it, right?”

“Yes. You see, we just made the roads. A dense network of roads. But which exact road it would traverse and when, that we don’t know. That depends on hundreds of conditions, loops, interconnected mathematical functions. So, its internal mechanism is often unknown to us.”

“I am confused.” Admitted Sangita. “So, we don’t know what’s going on inside AI’s mind. And we are not even bothered to look at it just because it is fetching us the right answers. For now.”

“Kind of.” Nodded John.

“Well, sir, that seems dangerous to me,” said Sangita. But when her eyes met Pulkit’s cold gaze she realized it might have offended the boss who was well known for his sensitivity on these issues.

“Revolutionary though.” She added.

“Ryan!” Turning to Ryan, Pulkit asked, “Tell me, how much more complex are we talking here? And how much more time it would need?”

Ryan looked confused, for a moment or two, but when he started, he exuded utmost confidence, “Well, I believe the secret to attain more human like interaction is creating a self-

evaluating model, that means about hundreds of new feedback loops and thousands new neuron inception....”

These phrases tensed the already tensed Pulkit. He knew it was almost an impossible feat to achieve in the given time.

“... so around two extra weeks.”

This surprising number cheered Pulkit instantly. “What? We need to train it too.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Ryan. “Then... one week more. Additional to already allotted time for primary training purpose.”

Everyone in the room was stunned.

“You mean just one week extra?”

“Yeah. Look. You don’t need too many facial data for this. You just need a good algorithm to interpret it.” Assured Ryan.

After staying silent for several seconds Pulkit said, “Arman, you already need to test and fine tune the existing model. And now you have to add this new feature...”

“Why me?” interrupted Arman. “It’s Ryan’s expertise. Let him do it.”

Beside the tempting possible results, the thing that convinced Pulkit even more to take this extra chance was Arman’s confidence on his subordinate. Pulkit knew however charming Arman might be, deep inside he was slightly jealous of any competitor. Especially Ryan. And the only emotion that could overpass this professional competitiveness was admiration for a good work. And Ryan’s work was definitely good.

“Okay then. Ryan, you have to make it more human like,” commanded Pulkit, in the politest way, “but make sure it doesn’t slow down or tamper the existing efficiency. And Arman, you make it more accurate. Work on the testing part.”

Arman nodded.

Turning to John, Arman said, “If it fails, it would come down to you, you are the CTO.”

Before John could respond Ryan replied, out of a reflex response, “It won’t.” There was no modulation in his tone. No arrogance. But a strange unaltered positive confidence.

“Good,” said Pulkit as he stood up. “Now I have to be on a meeting and convince the people to give us some extra time.”

“Show them the app,” Arman said jokingly gesturing towards the anime girl. To which Sangita shook her head. Arman continued, “Although, some people won’t admit it, but I’m sure they like it too.”

“ARMAAN!” Sangita yelled.

Chapter-4



Eight months before the launch:

Two months had passed since Ryan's first day in the office. People had been really nice to him. They would greet him and have short conversations almost every time they met. Initially, it used to baffle Ryan. It wasn't that people were hostile. It was just that Ryan had not adapted to such an extent of human interactions to such a frequency. In the Western part of the globe, people often treat unwanted interactions as rude and ill-mannered. But here, to avoid them, was rude. Every time someone would approach from the other direction, Ryan's mind would get hyper-activated in constructing some nice phrases to have an engaging conversation. But the mind, which could write a complex code, often found it very hard to say anything beyond weather and temperature.

A few days ago, Ryan, sitting alone at a corner table in the office cafeteria, was busy writing his journal.

'Day 150... People are fine. No one like Mike so far... Work is exciting...'

At such a time, Nivedita, the Human Resource Manager, came to talk. "Hey, Ryan! Hi." Nivedita greeted.

Ryan was bit bemused. He quickly hid the screen of his gadget. "Umm...yeah. Hi. Hi, Nivedita."

"You okay there?" Nivedita, seeing Ryan's haphazard reaction, asked in concern. "What are you doing?"

"Umm... Writing, something."

“Ooh. Bit of an artist, are you? Nice,” said Nivedita. “Anyway, here’s your new ID. Hope it would work fine at the gates.”

Ryan took the ID card from her. “Thanks.”

“You are most welcome,” said Nivedita. “So... liking the new place?”

“Yes. Nice.” This followed by a pause of several seconds. And that always bothered Ryan the most. Haphazardly scanning his mind he came up with, “Weather’s nice.”

“What?”

“I mean. It’s not frosty. Neither too hot.”

“Yeah,” said Nivedita. “Bangalore is always like this. Soothing for us. But I thought someone like you would find it hot here.”

“Yes. It is... But. That’s kind of okay.”

“Wait for the summer. You’ll miss your snowfalls,” said Nivedita.

“Yeah... May be.”

Nivedita waited for few seconds. Probably for Ryan to speak something else. Probably something more relevant.

“Okay then. See you,” she said and left.

It wasn’t the first time Ryan encountered awkward silences and abrupt pauses in conversations. He had old acquaintances with odd interactions with other people. These had a snowball effect. Each peculiar interaction added new scratch to Ryan’s fragile soft mind, adding enough trauma to ruin the next interaction with anyone. Ryan, who had almost hopped around the world, hardly had any people in his life with whom he was confident enough to speak without worrying. Their tiniest possible reactions, probable opinions,

always kept Ryan pondering. But he never realized, most of the opinions and reactions were his own imagination.

But the silver lining was, in this new office, once he crossed that initial barrier of awkwardness, talks became easy. As the most common topic, in almost everyone's conversations, was his life in the USA. People, from the security guard to his colleagues, were quite curious about how and where he lived. What was his schooling in MIT like etcetera. And Ryan enjoyed sharing his experiences. For the first time people listened to him intently. For the first time they made him feel special.

It was Friday and staff assembled in the meeting hall for the weekly output discussion. By now Ryan remembered everyone's name. Although with most of them he had never interacted more than one or two sentences, i.e., till the weather report.

There was a long office table at the center. Team members sat around it. There was Arman, Vaibhav, Sangita, and Rita. They were waiting for John and Pulkit.

"So, Mohan Bhargava... liking Swadesh?" asked Vaibhav mockingly.

"Haha. Yeah." Replied Ryan in his shy fashion.

After thinking hard for a second, he was about to say something, but Pulkit's arrival saved Ryan from it.

"Hi, guys. Sorry for being late," said Pulkit as he took the chair. "John is also on the way. In the parking he texted. So... let's wait few more minutes. Anyway, what were you discussing?"

"Ryan's homecoming." Said Vaibhav.

"Ah. Yeah." Pulkit smiled and turned to Ryan. "I hope you're liking it here."

“Yes. It is really nice here.”

“Arman, he’s in your supervision. Any positive reviews?” asked the CEO.

“Yeah. He’s good. He is brilliant.” Said Arman.

“He got to be. He’s from MIT. Not some local college,” commented Vaibhav.

Everyone, even Ryan, knew that Arman had always taken pride on being graduated from one of the most prestigious institutes in the country: IIT. But since the arrival of Ryan, his pride lost its luster. And his friends never missed a chance to take a dig on that.

Arman’s face turned slightly grim. He said, “Yes. That he is. MIT is a good college.”

“So, last week,” started Pulkit trying to pull the thread of conversation away from the debate of prestigious institutes. “We had...”

“They don’t have exams like IITJEE there...” Arman interrupted. Everyone turned from Pulkit to him. Seeing this sudden reaction he apologized, “sorry... just saying. Came to my mind.”

“Cracking an exam doesn’t guarantee your skill. Being in a good college does,” replied Vaibhav.

“That’s coming from a guy who never stop bragging about his CAT score,” responded Arman.

This punctured Vaibhav’s grin. “I don’t brag about my score.”

Sangita giggled out. “Yes, you do.”

“I...I don’t,” pleaded Vaibhav.

“Accept it, Vaibhav,” Pulkit also joined. “Your CAT score was the first thing you said after your name in the interview.”

“And almost every time we have a cocktail party,” reminded Arman. Everyone laughed. “So, cracking CAT with the highest marks doesn’t make you the best business mind. Just like IITJEE is no benchmark for scientific prowess.”

“But it is tough.” It came from the ever-shy Ryan. All the head turned to him. “A distant cousin once sent me the question paper when I was in my first year. I could only solve around seventy percent of it.”

“That’s not bad. Quite good, I guess. That’s like quite above usual the cut off, I guess,” Sangita tried to cheer him up.

“Huh. Good enough for Metallurgy from IIT Patna,” added Arman in grim tone.

“Guys!” said Pulkit. This time in bit determined tone. “That’s the system here. These are mere sieves. To expel out excess of people. I remember, even I couldn’t crack IIT the first time. Then when I was studying in Cornell, I had a friend who learnt coding in his garage from an uncle. He didn’t have much knowledge of other things. He didn’t know how many bones he had. He didn’t know in which continent Chile was. Or much about those organic or inorganic chemistry. But he was damn good coder. His SATs were average but his extracurricular achievements were mind blowing. He had four patents when he entered the course. We can’t even think or acknowledge such achievements here. Can’t fight it. So better accept it.”

Everyone nodded. It was a tense thoughtful moment. As if everyone was contemplating about their carrier struggles. The mood was stirred when John entered.

“Good morning, everyone,” greeted John. “What did I miss?”

“Well...” said Pulkit. “It is better if you keep that missed. Or else it would stretch to another hour probably.”

Everyone laughed.

Amidst that light moment Arman tilted towards Ryan and slowly asked, “Hey, you free tonight? Wanna join us for some beer?”

“Yes.” Ryan said with a soft nod. But deep inside he was too glad to express. Getting invited for a party was a privilege only cool kids enjoyed. Now, he was also one.

It was late at night and the city was getting showered since the evening. And it was enough to flood several of the city roads with knee deep water. Irony was that the city which was busy in making technological solutions for the world couldn't device a way to stop its own problem of water logging it faces every year.

Amidst such weather, Constable Lingarathnam Aiyar, just ended his late-night shift. He walked towards the parking while trying his best to adjust the zip of the jet-black rain coat which stuck over his pot belly. After several minutes of failed attempts, the Constable gave up. He was about to start his motorcycle when his phone rang.

“Ah! Who's now?!” irritated constable said as he took out his phone. It was an unknown number. Still, he picked it up. “Hello? Constable Lingarathnam speaking.”

“Hello, Lingarathnam Aiyar.” Said a female voice. “Your actions have been found malicious, and they, although indirectly, have contributed to the loss of innocent human lives.”

“What?! What nonsense! Who is this?” demanded Lingarathnam.

“In the last fourteen days, you are found to have committed four crimes higher than moderate nature and one minor nature. Do you regret your actions?”

“What rubbish! Do you know...” Lingarathnam stumbled for a second. “...are you from vigilance?”

“No. I am not from the vigilance department.” The female voice plainly admitted.

“Then FUCK OFF!” Lingarathnam hung up the call.

A hectic day. Water-logged roads. And spam callers. All these were enough to spoil the already spoiled mood. And there was only one way to lighten up the mind.

Lingarathnam, splashing water away, rode straight to a semi-dingy alley of the posh Koramangala. There was a bar whose light was still glowing, but the shutter was half down. Indicating it was closed for public. But the Constable was not just a common public. He knew that the place would serve him drink at any hour of the day.

Lingarathnam walked and gently knocked on the metal shutter gate. The rain made it less audible. So, he went again. Bit harder this time. A young boy of hardly fifteen rushed out from below the half-opened shutter gate and looked annoyingly through his sleepy eyes. But eyes turned big once it saw one of their regular customers.

“Oh. Sir. Sorry. Please, come inside.” The boy took him inside. The bar was closed. The chairs were all arranged over the table. Two of the staff were sleeping on the floor. The boy

called both of them. They woke up haphazardly. They quickly readied a table within a minute. One of them went in and came with one glass and a jug of water.

“What would you like sir?” the waiter asked.

“Today... weather is nice,” said Lingarathnam. “Bring something special. How about one of those bottles that you got from custom.”

“Sure sir. Got it.”

“And bring some chicken pakodas along with it.” Ordered Lingarathnam.

The waiter turned grim. “Sir...” he said slowly, “our cook has gone. We might have some chips.”

Lingarathnam looked at the waiter with stern eyes. “Chips? Really? Is that how you treat your special guests nowadays?”

“Sorry... but umm...”

“You were there, right... when your truck, loaded with your stuff, was confiscated by the police? Remember? And how you pleaded...”

The waiter stood quiet.

“And how generously I helped,” boasted the Constable. “You mean to say I shouldn’t have helped. Right. Huh...”

“No. Sir. I mean... okay I will check. I will arrange something,” replied the waiter.

“Better,” said Lingarathnam with a smile.

The waiter somehow managed to arrange the ordered dish from another hotel as most of the places were either shut or

were not delivering due to rain. Those served with the desired drink. Music was turned on while some random cricket match was played on the giant television that hung on the opposite wall.

Lingarathnam was two drinks down when someone banged on the half-shut metal gate. There was some kind of commotion for some time. But Lingarathnam couldn't care less. The imported liquor was doing magic on the Constable. But the magic spell was hindered when the hotel boy came running to him and said, "Sir, someone wants to meet you. He says you asked him to come."

Lingarathnam looked confused. Although he had done many illicit meetings in that bar but he couldn't remember calling anyone today. But again, today, he was under the beautiful influence of the soothingly toxic chemical he was having. So, he chose to meet the incomer. After all, anyone who knows this den would surely be important.

The boy brought a man along with him and went away.

"Hello, Sir," greeted the man. "I brought the cash as you said." The man took out a packet, wrapped well in plastic, from inside his raincoat and placed it in front of the Constable.

Lingarathnam looked at the packet and then back at the man. He was finding it hard to place the man's face.

"Sorry... but I can't exactly...", said Lingarathnam in his drunk tone. "Who are you exactly?"

"Sir, I am Girish. Girish Shetty. Software Engineer. I met you the day before yesterday," said Girish.

“Ah! Yeah, I remember,” recalled Lingarathnam. “Your wife is jailed for that... online cheating racket. Right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sit, sit,” said Lingarathnam pointing to the seat opposite to him. He then busied himself in counting the bunch of notes. “Why do you educated people get involved in such petty crimes?”

“Sir... she lost her job. I am on the verge of losing mine,” explained Girish. His voice almost choked. “We have EMIs to pay. Kid’s school fee.... We... could not see a way out.”

“Ah. Yeah. School fees...,” said Lingarathnam without dampening the speed of his fluent fingers that were smoothly counting the notes like a machine. “I tell you. These school guys... they are the real criminals. They charge so much. Still, we have to send our kids to hundreds of tuitions. If we don’t pay the fee, they will send our kids home. But if they fail, will they give a refund?! NO!”

Girish nodded.

“But no one is talking about them. They just say the police are bad. Police did this... police did that...”

As Lingarathnam finished counting, a smile automatically drawn on his face. “So... hey you want a drink?”

“No sir. Thanks,” said Girish. “I just want my wife to be out as early as possible. You said you know people... and...”

There was again banging on the door. This time harder. Again, the hotel boy came running to Lingarathnam. “Sir, some more people have come to see you...”

Lingarathnam quickly put the bundle of notes he received from Girish inside his coat. “More people... Okay. Send them in.”

Three hunky men came in with a big bag and put it right in front of Lingarathnam.

“Hey officer, I’m Abdul, Rafeeq chacha’s nephew,” said the broadest of them all. He was just over six feet. Had long hair and red colored beard. He wasn’t wearing any raincoat neither was carrying any umbrella. He, along with other two, was drenched from top to bottom. “It is 1 crore. Just as you messaged. Now tell me by when can you take chacha out of that hell hole!?”

Lingarathnam didn’t even pay attention to what the man said. His focus was on the bag full of money placed in front of him.

“Hello...?” Abdul called again to bring Lingarathnam out of his zone.

“Yes... It will be done,” replied Lingarathnam instantly. “Honestly, I don’t remember calling any of you... but anyway... your work...”

“Sir,” interrupted Girish. “You sure you don’t remember calling or texting us?”

“Yes. But how does that matter? I text hundreds of people in a day,” replied Lingarathnam. “Don’t worry, now that you have come to me, your jobs will be done.”

But Girish looked worried. “Sir, is it possible someone used your phone to message us?”

The magic spell was slowly waving off and Lingarathnam was getting little annoyed. "Hey you... Software Engineer. What's your problem? I often call people here. So might have called you people too... Just can't place it. That's it," saying that Lingarathnam took out his phone to check his messages. "Here... this... I have sent messages..."

This time even Lingarathnam halted for a moment. "Well... I have sent this around two hours ago... But... I was..."

Before Lingarathnam could complete his sentence police siren echoed throughout the place. A police SUV just arrived outside the bar. Two police officials banged on the half-lowered metal gate.

"Is this a TRAP?!" Abdul reacted. "You SCOUNDREL!"

Lingarathnam looked flabbergasted. Whatever little soothingness from the liquor was left in his mind, vanished in a second. It got substituted by utter confusion and fear. Within minutes the policemen were inside.

"We have information there's some illegal meeting going on here," asked one of the policemen to the bar boy, "WHY THE HELL ARE YOU OPEN AT THIS HOUR OF NIGHT?!"

The boy stood stunned in fear. All he could manage was pointing towards the table where the meeting was taking place.

"WHAT THE FU..." the policeman paused as he saw a familiar face. "You are constable from... High ground station, right?"

Lingarathnam saluted the Superintendent of Police standing in front of him. "Constable Lingarathnam Aiyar, Sir!"

“Hmm. So, the informant was right,” said the Superintendent. “The lady not only said that there’s police involved. But also send us pictures of the meeting.”

“Pictures... who took...” Lingarathnam looked around at the hotel staff. Everyone was there except the waiter from the evening.

“Anyway... Take everyone in,” the Superintendent instructed his subordinate.

“Sir, what about the constable?”

“*Especially* the constable!” replied the officer.

Chapter-5



Pulkit's was trying to stay grounded and focus on the challenges ahead but every day he ended up meeting someone who would take him to the ongoing festive euphoria of being sensational CEO of the coolest startup in town.

"Hey! Pulkit!" called someone as Pulkit was about to enter a restaurant to have dinner with his family.

Pulkit turned to find a newly formed friend cum competitor: Bhavesh Saxena.

"Can't believe," said Bhavesh as he approached Pulkit. "That I am lucky enough to meet the iconic Pulkit Goel, the star entrepreneur..."

"Oh, stop it," said Pulkit with slightly reddened cheeks. "Don't embarrass me in front of my family."

"Oh, Namaste Bhabhi ji," greeted Bhavesh as he noticed Pulkit's wife next to him. "But trust me nothing I said was flattery. It was hundred percent truth. What a marvelous thing you have created."

"Ah. I just happened to have a brilliant team," said Pulkit in a humble tone.

"I hope you still have them," said Bhavesh.

"Well, yeah... Except one guy. One of our main technical brain..."

“Yeah. These Talented people are slippery as eel. You give a little slack and some big fish is ready to snatch them with their lucrative perks and shares,” said Bhavesh.

“Yeah. Truly said.”

“Anyway, I won’t spoil your family time but,” said Bhavesh. “I have an incredible idea where we both can collab...”

“Sounds interesting,” said Pulkit.

“I will ask my secretary to fix a meeting next week,” said Bhavesh. “Please try to keep some slots open.”

“Haha. Sure.”

“By the way, another thing, I thought I would share in the meeting but,” said Bhavesh as he turned bit grim. He came bit closer and said, “Some asshole hacker is targeting the new tech firms. Tech firms, like us.”

“There’s always some malicious guy out there trying to show off,” said Pulkit.

“This one... is different,” said Bhavesh. “We had been attacked. Although we handled it. But, Paramjeet, and... that Gilburtech guys... they also reported exactly similar type of actions. I reported the same to police cyber cell. A close guy there told me, someone is targeting the new players.”

Pulkit turned bit anxious.

“Anyway, you have nothing to worry about,” said Bhavesh beamingly. “We all know you have one of the best cybersecurity and some genius fellas sitting over it. I just informed you to stay vigil. Don’t spoil your night thinking about it.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Okay then. You enjoy. See you soon.” Saying that Bhavesh left them. But his words stayed deep in Pulkit’s mind.

Seven months before the Launch

Friday evening drinks were now a weekly ritual. The entire team: Arman, Sangita, Rita, Nivedita, Vaibhav and Ryan would hop around the city, trying a new pub every weekend. Even Pulkit and John joined them several time. But on one condition. They would not turn the party into office meeting. Although, after two rounds many office grievances often hit the table. But they were sorted in a fun way worthy of this table.

For Ryan, it was a great change. He couldn’t remember last when he was part of such amazing social group. And for him, to be part of a group of more than three people, was a rare opportunity. Something he had only seen in those American sitcoms. But in real life it wasn’t the same for everyone. May be that’s why something so basic was a thing of aspiration and that drove people to watch those shows.

Another thing that Ryan didn’t realize was that his episodes of mental breakdown and fits of anxiety had drastically reduced. He no more needed to write down journals to calm his fidgeting mind. That too without any counseling or medication, which were part of his daily routine in the US. Although the shyness and intimidation were still in the system. But the intensity of same had reduced a lot.

It was a similar Friday night in the rainy month of June. It was decided to visit this new restaurant cum bar food-vloggers were making a huge fuss about. They left in three groups. Ryan joined Vaibhav on his scooter. Pulkit and John hopped in Sangita’s car. Rita opted for

Arman's bike. Thanks to the famous Bangalore traffic Vaibhav's 150cc scooter made its way to the destination much before Sangita's SUV. That too before the start of rain. They waited under a sunshade for rest of the team as the bouncer on the gate won't allow them until the whole group arrived.

"You rode really nice," said Ryan to Vaibhav. "Otherwise, we also would have got drenched like them." Ryan pointed to several two-wheeler riders commuting on the road.

"Yeah. Experience, brother," replied Vaibhav in the prideful tone. "Ten years of traveling experience though these packed up roads. This scooter has really been a life saver. I bought a Tata SUV two years back. But still prefer my two-wheeler over that four-wheeler. Anyway, do you want a smoke?" Vaibhav asked as he reached for the pack of cigarettes in his pocket.

"No. Thanks. I don't," Ryan politely turned down the offer. "Rita should have come with Sangita. I wonder where Arman must have been stuck," Ryan casually remarked. It was later when he checked Vaibhav's reaction that he realized he had reached some inappropriate area.

"Sorry..., " said Ryan. "I didn't mean any..."

"Oh please. Why are you apologizing," said Vaibhav as lighted up his cigarette. Then slowly exhaling out a dense smoke he continued, "It's very natural to wonder that. But... now you are part of our team, so you must've noticed it too."

Ryan stayed quite for few seconds then said, "That... they have a thing going on."

"Yeah. A thing indeed." Vaibhav chuckled. "Actually, Rita comes from a really conservative area. You know, those areas where people

of your community have a bigger say on who should marry your daughter.”

“Really. No. I didn’t know such area exist.”

“Haha. Definitely you don’t,” said Vaibhav. “Anyway. They were really good friends. Arman and Rita. Somehow, or may be Rita herself told, her family came to know about it. Within one week, they got her engaged with someone from their own community. And within a month. Married. Arman and Rita stopped talking to each other in the office for several weeks,” said Vaibhav. “You know, the so-called social convention that prohibits a married woman to be too friendly with a male friend. That too of different community.”

“That’s sad.”

“That’s not the saddest part. Her family was so desperate to get her married to a guy in their community that they ended up marrying her with an alcoholic abuser. Although, that we discovered much later. Once even police got involved. That was a mess.” Vaibhav dropped the butt of his cigarette and crushed it with his shoes. “Slowly, over several months, they started opening up. Arman and Rita. Talking to each other like before. So, since then it had become an unofficial mandate, that is, to give them a little space. You know, a decent one.”

“Hm. That’s really supportive of you all.”

“To be honest, I wasn’t that supportive initially. Used to criticize them a lot,” confessed Vaibhav. “You know. I can be a real ass sometimes.”

Ryan stayed quiet.

“Then one day, Sangita made me understand. That what’s so wrong if someone, who is going through such a hard time, is finding solace in company of an old friend? Who are we to shame them? Is it because

it threatens the idea of social norms? Or because it challenges our own mental conditioning?”

“Hm. She’s got a point.”

“Yeah. She did,” agreed Vaibhav. “It is just... I would really be bothered if Jyoti gets too friendly with someone.”

“Jyoti?”

“My wife. Jyoti,” said Vaibhav. “But yeah. I would also not abuse her and wish her to lead a suffocated life. So...”

Ryan nodded.

“Social norms are strange, you know. At least in this part of the world,” continued Vaibhav. “I mean, it seems okay to many if a husband abuses his wife. But they would consider it a total taboo for her to be friendly to another man. Not all, I agree, but a significant number of them. At least it is not like that in the West, I guess. Even the Indians living there. There they are far more aware about mental health and stuff.”

Ryan couldn’t express to Vaibhav how closely he had witnessed the grave nature of this condition. He had seen how unbearable and mentally taxing an unhealthy relationship could get.

“Hey,” called Vaibhav bringing Ryan back from his own thoughts. “Never touch this topic in front of Arman. Anything about Rita and his past and all,” warned Vaibhav. “He is a bit sensitive regarding this.”

“Yeah. Sure. Will keep that in mind.” Ryan obediently agreed.

“You tell. You’ve got anyone? Someone in the US maybe?” asked Vaibhav.

“Nah. Nothing much,” Ryan replied as shyness and awkwardness rushed back into his system.

“C’mon, I’ve heard western people are way too forward. They make their kids to go to dancing with other girls. What do you call it...” Vaibhav tried hard to remember. “...umm. Tell me...”

“Prom,” Ryan replied grimly. This word brought a flood of awkward memories. The worst of which was with Katherine. A girl in his class whom he liked a lot. But confessing feelings was a distant dream. Especially for a boy who struggled hard to mere gel with the other students. Mere peaceful co-existing in the school, that is not getting bullied or insulted on repeated basis, was struggle for him. But, after getting over-motivated by a few classmates whom he could call friends, Ryan decided to ask Katherine for prom. Without asking straight away, Ryan thought of making it more presentable. So, he wrote a poem. And read it out to Katherine in front of the class. The repercussions were unforgettable. Not only that Katherine straightly rejected the proposal (Although Ryan later found that it was because someone had already asked her out), but some boy recorded some part of his oration and later used clips of it to make funny memes (which was a brand-new thing for school kids) and circulated it throughout the school. Poor Ryan went to an embarrassment zone for weeks. To worsen the matter, his parents, who themselves were busy in their own fight would hardly console him. Rather many a time made fun of his childish actions.

Ryan narrated his experience. Vaibhav laughed. Seeing Ryan’s bit offended expression, he said, “What? It was a funny story. Sad. Yet funny. At least you have such stories. You were brave enough to approach a girl with a poem. My life was spent between school and numerous tuitions.”

Vaibhav's words suddenly changed Ryan's perception for a moment. Strangely, he was right. After a decade those so-called embarrassing moments were nothing but fun stories. It was he who was clenching those old memories and was trying to relive them.

"That's it? No one after Katherine?" Vaibhav continued.

"Well. There was one. In the college. A half Indian Half Canadian girl. Nitika Johnson. She was... good." There was a tone of despair in Ryan's voice.

"So, you two are no more together?"

"No... we never were. We were just good friends."

"Just good friends?"

"Actually. I kinda liked her. But before I could ask her, Pablo took her away. The hunky Italian guy. But I feel, if I had told her earlier, she would have said yes. At least that's what I love to believe."

"Hmm. I see," said Vaibhav. "Don't wait that long next time you like someone. And don't be afraid to say it. Either she will say yes. Or you will have a fun story to remember later. Hey, they are here." Vaibhav said as the SUV reached the parking in front of them.

Ryan usually didn't talk so much. Very rarely he found such a resonance of mindset when he felt like sharing more. Today felt like one such day. Today, he wished to tell Vaibhav that there was a girl he had developed feeling for. The girl who, wearing red kurti and blue jeans, was coming through the rain along with Pulkit and John.

Chapter-6



Pulkit was going haywire from past couple of days. Bhavesh's warning had planted seed deep inside Pulkit's subconscious mind. Adding to that, the sales of Xanti, which was skyrocketing in its first few weeks, had been stagnant in last several days. It was well known fact that reduction in numbers was directly proportional to the CEO's mental stress. Pulkit was no exception to that. His inner frustration would often get transferred to some teammate or the other. Sangita and Vaibhav were mostly on the receiving end. To evade this daily office wrangle, it was decided to reach out to their customer base via group of new social media influencers beside the ongoing traditional ways of hiring Bollywood celebs, who knew nothing about the product, to endorse the same. Hence, after a lot of debate and brainstorming three influencers were short listed and were invited to witness the behind-the-scene working of Xenith Digital.

Accordingly, the three influencers, Priya Singh aka DigitalDiva, Anup Gasotia GujjuGadgetwala and Jay Seth aka Techlord visited their office. Beside the core team there were many in the staff who were excited about this collaboration. One of them was the peon, thirty-year old, sweet and naïve, Ravichandran Nuli. He was a big admirer of tech channels, especially DigitalDiva, i.e., Priya Singh and he deeply wished to be on screen with them. He chose not to spare any opportunity.

Priya, Anup and Jay were waiting in the common waiting area when Ravi went with three cups of coffee.

“Mam,” said Ravi as he put forward the tray of beverages. “Coffee.”

“Thank you very much.” Priya thanked politely.

“Very big fan, mam,” said Ravi.

“Thank you,” Priya replied with a charming smile.

“All of yours.” Ravi added as he read reaction of other two.

“Really?” said Priya, making a frown face. “I thought you were only my fan.”

“I mean... I am. I...,” Ravi got confused as how to handle this tricky solution. “I am fan of all three of you... But bigger fan of yours.”

“Huh... I don’t believe you,” replied Priya. “You got to prove that to me.”

“Prove it? How mam?”

“Tell me something juicy, something secret, that know no one knows about here,” said Priya. Anup and Jay smiled at Priya’s cunning manipulation.

“Well... what can I say,” said Ravi thinking hard. Then looking around he slowly asked, “Will I then get featured with you?”

“Featured with me? In my YouTube video? Sure...”

“Well... there’s rumor about Arman sir being involved with this married mam. Rita.”

“Who’s Arman?” Priya asked blankly.

“Our main computer engineer sir. He is one of the main technical guy,” said Ravi.

“Oh. Well, until he’s making it to Forbes list I’m not interested,” said Priya. “Anything about Pulkit?”

“No. He’s clean,” said Ravi. In quite a bit disappointed tone. He was unable to help Priya with a spicy content. Then something clicked in his mind. “Yes... there was something Arman sir was saying.”

“About his girlfriend?”

“No. About Xanti.”

“What?” asked Priya curiously.

“He was saying the other day that there’s a chance that Xanti is thinking by itself. And it can turn into a killing machine.” Ravi said with serious grim tone.

“You mean like Terminator?” asked Priya.

“Exactly like Terminator!” said a voice from behind Ravi. He turned and was shocked a bit. Pulkit was standing right behind him along with Sangita. Although his smile didn’t reflect any discomfort but Ravi knew, Pulkit was mad at him.

“Nothing is better marketing than a few conspiracy theories, isn’t it,” said Pulkit as he approached the influencers and shook hand one by one.

“Yes. Of course,” replied Priya with a bit embarrassed smile.

“You guys comfortable? Need anything else?” asked Sangita.

“No, thanks, we are good,” said Anup. Pulkit turned and looked at Ravi. Ravi quietly left the area.

“So, how do you guys are planning to do it?” asked Sangita.

“We were thinking of a live interview, three to one,” suggested Anup. “Kind of stuff they are doing with politicians nowadays.”

“That sounds cool... and scary,” said Pulkit.

All of them responded with a jolly laugh.

“Well, I think my office would be a nice place for that,” said Pulkit turning to Sangita.

“Yes. I agree. It will be perfect balance of candid and corporate.”

“And... There we can also demonstrate our next surprise,” said Pulkit. Then turning slowly to all the incomers, he added, “Hope that’ll be juicy enough for your YouTube channel.”

Embarrassed guests responded with weak giggle.

The set was prepared in Pulkit’s office. Thankfully to technological advancement in media industry, no more huge and heavy instruments were there. Just one laptop attached to few small cameras and one smartphone, fixed on respective tripod, kept at different angles. And microphone was attached near everyone’s neckline. In hardly fifteen minutes they were ready to go live. Sangita, Vaibhav and other few staffs stood behind the camera line. Ravichandran also wished to be there but after the recent fiasco, he dared not.

“Hello and welcome everyone,” started Priya. “On the biggest collab of the year...”

“Three influencers. Three channels. And one very special guest,” joined Anup.

“Please give a round of applause to entrepreneur of the year,” introduced Jay, “the “Elon Musk” of India, Pulkit.”

Pulkit felt really humble by the grand introduction. “Thanks a lot. But not Elon Musk...”

“Why? You don’t like Musk?” asked Jay. “So would you like Sam Altman of India more”

Pulkit laughed. “No. It’s nothing like that. These are both big names. I’m just a small entrepreneur. Trying to do some new ‘dhanda’”.

“That’s the humblest way to summarize an entrepreneur of your stature,” said Priya. “So, Pulkit. Your Big product is at last out in the market. How do you feel? Relieved to launch it. Or anxious about the reception?”

“Definitely anxious,” admitted Pulkit. “But yeah. The night when Xanti went online... that one night was really overwhelming. Even a couple of days after that, when all the wishes and complements were pouring in. After all, it was years long ambition. Months of hard work. So that felt amazing. But when that hangover lifted off, a strange anxiety kicked in. Although, touch wood, the numbers were quite good. But still. It’s a constant worry that keeps you on toe.”

“Do you think that lack of awareness among the masses may be a reason that it is not spreading well,” asked Anup. “I mean... as well as it should. After all it is first of its kind in the country.”

“Well, I would not say that people are totally unaware. But I feel they are not able to comprehend the benefits Xanti can bring. How much better can their quality of life be. I mean, Xanti is not a luxury item. It is a medical aid. You turn on your smartphone or laptop, install it, spend five minutes with it and you can easily lead a 65% healthier life. It’s all stats.”

“So, it’s no more apple but one time Xanti a day keeps the doctor away,” said Jay. “Are you planning to replace doctors?”

Pulkit laughed. “That’s the first thing any layman says when they hear about Xanti, no offense,” said Pulkit. Priya frowned a little on this remark. So did Sangita. She didn’t want any of his comment to turn into viral meme. Although it would be beneficial anyway. But she didn’t wish to use bad publicity right now. “Look. It can never replace doctors. What it is doing? It is just doing a better diagnosis. A better analysis of your medical reports. A much better therapeutic aid than we can get from our family or friend. All that just with a touch of a finger. I know it is still an object of confusion even among the educated citizens. Don’t worry. I’ll give a live demo of this at the end of this podcast.”

“Thanks, Pulkit,” said Anup. “So, this confusion among us. As you said. This lack of acceptance of your AI bot... do you think this is also because of a fear regarding AI among the people?”

“Now that is the most stupid reason to fear,” remarked Pulkit almost instantly. “Look. A similar mood was created in late eighties. People claimed computer would take our jobs and all. But what happened? Thanks to those computers millions of us are earning our livelihood.”

Anup looked bit uncomfortable after this response. He adjusted himself and asked, “You see, Pulkit, I started my YouTube channel hardly eight months ago. Before that I was working in a MNC in Singapore. But I was sacked because our entire team was replaced by some new AI tool. So, I don’t think the reason is too stupid to fear.”

Jay and Priya realizing the growing tension tried to change the flow of conversation. Priya hurriedly asked, “You see, big names such as Elon Musk has raised severe concerns regarding an uncontrolled AI.”

“Look. I think Elon lack the vision of what could be achieved by an AI,” Pulkit straightly replied. “And all his worries and hesitations are almost decade old. Today even he is investing heavily into AI tech.”

“Then why do you think US and many European countries are thinking regulating the use of AI. There are talks about data governance. Even Sam Altman is advocating making strict regulations,” said Priya.

“That is what the west always does,” said Pulkit. His tone had a slight touch of fury. The constant bashing of an idea that he so dearly believed in, that too on a stage he prepared to promote it, was really irritating him from the inside. Trying his best to conceal his frustration he carried on. “First, they make grand stuffs. Fill up their bellies. Then they make regulations to restrict others to do the same. They did the same with oil. They are doing the same with data. My dear friend and CTO of Xenith Digital, Johnathan Smith, left US and joined us for this same reason.”

“So, you are saying there’s nothing to worry?” asked Jay.

“Have you ever heard an AI harming a human? Or a robot attacking its master?”

“There was a chess match,” Anup, who was silent for long time, spoke out. “In Moscow. July 2022, most probably. A nine-year old boy vs an AI driven robot. The boy was making some quick moves, the robot snapped the boy’s finger.”

“The boy was making move without giving enough time for the robot to play its move,” corrected Pulkit. “That’s why the robot tried to prevent him from doing that. But it was a robot. Not a sentient being. It could not calculate the pressure properly and ended up injuring the boy’s finger.”

“Do you know in last fifteen years, more than sixty percent musicians are forced to quit their jobs?” Continued Anup. “Because no one is interested in actual instruments. Or even in actual singers.”

“So, just because few singers are not singing, should we stop the attempts to make dumb people speak?” asked Pulkit.

Anup stayed quiet. Sangita was biting her nails. The talk has turned into a debate. Although, quite healthy one. So far. Sangita was worried that few more furious remarks could ruin its entire purpose.

“AI is in its budding stage. And it can do wonders in coming time,” said Pulkit. “Even Elon Musk, the most cynical man about AI, himself is creating techs to use AI to cure paralysis and Alzheimer.”

“That’s true.” Agreed Priya. But she, along with other two, didn’t looked convinced.

“I think it is time to give you all a live demo of what Xanti can do,” said Pulkit. His eyes glowing in pride and child-like enthusiasm. “And... what we plan to do in next phase.”

Pulkit turned on his computer system. Selected the Xanti icon. An AI generated beautiful female humanoid figurine appeared on the screen.

Pulkit looked for someone from the office staff. “Sangita!” called Pulkit. “Would you please...”

Sangita quickly came in front. Took out two boxes from the cupboard near them and placed it on the office table. Then open one of them. It was around one feet large cubical device with a small touch screen on the top. It had large hole right at the bottom center. Sangita pressed something on the touch screen and the machine spoke “Connected” in a mechanical fashion.

“You see friends,” started Pulkit. “One of our partners in the pharma sector engineered this custom-made device for Xanti. You have heard about many digital blood testing devices available nowadays. But they perform very limited tests mainly because a common man can’t interpret all the parameters of those tests. But this device here can perform more the fifty types of blood tests. And you don’t have to rush to any doctor with the report. Xanti will give you a complete analysis.

Pulkit gently put inside his right hand in to the hole of the machine. Sangita strapped it properly. The machine instructed: “Stay firm.” Followed by few beeping sounds. Inside the machine, small mechanical arms were working harmoniously to extract few drops of blood out of Pulkit’s hand. A tiny needle punctured Pulkit’s skin. Another hand,

capillary sized tube sucked few drops of it. All of this happened inside the guarded box. When the procedure was done the machine signaled. Sangita unstrapped the hand and Pulkit pulled it out. The machine instructed to put a cotton over the tiny cut.

Within few minutes, the machine printed a long slip of paper with test results. But things got interesting when Xanti started sharing its analysis.

“Hello Xanti!”

“Good morning, Pulkit,” greeted Xanti in a soothing voice. “How are you doing today?”

“You tell me,” Replied Pulkit with a smile.

“Your blood sample is just been uploaded,” said Xanti. “Let me have a look.

“Pulkit, there is not much to worry about your blood test,” said Xanti. “But there is a slight possibility of cholesterol. You should focus on your workout routine and restrict your diet a bit.”

“Now you are sounding like my wife,” said Pulkit. Everyone around laughed. “I am looking after my diet.”

“It seems you have been drinking a lot lately,” pointed out Xanti. “Blood alcohol content is quite high. Sugar is also bit higher. But within range. There is no thyroid. That’s a good sign. Overall, things are under control.

Priya couldn’t resist clapping. Anup and Jay also looked amazed.

“So, except a bit of whiskey in my blood, I am all healthy, right?” asked Pulkit confidently.

“Not exactly.” Replied Xanti. The response startled even Pulkit.

Xanti stayed silent for a few seconds. Then slowly spoke, “Your heart rate, perspiration and breathing pattern is suggesting you are under significantly amount of mental stress and anxiety. You want to talk about it?”

This response beamed Pulkit with joy. Containing himself, he quickly turned to the guests and showed his smart watch, “My watch is connected to it. Using data of my watch and visual data from the Webcam of the computer it deduced all these,” explained Pulkit.

“Pulkit,” continued Xanti, “Please respond to my query. Your wellbeing is important to me.”

Pulkit turned to his computer screen and replied, “Well, honestly, I want people to like you. To know about your prowess. So that you can reach to more people.”

“I believe your new friend will surely help you with your discontentment. Statistically, there is a probability that the sales would increase at least by 11% once they upload their review. Positive or negative. “

“Really? There can be negative reviews too?” Pulkit enquired.

“What if we give all positive review?” asked Priya loudly for the computers microphone to catch.

“Then the increase can be as much as 22%.”

Every staff and the three influencers clapped hard listening to the statement. Pulkit also smiled. But his mind was still fidgeting. And that was not hidden from Xanti.

As the applause cooled down, Xanti asked, “You don’t seem to be satisfied with numbers,” said Xanti. “Your breathing pattern still shows signs of anxiety. Do you want to talk about it?”

“C’mon Xanti,” reacted Pulkit. “We can’t go in therapy mode right now?”

“Why not?” responded Xanti. “Okay, we won’t call it therapy. We will call it what you coined: Chill-chat!” Suggested the AI. “And you never know, it could be a good demonstration of my abilities to your guests.”

Pulkit’s eyes widened by the proposal. It was indeed a good idea. Even he himself was not prepare for that. But now that it had been declared out in open, Pulkit worried how well could that be executed.

“Don’t worry, I won’t disclose your deepest secrets to your friends,” joked Xanti playfully as it didn’t receive any response for several moments.

Pulkit laughed and looked at everyone else. Every pair of eyes were fixed at him. Everyone wanted him to do it. He looked at Sangita, who shared Pulkit’s worry, looked as anxious as himself. Turning to Xanti, he said, “Okay then. Let’s do it...”

“Very well,” replied Xanti. “Please adjust your chair in a more comfortable posture while I create a calm ambience.” The LEDs throughout the room turned dimmer while some of them switched from white to soft bluish color. A soothing

harp and flute music started playing in the computer's music player.

"Everyone in the room is requested to keep their gadgets in silent mode and maintain silence for the next few minutes," Xanti instructed in a little louder tone. Then with a soothing tone it asked Pulkit, "Pulkit, are you comfortable?"

"Yes."

"Do you like the music?"

"Yes. It is nice."

"Take three deep breathes." Xanti instructed. Pulkit followed. Then it continued, "So, tell me. What is it going on in your mind right now?"

Pulkit thought for a while and said, "I am wondering whether you would be as effective as I imagine... no offense though..."

"None taken." Xanti replied almost instantly. Everyone giggled but quickly turned quite to witness the first ever machine to man therapy.

"And even if you are good, would I be able to take you to each doorstep?" Continued Pulkit. "That's really a big pressure on me. Bigger than the challenge of creating you. In that I knew that if I worked hard, I could achieve my goal. But now... my success is beyond my hand. I don't know how people would react. What would make them happy. Several times I have seen good artists or good leaders not getting their due credit just because they couldn't influence the crowd."

"Okay. Good." Xanti appreciated Pulkit's sharing his internal turmoil. Although there was one major thing that Pulkit

didn't disclose. Something that was bugging his mind that very moment. That is, whether this open therapy session could exceed the expectations of the millions of spectators. No doubt it was a great opportunity. But it felt like a risky gamble.

"Now let's take one at a time," said Xanti calmly. "So, you are worried that you can't convince the people to buy your product, right?"

"Correct."

"Have you ever felt like that before? When you felt it could be hard to convince people around you?"

"Well..." Pulkit thought hard. "There would be some. But nothing worth mentioning..."

"Here, look at this picture I took from your Facebook profile, I hope you don't mind," said Xanti as she displayed a picture of Pulkit. It was couple of years old. Pulkit looked rather skinny. He was sitting on the counter of some sweet shop.

"Oh. Please. Not this..." Pulkit busted into laugh.

"I presume that this denial is just a colloquial phrase," said Xanti and continued with its presentation. "Would you like to share with us the backstory of this picture?"

Pulkit looked bit embarrassed. "Well... this picture was taken few years back... At that time, I have just started Xenith Digital. I was looking for funding but couldn't crack a good deal. In such a time, my youngest son, Ayansh, was born. Although we were all very happy, but suddenly pressure dawn upon me. I was a man in his forties. Left a safe job to start a business. But didn't have enough money to educate my both

the kids properly. Family also criticized me a lot. At last, one of my uncles made me sit in our family sweet shop. This picture was taken at that time.”

“That’s sweet.” Said Xanti. Many of them chuckled at its use of pun. “So, how long you worked there?”

“Three days. Exactly three days,” said Pulkit. “Probably the hardest, the most conflicted three days of my life. Then, I first talked to my wife... Ah! She was really supportive. Really grateful to her,” thanked Pulkit. “Then went to my family members... And convinced them. That I can’t be a *mithai wala* for the rest of my life.”

“Was it hard...? Convincing them?”

“Oh. It was like fighting a battle. The fear and the pressure they imposed. It was only my wife who stood there and assured them that we will get through...”

“At that time,” asked Xanti. “Did you even imagined that you would be CEO of a multimillion-dollar startup within next two years?”

Pulkit’s eyes turned moist. His breathes were now calmer. “No... Thankfully, I met John. Then slowly built an amazing team of brilliant peoples.”

“Do you believe in their ability?”

“Sure...”

“You think they all have made an amazing thing?”

Pulkit stared at Xanti’s humanoid face. The question seemed personal. And he gave the honest answer, “Yes. I think we have made an amazing thing.”

“So, you convinced twenty-eight of your family members alone, when you had nothing,” said Xanti. “Now don’t you think with the help of seventy-one brilliant people on your team, you could convince few million people when you actually have the most amazing product of the entire country..?”

A tear rolled down Pulkit’s cheek. “Yes. I can... We can.” Pulkit sat straight readjusting his chair back to upright position. He stayed silent for few seconds. His gaze fixed on floor but his mind was definitely elsewhere. Everyone in the room were mesmerized. After some time Pulkit looked up at the computer screen and calmly said, “Thank you, Xanti.”

“That’s my job. Your well-being is important to me. Glad to be of help.”

The lights turned back to normal. The background music stopped. Pulkit looked at everyone. The reaction was utterly pleasing. Especially that of the three interviewers.

“I... I don’t want to talk right now,” said Priya. “I’m in different zone right now. But must say. It was magical.”

The other two nodded. Anup slowly said, “You have truly engineered a masterpiece, Pulkit. Medical diagnosis and all are fine. But in a world stricken with loneliness and mental stress, such a digital companion can be revolutionary. Hats off to you and your team.”

“You reminded me of one of our core designers. A brilliant guy. Unfortunately, he’s not here today but...”

“We have John here,” interrupted Sangita. “And Arman...”

John and Arman, who were busy solving some technical issue just joined the audience.

Suddenly, Pulkit's calmed mind heated up instantly. Arman's face reminded him of an event from the morning. But he chose not to reflect it.

"Ah. The real intelligence behind the artificial intelligence," said Priya as she greeted them.

"Hey, that's a nice catchphrase," complimented Jay.

"Why don't you guys join us," said Priya. "How about we go through the entire team," quickly turning to Pulkit, "With your permission."

"Yeah, sure. With pleasure." Said Pulkit. "Each and every one here deserves appreciation."

Priya got up. Picked one of the cameras. And one by one took a small bite of everyone present in the room. She didn't miss Ravichandran, who was bit hesitant at first.

They left the office in a very lively mood. Everyone was happy on getting a taste of recognition. Sangita congratulated Pulkit.

"Great job," said Sangita. "Honestly, at some places I almost freaked out. I thought it would backfire or something. But in the end, you handled it amazingly."

"Thanks, Sangita."

"Tell me honestly, did you plan that therapy session?" asked Sangita in a lower voice. "Or was that totally out of the blue?"

Pulkit hunched a bit forward and replied in the same low voice, "Even I was shocked. I was about to shit in my pants. It was totally unscripted. And... it was amazing!"

Sangita laughed. John and Arman also approached him. Sangita turning to them said, "You really made something amazing."

"Thanks," replied Arman. "And you are marketing it amazingly too."

"Yes. Especially after the way you almost marred the name, it became necessary to market it amazingly." Pulkit said to Arman in a stern tone.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just because you were involved in the design doesn't give you right to speculate any nonsense about my product," replied Pulkit. "Rather you should be more careful about what you say and where you say?"

"I... I don't understand."

"DO NOT keep blabbering away your conspiracy theories everywhere," warned Pulkit.

"Look. I never made any baseless comment. I have seen somethings..."

"Then SHOW IT TO ME!" Pulkit roared. Every staff in the room turned to look at the sudden outburst. "Show me something real and I will believe you."

Arman looked around. Every eyeball was fixed on him. Flushed in embarrassment he turned to leave.

"And yeah," called Pulkit from back. "Make sure you are not drunk this time."

Arman looked back. There was strange amalgam of shame and anger in his eyes. Without saying anything further, Arman stormed out of the room.

Chapter-7



Three months before the launch

Kundan Kumar, the new politician in town, was losing his cool. It had been months since he launched his new party but nothing significant was happening. There was a slight buzz in first few weeks when he led protests along with Taxi Unions and other groups, who were on verge of losing their jobs. But things were really slow since that. Media wasn't giving him much importance either. He hardly was getting any slots in the panel of those never-ending debate shows throughout the news channels. No big politicians would like to join them. Kundan's so called dream seemed quite far-fetched. Kundan, sitting in his room cum party office, was busy with these thoughts, when Joseph Sebastián, one of his closest comrade and party's digital marketers, visited him.

"Good morning, Kundan bhai," greeted Joseph. "What happened? You look worried."

Kundan narrated him his entire inner turmoil. Joseph seemed to resonate with the problem.

"I understand, Kundan," said Joseph in worrisome tone. "I myself feel the same. Day and night, I am trying to push our name, our cause, in different social media platforms. But... it just isn't getting that traction. And, biggest problem is..."

"Yeah. Tell... Don't hesitate... what is the problem?"

"This AI thing. Our prime agenda," said Joseph. "There is way too much positive news about them. And... however painful it may sound. But they are doing well. Every startup, every little venture."

"SO WHAT?" responded Kundan at the top of his voice. "Should we stop fighting? If the target is difficult then stay assured, once we win over that, our reward would also be big."

"Hope so..."

"Don't just hope," said Kundan. "Believe so. And all these startups you said, doing good, praiseworthy works... You just wait. There will be a day when they will fail. That day we will attack. We would play our narrative. We are historically pretty good at..."

"Wait... Wait a second," interrupted Joseph and remained quiet.

"What? Wait... why?" asked restless Kundan. But Joseph stayed in his thinking zone.

After silence of over a minute, Joseph said, "Why wait?"

"What do you mean?" asked Kundan in a perplexed way. "We must wait till they fail so that we can use that situation..."

"Exactly. Why wait for that," said Joseph. "Make that happen!"

"What do you mean?" asked Kundan.

"Don't wait for the train to crash. Put a boulder on the track," suggested Joseph. "Remember, few years back?"

"Okay. Yeah. I understand," said Kundan as he recalled such incidents couple of years back when it was found that some people, just to defame the government and some political party, would try to damage the railway system. "But... don't you think that will be a bit cheap move?"

"You are now in politics, my friend, you have to play it cheap," said Joseph. "At least, if you want to stay relevant."

"So how do you suggest we do it?"

"Well... there are multiple ways," began Joseph. "Traditional hacking is there. We can also go for data poisoning."

"What is that?" asked Kundan curiously.

"Basically, if we alter, delete or manipulate some data from which the AI model is being trained, then we can alter its behavior," explained Joseph. "Basically, the AI will produce unwanted output. Now imagine, an AI driven car, because of some cyberattack, ends up crashing into a shop or run on footpath, then that could bring us our big break."

Kundan looked very thrilled. "Amazing," he laughed in joy. "Sounds too good. But... who will do this? Can you?"

"Well... I'm not that good. But I have a friend."

"Mind you, we can't disclose this to just anyone," warned Kundan. "And we don't even have much money to spend."

"Don't worry," said Joseph. "He's a friend. He's cheap."

Arman was still furious. It had been over twenty-four hours since Pulkit had accused him of spreading hoax and misinformation. Not only Arman felt that as attack on his credibility but also on his friendship. Since then, without having proper food or sleep, Arman was frantically looking for one solid clue that would prove his hypothesis.

After spending hours on his computer and then at the main servers, Arman finally felt like he got something. But to make sure of that, he needed to check something at the core of Xanti. The datacenter at the heart of Ulsoor lake.

It was raining cats and dogs. Along with frequent bursts of thunder throughout the dark sky. With rage full yet drowsy eyes, Arman was driving straight towards the data center when his phone rang. It was Rita.

“Hello...? Arman?”

“Yes,” replied Arman to the speaker. Keeping his eyes straight on the water-logged road.

“Where are you? You are not even replying to the messages. Are you okay?” Rita sounded really worried.

“I am driving.”

“What.... Why? Don’t you have a self-driving car? Why are you driving? That too in this weather!”

“I’m not taking any chance with this... And I’m fine,” assured Arman. “I’m going to Ulsoor. To the data center. I think I’ve found something. Something big!”

“Really? What?”

“I won’t tell right now. Let me confirm first,” said Arman. “But I must say. Ryan was a genius. He made it!”

“What are you saying... And...”

“I will explain everything later.” And hung up.

“Okay... just take care.” Rita said as quickly as possible. Hoping to send her wishes within those fraction of seconds

before the disconnection of call. She stared at her phone for few seconds. Lost in some thought. But not for long. There was a sudden ramming on the door of the bathroom. Her husband was on the other side.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING THERE!!” he demanded. “How much long would you take?”

“Just... just a minute.”

One month before the Launch

After spending so much time in the west, Ryan had inculcated many of the western attributes. One of them was getting in a joyful mood during the Christmas season. This year was no exception. Except for the fact that Christmas was not even among the top three things that was making Ryan so happy.

Firstly, his work was going great. He helped in developing a one-of-a-kind AI algorithm. And he was getting his due credit too. Everyone in the office really appreciated his efforts and would often praise his superb intelligence. Secondly, for the first time in his life, he was part of a social group which had more than three members. Thirdly, after ages, he had fallen for someone. For last several months Ryan was finding ways to confess it to Sangita. And Christmas gave him that chance.

Ryan was amazed to see that Indians also celebrated the festival with such zeal. Although the practice was bit different. In the west, office would be closed. People would buy gifts, decorate their homes and would have cozy dinners with the family. Whereas, in urban India, the group of people called “HR” would make sure that the office staff

must stay in the office. And to lure them to do that, they would organize innovative ways to party.

In Xenith Digital, the HR head, Nivedita, announced that there would be a grand party on Christmas. And everybody was asked to stay on Christmas Eve to decorate the office and the Christmas tree. Ryan decided he would gift everyone something.

“Really? For everyone?” reacted Vaibhav when Ryan shared the plan with him while they were moving out of the office on the way to weekend drinks. “That would be bit expensive.”

“Yeah. But... it’s a special Christmas for me,” said Ryan. “It’s my first Christmas in India. Plus, my first Christmas in my first job. So... just want to make it little special.”

Vaibhav halted abruptly. Looked at Ryan and said, “There’s someone in the office you want to gift, isn’t it?”

Ryan stayed quiet. His cheeks turned blushed red.

“There is some girl you want to impress...” said Vaibhav in playful tone.

Ryan nodded shyly.

“Who’s she?”

“Umm... Actually...”

“C’mon. Are you not gonna tell me?!”

“No... it’s not like that. I will,” explained Ryan. “I just... Let me tell her first. Then I’ll tell you all.”

“Oh. Don’t want to jinx it, right?” said Vaibhav. “I understand. And best of luck, Champ. Really happy for you.”

“Thanks, Vaibhav,” said Ryan in grateful tone. “Means a lot.”

"Mention not."

"Hey. Can I ask you a favor?" asked Ryan. "Can you please drop me near any mall on the way? Need to buy stuffs."

"You won't join us today?"

"No. It'll take time. I don't want to keep you guys waiting unnecessarily," said Ryan.

"Oh, please. Stop being so formal," rebuked Vaibhav in a friendly manner. "Arman was also saying that he needs to buy something for his home. We can give you company. But yeah, if you are planning to buy some highly expensive diamond necklace for your girl and don't want us to see, then..."

"No, no. Nothing like that," said Ryan. "Rather it will be really nice if you guys could give some company. I could really use some suggestions."

As decided Ryan, Vaibhav and Arman went to the nearest mall.

"So, Vaibhav was saying you are planning to gift everyone this Christmas," asked Arman as he walked into the mall along with Ryan and Vaibhav.

"Yes, what would you like to have?" asked Ryan.

"Well, a Tag Heuer watch will do for me," replied Arman casually.

"Okay."

Arman stopped for a moment. "You aren't serious, are you? This isn't some American trick to rig up the appraisals, is it?"

"Yes. You've nailed it. So, Tag Heuer will do, right?" asked Ryan mockingly.

Arman laughed. "But I've heard rumors that someone is thinking of switching the company..."

"What?" Exclaimed Vaibhav. He quickly turned to Ryan. "You didn't tell me."

Ryan laughed. "It is nothing like that," he said. "Last week after the drinks, when you both left, John and I was walking out of the bar when he met an old friend of his who work in some startup in Bangalore. He jokingly asked me to join his firm. He also gave me his card."

"Really? Then what did you say?"

"I said I won't leave Xenith till I complete my project or I find anything more exciting than this, which is next to impossible."

"That's some loyal colleague we have here," said Arman. "John told me about 'bumping into a recruiter friend' but didn't gave these details."

"But I must admit, their product is quite interesting too," said Ryan.

"How did you know that?" asked Vaibhav. "He didn't tell you all that, did he?"

"No. But he traced my email from LinkedIn and emailed me the crux of it," said Ryan with a latent pride.

"So, are you thinking?"

"Yes, I am. But haven't decided yet. That'll depend..."

"Depend upon..." asked Arman curiously.

"Whether my gifts could get me a handsome raise or not," smiled Ryan.

Both of them laughed.

“By the way, why don’t we split the job,” said Ryan. He took out a small piece of paper from his pocket. It had names of some people along with possible gifts scribbled next to it. “Can you two please get me these? I’ll check some other gift from the next floor. That’ll save us some time.”

“Okay. But what if...”

“If you don’t find that exact thing, you choose whatever you like,” said Ryan. “I’ll meet you near the counter in half an hour.” Saying that he hurriedly walked up the escalator to the next floor.

“He seemed to be in a hurry,” said Arman.

“He wanna buy special gift for someone special,” said Vaibhav. “That’s why he went alone.”

“Really? Why didn’t you tell me? Who is she?” asked curious Arman.

“He didn’t tell me her name. Just told me that he wishes to give a special gift to her and propose her may be.”

Arman grinned. “That naughty bastard. Amazing! I wonder who she might be...” Arman lost in thought. After few seconds he spoke up, “I think it is Nivedita from HR. Recently I’ve seen him having long chats with her.”

“You sure?” asked Vaibhav skeptically. “Although I’ve noticed the same too.”

“Check the list...” Saying that Arman almost snatched the list of colleagues from Vaibhav. “See... Nivedita’s name is not on this list.”

“There are many names not on the list,” pointed out Vaibhav. “Yours, mine, Rita’s... Rather these are probably those couple of guys with whom he does not even interact much. There’s Ravichandran. Harsh. Even our security guys.”

“And Nivedita is not on that list,” replied Arman. “That means she is on that special list.”

“May be.”

“Damn,” said Arman. “Don’t judge me. I don’t want to be nosy. But I’m damn excited to see what’s he planning for Nivedita.”

“That sounds too girlish and I am ashamed to say...,” remarked Vaibhav. “... I’m also thinking the same.”

Both the boys hopped up the escalator to follow Ryan. After searching for a while they at last spotted him. Ryan was lingering around the display of a branded clothing outlet. He went in. Through the glass door it was clearly visible that he was enquiring about a stunning red dress that had been hanging on display. Arman and Vaibhav were witnessing all this, standing from a significant distance, lost among the continuously moving crowd.

“Hey... I’m thinking. Let’s prank little Ryan a bit.” Said Arman slowly.

“Like you did with Rita last year? C’mon. That was too much. And what if...”

“Cmon. It would be fun. It would be our bonding moment. And pulling pranks has been a cultural event of our...”

“Of YOURS.” Vaibhav corrected. “Anyway, what’s your plan?”

Arman shared his mischievous plan to prank the latest member of their group. Listening to the idea Vaibhav first burst into laughter. Then controlling himself he said, “But what if Nivedita gets offended?”

“We will give her a heads-up”

“That’ll ruin the surprise.” Said Vaibhav.

“Oh,” said Arman as he realized the flaw. “I don’t think she will mind. We will be there. We will explain everything to her. And... she’s a cool girl. I think she’ll handle it sportingly. Remember when I accidentally cracked that offensive obese joke?”

“First of all, that wasn’t accidental. You intentionally pulled that one,” said Vaibhav. “But yeah. Her reply was amazing. She roasted you good,” Laughed Vaibhav. “Classic Delhi girl!”

“So... do you think Nivedita couldn’t handle that?”

“Yeah. Maybe you’re right.” Vaibhav said and agreed to join Arman’s Plan De Prank.

Meanwhile, Ryan, lost in his rosy thoughts spend almost all his time to plan a perfect setting for the special confession. Even at home, he would prepare for this extempore. He had drafted several sample speeches. Some starting with a joke. Some with a compliment. He was certain that he would mix up at the time of execution. That’s why he was injecting his subconscious mind with clever and beautiful alternatives so that at the time of crisis, his age-old fumbling and well-known awkward silences may not ruin the special moment. He would often keep mumbling those lines from his speech while at home or in the office. His mother noticed this peculiarity and rebuked a few times. But that was the most she could have managed in her busy schedule. Ryan, on the other hand, was way too focused to get swayed by such minor busts of maternal rage. This was a special moment for Ryan. A new, more confident Ryan. And he didn’t want it to get ruined by anything. Or at least that’s what he wished.

Chapter-8



Pulkit called a short meeting of the team to discuss the outreach of their recent marketing stunt. Sangita, along with Rita, Vaibhav and John joined Pulkit.

“The viewership is really good,” said Sangita. “So far almost four lacs views.”

“Just four lacs?!” Exclaimed Pulkit. “When you said good, I thought it would be around one million. Those kids with their cringe songs and slutty videos reaches a million within days.”

“Well, for that you need to take off your shirt,” Sangita replied jokingly. But Pulkit didn’t look impressed. “I mean... C’mon. You can’t compare with them. Our target group is different. And... it is reaching them.”

“You think so?”

“Certainly.”

“Give me a number,” said Pulkit. “How many? I mean what percentage of our target group do you think have watched it so far.”

Sangita raised her eyebrows to the question that was bordering on absurdness. “Well, I’ll say, twenty percent.”

Pulkit quickly turned to Vaibhav. “How much sales have increased in last two days?”

Vaibhav, startled a bit with the unexpected enquiry, fumbled a bit. “Umm... around two percent may be.”

Pulkit turned back to Sangita. "Vaibhav is saying two percent."

"Look... My job was to take it to them. Why they are not buying that Sales people would tell. May be because its month end."

"Ah! Month end!" remarked Pulkit. "That's a good excuse. I shall tell that to the investors when I meet them today."

"Don't worry, Pulkit," said John. "Don't get stressed. I received very good reviews from several of my friend in US."

"EXACTLY!" said Pulkit bit loudly. As if he was waiting for this reference to come up. "That's what bugging me. I also received over fifty calls probably. Old office colleagues, friends. But most of them are sitting in the Silicon Valley. Why I am not reaching guys in Bellandur. Pune. Gurugram," Turning to Sangita he said as calmly as possible, "Sangita, I want to reach them."

"Look," John continued. "No offense but... till today, any product or idea is revered more in India when it comes bouncing back from the west." Everyone nodded in humorous yet shameful agreement. "Slowly, those guys in the Silicon Valley would tell their pals sitting in here. And then, they would definitely look into it."

These words brought back smile on Pulkit's face. "I hope that too, John. Thanks."

"Well..." said Sangita bit hesitantly. "There was another proposal from a Hindi news channel. But... I kind of said no..."

Pulkit's smile vanished instantly. "What?! Why?"

“They wanted to make a special episode about AI and its... effects. Mainly bad effects. Basically, linking it to all those political strikes and agitation throughout the state. You know, how they present it. A clip from Terminator, with a Bollywood song in the background and the reporter shouting as if it is the end of the world. So... they were asking if they could use a byte of your interview. But... especially after yesterday’s outburst... I said no.” explained Sangita. “Although I’m sure if I call them right now, they would come running to us. It’s your call.”

All eyes were fixed on Pulkit as he took few moments to process his thoughts before uttering his next words. “Nah. I won’t DE-fame my product for the sake of FAME. It has enough potential to make it big. And it is too special for me. I didn’t even allow my friend to talk ill about...” Pulkit halted for a moment. “Where’s Arman anyway?”

Rita wished to speak up. But chose otherwise. Sangita, after waiting a while, said, “He hasn’t come today.”

Pulkit nodded. “You guys think I was too harsh, don’t you?”

Everyone stayed quiet. John came to rescue. “It was totally natural reaction. And it happens when you work together.”

Pulkit nodded. “Anyway, send him to me whenever he comes to office.” Pulkit looked through everyone and halted at Rita. She nodded in affirmation.

“Okay then, I think we shall...”

A loud ringtone interrupted Pulkit. It was coming from Rita’s phone.

“C’mon Rita... Phones on silent, please.”

“Sorry, sorry,” replied Rita as she haphazardly took out her phone from her purse to silent it. But looking at the name flashing on the screen she stopped. She slowly said, “It’s Arman.”

Pulkit smiled. “That rascal would really live long. Okay you take that; we are almost done anyway. And ask him when is he coming back?”

Rita stood up, walked towards the end of the room so as not to disturb the conclusion of the meeting, and picked up with a slow and timid voice. “Hello?” She stayed there for a minute or two and then suddenly fell on the ground with a shriek.

“RITA!” called Sangita and Pulkit in an almost unison. Everyone ran towards her.

“Are you okay? What happened?” asked Vaibhav.

Rita looked shocked. “Arman... he had an accident.”

Twenty days before the Launch

Soon, the Christmas Eve arrived. Ryan felt like appearing for an unprepared exam. He wished he had got a few months more. But at the same time, he knew, even after preparing for a year, he would have felt the same and would have been equally nervous as he was that day. Why won't he be? Any historical analysis would suggest that he had ruined any such moment that had happened in his life. His mind was filled with flashes of cynical events and shameful situations of the past. The only thing that was giving him hope was, the present. He underwent a mesmerizing change in last couple of months. Even his mother noticed it and even complimented him once. Only. Probably scared not to jinx it. Ryan himself felt happy and quite a bit

confident that he no longer needed any pills to confront a social group. He no longer needed therapy to mend his mental functionalities occasionally. He, at last, could do those simple things that his fellow friends could do. A comparison that had haunted him almost his entire life. Rather, he was so pleased with this newly found confidence that a small part of him wasn't worried about what Sangita might say. That part of him was happy that he could at least approach a girl. That part of him was rather frantically worried about losing this ability itself.

As Ryan entered the office with bags full of goodies on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, he felt an enthralling vibe as the ambience was filled with pop music, the smell of freshly packed cakes from the nearest bakery and the hustle and bustle of the staff, who were busy and in decorating the office. A similar cacophony was occurring inside Ryan's belly. Bit more chaotic than the outside. He had heard people say something like having 'butterflies in the belly.' Ryan was certain that the imaginary creatures inside his stomach were definitely bigger than butterflies.

"I can do it. One at a time," said Ryan to himself. Taking a long deep breath, he marched on.

Nearest to him were three guys: Ravichandran Nuli, the office peon; Joel Fernandez, the guy from legal; and security guard Hariprasad Kumar.

"Hi, guys," greeted Ryan. Then, shuffling something through one of his bags, he took out a neatly wrapped cute little box and handed it to the security guard. "Merry Christmas, Hariprasad Ji."

Hariprasad felt a bit confused at first, substituted by an overwhelming joy. "It's... it's for me? Thank you sahab ji."

"You are most welcome," said Ryan as he nodded with a big smile. One by one, he gave gifts to rest of the two too.

He kept hopping from one cluster of staff to another, distributing thoughtfully chosen gifts respectively to everyone. With every acknowledgement of gratitude and heartfelt good wishes he was receiving, he felt more and more joyous and confident. He had just given presents to half a dozen of his colleagues when he ran into Sangita, who was accompanied by Sujata, a new intern in the Marketing wing. He froze for few seconds. The confidence meter was yet to reach the benchmark.

"Hi, Ryan. You...okay?" asked Sangita anxiously.

Ryan didn't respond. He just nodded, searched his bag and handed over a gift to Sujata. "Merry Christmas."

"Oh. Thank you, Ryan." Thanked Sujata.

Sangita, smiling at the gesture, was expecting the same for her. But to her surprise, Ryan turned and started walking.

"Hey... where's my gift?"

"Sorry. Actually, I kept your gift in my cubicle... along with few other. Will get back to you," lied Ryan and continued with his gifting drive. He soon spotted Arman, helping Rita in decorating the Christmas tree.

"Hey, Merry Christmas," greeted Ryan as he gifted him the present. Followed by Rita.

"Thanks mate," said Arman. "So, you didn't yet give your 'big gift' did you?"

"Not yet. I'll do that at last," said Ryan. "Very nervous for that."

"Don't worry, Champ. You will win heart!" wished Arman.

“Okay. Excuse me now. I have to see Pulkit and John.” Saying that Ryan walked away.

“What’s this special gift, you were talking about?” asked Rita as Ryan went significantly away.

“Ah. Today Ryan is planning to propose to his lady love,” said Arman as he hurriedly unwrapped his gift box. “And I’ve planned a....” Arman stopped. He couldn’t believe himself. Ryan had gifted him the exact watch Arman talked about jokingly the other day in the mall. “That bugger really got a big heart!”

The whole office was now acknowledging the same. Ryan’s gifts were the main topic of conversation at every corner of the office floor.

“He got me a beautiful bracelet,” Exclaimed Rita to Vaibhav when they met at the cafeteria.

“That’s really nice. He got me a nice pair of sunglasses. Needed one for a long time,” said Vaibhav.

“But he loves me the most,” interrupted Arman who still was overwhelmed by Ryan’s gift. “He got me this watch.”

“Hey, Arman, be alert,” reminded Vaibhav. “We must be near when Nivedita gets the gift. Otherwise, she’ll fry little Ryan.”

“Why I would say anything to Ryan,” said a voice behind them. “He gave me such a beautiful bracelet.”

Arman and Vaibhav turned to her in utter surprise.

“He gave you... bracelet?” asked Vaibhav. “Not a dress? In a big box, wrapped in red.”

“No, I got a bracelet. Is there any mix-up?” asked Nivedita worriedly. “I don’t wanna switch.”

“No, no. There’s no mix-up.” Assured Vaibhav.

“Although,” she said. “I’ve seen him taking a similar packet, with red wrappers and all and walking towards Sangita’s room.

Vaibhav looked at Arman as both of them realized their blunder mistake.

Back in Sangita’s cabin, she was alone busy taking some festive poster printouts from her computer. Ryan gently knocked and entered.

“Ah. Ryan! At last, found my gift, did you?” mocked Sangita, keeping her gaze fixed on the computer screen.

Ryan’s heartbeat was accelerated. His breaths turn shorter. All the words and speeches he mugged up last night, were swirling in an inaccessible zone of his mind. He, gathering all his strength, started: “Hi. Sangita. Yeah... I found your present. Actually. I had it all along.”

“Then why did you lie?”

“I was...” Ryan felt short of words and breathes at the same time. “I was scared. Because I didn’t want to give you just a gift. Sangita... I have always been a shy and awkward guy. You must have noticed. But this place, you people, this company, you all changed me. I feel like... home. Rooted. After a long time, I’ve met some people whom I can call friends. And after an even longer time, I met someone whom I wish to call something more than a friend.”

“Oh dear,” the words slipped out of Sangita’s mouth instantly. “That’s really sweet of you, Ryan, but...”

“Do not stop me. Please,” requested Ryan. “I have thought of all the possibilities. Like I consider all the variables while coding. You may have someone special. Someone better than me might have already

asked you out. I know all that. Still. I felt like running this program. You can react anyway you feel like. Don't hesitate. I have estimated all possible outcomes. So, there's no way you could hurt or upset me. I just want to say, that... that you are a beautiful woman... and I find you stunningly attractive. And. Surprisingly, you are much more beautiful from the inside... I'm sorry. I mean, your heart is really kind," Ryan quickly corrected, hinting at a chance of drastic misunderstanding. Sangita accepted his clarification with a sweet laugh. Ryan got some confidence to continue. "You are really kind-hearted. Talking to you can really be a soothing experience. I do not want anything. I just wanted to tell you all this. And even more. Here is a gift for you... Merry Christmas!"

Sangita remained amazed and immobile for several seconds. With a smile, she got up and took Ryan's gift. "Thanks a lot, Ryan," she said most politely and went to unwrap the gift when a small piece of note pulled her attention. "What's... You wrote a poem for me?"

"Just an old hobby."

Sangita read:

'I have heard a lot about exotic east,

Snake charmers and mystic priest.

Heard about colorful people, festive trend

But my best discovery was, finding you as a friend.

Hope to be same for you, a friend of high rank,

This was all, from your new friend from the Hudson's bank.'

Overwhelmed by the heart touching lines, Sangita couldn't wait and quickly unwrapped the gift only to get even more shocking revelation. And the revelation was shocking for Ryan too.

Sangita took out a pair of the most provocative sets of lingerie she had ever seen. Her blushing cheeks turned furiously red. Ryan literally froze on his spot. There was an utter silence in that room for several seconds.

“Oh... now I get it what you meant when you spoke about ‘inner beauty’”, said Sangita in a stone-cold tone. Her voice was not loud, but anger could be felt at the utterance of each syllable. “You want to see me in this, right? All those fancy sweet words were to get me into these?”

Ryan’s mind blacked out. It could not process anymore. He did not respond. He could not respond.

“Basically, you want to sleep with me, right?” enquired Sangita. “Tell me. It’s cool. We are as cool as Americans. So... You wanna do it? That’s why all wrote those poems and your little speech of yours? Tell me, you pervert!”

Ryan shook his head. His eyes were all teary. “I... I didn’t know it was...”

“Oh my God. Yeah. Right... it must be a mix-up now,” said Sangita. “Perfect. First, observe the girl’s reaction. If she’s into it. Then Jackpot! Or else make up an excuse. It is a mix-up. I didn’t know how it got in here.”

“Believe me...” Ryan was going to explain himself but was interrupted by two incomers. Arman and Vaibhav came to his rescue. But they were too late.

Looking at the lingerie in Sangita’s hand, Arman tried to explain, “Sangita, listen to me. It is all a misunderstanding...”

“AH! Just about time,” said Sangita banging her hand on the table top. “Oh, man! Either I’m too good or you guys are really predictable. Tell them, Ryan, didn’t I predict this exact scenario a few seconds ago?”

“Sangita just listen to us,” demanded Vaibhav. “It is not like that. It was a prank. It was supposed to be one.”

“Yes. It’s my idea,” admitted Arman. “I switched his gift. And thought...”

“And thought it would be hilarious to gift this to your colleague?” Sangita showed the dress in her hand more elaborately.

By now, several more people also came into the room enquiring about the ongoing ruckus. Amidst all this, Ryan stayed quiet. Trembling in shame. He looked at Arman with tear-filled eyes and listened as Arman explained beautifully how he executed his master plan. He still couldn’t believe the amount of deception coated over those helping gestures shown by Arman the other day. Taking, rather almost snatching, the big heavy bags from Ryan to help him. Then taking to the other side so that Vaibhav could get enough time to swap the material. The worst part was that this explanation lost its credibility like camphor in the air. Furious Sangita wasn’t willing to accept that.

“Don’t make things up, Vaibhav,” said Sangita. “Just admit you just are defending this horny Mr. America.”

Beside Sangita, the common perception around the room was quickly taking up Sangita’s side. Everyone entering the room perceived two main things: Sangita holding a slutty lingerie; It was inside Ryan’s gift box.

Ryan, unable to take it anymore, pushed everyone and dashed out of the room.

Vaibhav and Arman kept calling him. But Ryan's brain wasn't even acknowledging them. It was all numb.

After a long time, Ryan's mind was out of the years of darkness. After a long time, it went back into it.

Chapter-9



A mobile crane was pulling out Arman's car out of the lake when Pulkit and the entire team reached the spot. The police on the spot informed them that they had already sent Arman to the nearest government hospital. But his condition was critical. The police also gave a faint idea on how the car might have run into the lake amidst heavy rainfall and slippery road.

Pulkit, along with others, quickly rushed to the said hospital where Arman was taken straight to the ICU. The doctors had to perform some urgent surgeries to stop bleeding due to glass pieces and other wounds. They were waiting in the lobby when an old police constable approached Pulkit.

"Are you from the family?" the constable asked.

"No. We are his office colleagues... friends. We are his friends," corrected Pulkit.

"You need to fill up some forms here. And might have to sign a statement."

"What statement...?"

"Ah. A formality," a lean tall man, in his late forties, interrupted. Although he was in civil dress, but the Constable saluted him. The man nodded back.

"Purusottam ji," said the man. "You give these documents to me. I'll talk to them. You go and handle that truck driver's

family over there.” He pointed to a group of people on the other end of the corridor.

“But sir... I can manage this too,” Purusottam insisted.

“I know you can,” the man said. “But you don’t have to. I got this. Now you go.” The constable obeyed. Then turning to Pulkit, he politely greeted, “Hi, I am DSP Rajveer Rathore. If you don’t mind, can I ask you some questions?”

“Well... Yeah sure,” said Pulkit. “This is just an accident case, right?”

“Well, I think so... just making sure,” replied the DSP. “Actually, I am involved with another case. In last two days, there had been seven such cases where a self-driven vehicle had injured someone. Five of them involve trucks of this new tech firm...” Rajveer tried to recall the name, “umm... Coolie or something.... They launched a fleet of self-driven trucks last month. Now five of them had rammed over six pedestrians.”

“Oh. That’s sad,” replied Pulkit.

“Yes. Unfortunately,” said Rajveer. “Since a big company is involved, many are hesitant to lodge an FIR. The company is saying that there may be some malfunction in the vehicle’s LiDAR or the GPS system due severe rain and thunderstorms. I wonder whether that’s the case with your friend too.”

“May be,” said Pulkit. “Although LiDAR sensors are well insulated but some unfortunate thunder strike may affect it.”

Rajveer looked at Pulkit with raised eyebrows.

Reading the expression of surprise, Pulkit explained, “Well... I am into tech stuff, myself.”

“Oh. I see,” said Rajveer. “Anyway, you need to fill up this form. Declaring that you are taking Arman’s responsibility...” Rajveer handed over a paper from a bunch in his hand. “So, you all are... friends?”

“Yes,” said Pulkit. Turning to Sangita and Rita, who were sitting on the metal bench next to him, he introduced, “this is Sangita. And that’s Rita.” Sangita nodded. But Rita was too shocked to respond. With her head over Sangita’s shoulder, Rita stayed almost numb.

“Hm. Anyway, I just want to ask, you don’t doubt anyone right?” asked Rajveer.

“No. Why would I?”

“Just saying. As per your knowledge, you don’t know anyone who could orchestrate such an... incident. Right? I mean, does he have any enemy or someone who may...”

Pulkit looked confused. “He is just a software engineer. Not some gangster or politician! No! I don’t think he has any enemy who would do such gruesome act against...”

“Sorry. Just have to ask to omit the possibility,” said Rajveer. “You see there was a connection...”

“Ryan...”

The numb Rita spoke up in a meek voice. But the response was enough for the sharp ears of the police officer.

“Sorry...? Mam, you said something?” asked Rajveer.

“Arman said Ryan... Ryan did something,” Rita muttered.

“What are you saying, Rita?” rebuked Sangita. “Are you mad?!”

“Sorry... who’s Ryan?” Rajveer asked.

“He used to work with us...” said Pulkit. “You ignore her. She’s disturbed. Just ignore.”

“Umm... I wish I could,” said Rajveer as he fixed his gaze on Rita who looked way too tormented to give any proper answers. Rita again went back to her numb state. Sangita tried to comfort her.

“Okay. You know what, my bad,” said the officer. “I will leave you guys. Anyway,” he pulled out a card out of his pocket, “give me a call, if you have anything to say...” Pulkit extended his hands to take it but Rajveer bended a little and gave the card to Rita. “... anything that can help your friend, Arman.”

Rita quietly took it.

“By the way, which company you said you work for?” asked Rajveer to Pulkit before leaving.

“I’m the CEO of Xenith Digital.”

Rajveer raised eyebrows in appreciation. “Very well. See you, Mr. CEO.”

As Rajveer walked down the hospital stairs, he called his subordinate, the sub-inspector Bala Murugan.

“Jai Hind, sir,” saluted Bala instantly from the other side.

“Jai Hind,” responded Rajveer. “Bala, you are looking into the accident case of lake Ulsoor, right?”

“Yes, sir,” said Bala. “And just now we came across a very interesting lead.”

“Really? What’s that?”

“Actually, due to rain and thunderstorms, most of our CCTV cameras in that area fried up. So, we were not able to see the actual footage of how the accident happened. But when we asked the eyewitness, who was the first to inform us, he said that the car broke down near the edge of the lake. Arman got down to check the engine. Right then, the car picked up speed, rammed Arman and drove into the lake.”

Rajveer stayed quite for a long time.

“Sir? You there...”

“Um... yes. Yes. I’m here,” said Rajveer. “But... it is really an interesting lead. What do you think about it?”

“I think, it’s just like ‘Tarzan and the wonder-car’.”

A cringe wave instantly shattered Rajveer’s thought process.

“Oh, please Bala! Stop watching dumb cinemas!”

“Sorry sir... But I do believe in ghosts and stuff. My distant aunt was once possessed by...”

“Will you stop it?” rebuked Rajveer.

“Sorry, sir.”

“This gives us two things. First, it wasn’t an accident. But a murder. Second, if no one else was inside that car, that means someone must have tampered with the software of the car. Now who can do that?”

“A... software engineer?”

“Exactly, Bala. A software engineer,” said Rajveer. “Bala! Start interrogating everyone in the Xenith Digital. And start with a guy named Ryan.”

Seventeen Days before the Launch

Ryan locked himself up. Physically as well as mentally.

For around forty hours straight, Ryan didn't move out of his room. His mother being busy in her packed schedule didn't pay attention. It was only when her maid, who was the only person responsible for providing food to Ryan at proper time intervals, told Anjali about the anomaly in her son's daily routine, that she found out.

Already fatigued and tired from her hectic job, Anjali went to check on her son. She was never a cuddly cossetting type of parent but had her unique way of dealing with her son's problems which often seemed very mechanical to others but were always quite effective. She went in. The room was dark. Ryan was lying on his bed. Not sleeping. Just lying in the darkness. Anjali's switching on the light made him fidget annoyingly and quickly turn his face opposite to his mother.

"You okay, there?" asked Anjali.

"Yes. I'm fine." Replied Ryan.

"You didn't go to office today?"

"No," said Ryan. "I took few days off. Not feeling well."

"But you just said you were fine." Reminded the doctor.

Ryan felt irritated. "I mean... Nothing like that. I mean. Just didn't feel like going. Not that I am sick or something."

"Okay. Okay," said Anjali calmly. "Just asking. I am not just your mother I'm also a doctor. So, you can tell me if there's any problem."

"Told you already. I am totally healthy. I am fine!"

“Okay.” Said Anjali and turned to leave. But quickly turned as if something struck her mind. “By the way, I am glad that you are free next few days. I’ll need your help tomorrow.”

Ryan turned to his mother. “Help?”

“Yes,” replied Anjali beamingly. “We are having a Healthcare drive tomorrow in some local village. So, you can be quite handy. I’ll be needing as much help as possible.”

“What? No!” protested Ryan. “I don’t want to go...”

“C’mon. Be a sport. You will like it there. It is nice green...”

“NO! It is your work. So you go,” interrupted Ryan. “Why should I go?”

Anjali’s gaze turned a bit stern. “I could have told you the same thing during numerous of your Parents’ Day, sports day, and whatnot! Yet, I was there. Each and every time. Managing my work and all. So, you kind of owe me that much.”

Ryan had no answer to that other than agreeing politely. “Okay.”

“Very well,” said Anjali with a smile. “We will start at 06:30 in the morning.”

“WHAT?”

The next morning, as per instruction, Ryan was ready on time, and the mother-son duo went on a long drive to some village. Throughout the journey, Ryan chose to stay quiet. Putting on his headphones, Ryan rested his head against the window. Both of them knew that no song was being played in those headsets yet both of them acted as if they didn’t know that fact. Ryan would occasionally shake his head to some hypothetical music beat to convince his mother, to which Anjali would just smirk a little.

The car left the concrete jungle behind and was dashing towards the real jungles of the Western Ghats. As the view out of his window began to transform into a tropical wonderland, Ryan was forced to move out of his fake musical façade and break the silence. “Where are we going?”

“We are going to a village in Chikmagalur,” replied Anjali in a plain tone.

“Chik...magalur? That is a tourist spot, isn’t it?” asked Ryan.

“Yes. It is a beautiful hill station in the Western Ghats.”

“Are we going on a vacation?” asked Ryan surprisingly.

“Not exactly,” said Anjali. “Although I hope you enjoy it there. The village has some nice scenic spots.”

Ryan went back to his position. He had many more questions buzzing inside his mind. But he just had one of the longest conversations with his mother in recent times. And was not feeling like pushing it further. He decided to focus back on the lush greenery outside his window.

After an almost four-hour long drive, Anjali parked the car in the backyard of a school in a distant village.

“Where are we?” asked Ryan after breaking the long silence. “And why are we here?”

“I have been coming here for the last few months,” said Anjali as she stepped out of the car. “This is an NGO which helps resettlement of people who suffered from flood or any other natural calamities. So, me and a few colleagues of mine visit this place once or twice a month and give some volunteer services to these people.”

Ryan was spellbound by this new philanthropic side of his mother.

“What?” asked Anjali as Ryan gawped at her for few seconds.

"That's... really cool of you," said Ryan.

Anjali smiled. "Thanks, Ryan."

Both of them moved towards the old one-storied building, which looked more like a refugee camp than a school. People were waiting in long queues. A middle-aged woman rushed out of the building and came to welcome Anjali.

"Welcome, Dr. Bose," the lady said. "Glad you could make it today."

"I am glad too, Sunita. Sorry couldn't make it in past few weeks," said Anjali. "Anyone visited yet?"

"Yes. Dr. Risabh is already inside."

"Okay. Anyway, this is my son..." introduced Anjali. "Ryan Malik."

"Mali...", Sunita mouthed her confusion but decided to back out at the final moment. Anjali noticed the fumbling. But did not mind much. She was used to it. Sunita extended her hands and greeted Ryan most politely. "Welcome, Ryan beta. So nice of you to come and help your mother."

Ryan felt a slight churning inside his belly. He was in no mood to face and interact with such a crowd whatsoever. At the same time, it felt wrong to say no to such a noble work. He meekly said, "Umm. Yeah. Kind of..."

Understanding son's latent dilemma, Anjali slowly said, "How about you wait here," pointing to a playground in front of the building, "and I will call you when I will need you. Okay?"

Ryan felt relieved. "Okay."

Anjali looked around and spotted a kid sitting nearby, under a tree, playing with a cricket ball. She turned to Sunita and asked, "Sunita, isn't that Kaveri Amma's grandson, Krishna?"

“Yes. He brought his grandmother. She is in the queue.”

“Krishna!” called Anjali.

The boy, hardly over ten, looked up and sprang up beamingly and began walking towards her. Unfortunately, his walking pace isn’t as fast as his speed of getting up. There was some serious problem with his right foot. That was making him limp all the way.

“Good morning, Doctor Bose,” greeted Krishna with a big smile.

“A very good morning, Krishna,” Anjali wished back by squeezing his little cheeks. “And where is your crutch? I have asked you to carry it along for a few more weeks.”

“Nah. I am fine. I can’t play with crutches on,” replied Krishna innocently.

“But if you don’t use them now, you won’t be able to run fast later.”

“I don’t need to. I can hit sixes and fours standing only,” replied Krishna innocently.

Anjali laughed. “Oh really? My little Sehwag. Anyway, this is Ryan. Will you please show him around? He is new here.”

“Sure,” said Krishna joyfully. He took Ryan’s hand and started walking towards the ground. “Come.”

“Take good care of him,” Anjali said before moving inside.

Ryan rolled his eyes. A babysitting job was the last thing he was expecting. However, he was a little glad as it was better than facing hundreds of unknown people.

“So where are you from?” asked Krishna.

“I am... from Bangalore.”

“Oh,” said Krishna. “My village was down the hill. But after last year’s flood, we had to shift in this village. They are building our house but...”

“Where are you taking me?” asked Ryan interrupting Krishna’s unending trail of talks.

“Doctor said to show you around. So, I am taking you to some of the beautiful spots of this village. There is this...”

“No, no,” Ryan interrupted again. “You don’t have to. Thanks a lot for the trouble.”

“Are you sure? Doctor Mam has asked me to show you around,” said Krishna.

“I know she did. But you don’t have to walk so much.”

“Are you saying this because of my legs? I am totally fine.”

“No, it’s not because of your legs,” Ryan clarified. “I just want to sit quietly at some place.”

“Okay,” said Krishna and began pulling his hand towards another direction. “Come.”

Krishna took him to the spot where he was sitting before. Under the shade of a giant tree. It was peaceful. For a while.

“So, you are from Bangalore,” continued Krishna. “I heard it is a big city.”

“Yes, Krishna. It is a big city.”

“Do you have mountains in your city?”

“No. We do not have mountains in Bangalore.”

“Oh,” said Krishna in a disappointed manner. “Then it isn’t that a big city.”

“It is not like that. It is not necessary that every big city must have mountains. I have been to several big cities. Some of the biggest in the world. And they don’t have mountains,” explained Ryan.

“Really?” asked Krishna in disbelief.

“Yes. Really, I have been to many big cities.”

“No. I mean, really there are no mountains in big cities?” asked Krishna.

Ryan frowned and nodded. “No.”

A silence followed as Krishna immersed in some deep thinking as one of his old and most liked beliefs just got ruptured. Ryan was a little glad. This revelation brought him some quiet time. But it didn’t last long. Hardly a minute later, Krishna came up with another question. “So, which is the biggest city you have ever been?”

“Well... big in terms of big infrastructure if you mean then definitely New York City.”

“Oh. Where is it? Is it even bigger than Bangalore?”

“Of course, it is bigger than Bangalore. It is one of the biggest cities in the United States of America.”

“You have been to America?” Krishna was amazed. “That is in foreign. You have to go there by aero plane. Right?”

“Yes. Yes. And yes.”

“Wow. You have been to so many different places. You must be having so many friends from all the different places. I have friends from my old village. And now I have friends in this new...”

“NO!” yelled Ryan as Krishna’s remark triggered multiple memories in Ryan’s mind. Unfortunately, most of them were unpleasant. “Living in many places does not mean you’ll have many friends. That’s the most stupid thing to assume! You understand?!”

Krishna was startled by the sudden rebuke. His eyes were about to shed little teardrops. Ryan regretted the outburst the very next moment. “I am... Actually... I’m sorry. Don’t cry now,” apologized Ryan. “Actually, I’m bit disturbed. Not because of you. But something else.”

“What is it?” asked Krishna wiping his eyes.

Ryan hesitated for a moment but then decided to go with the flow. “Well... I went through a very embarrassing moment. In my office. And... all my colleagues made fun of that. I’m worried that they will mock me even when I join the work.”

Krishna listened intently and instantly replied, “Just like what happened to me few weeks back.”

“Really? You also went through such harsh mental stress and anxiety?” mocked Ryan. “Will you kindly elaborate?”

“During the flood and landslide, my leg,” he pointed to his right leg, “got stuck in the rubble of my own house. Many uncles in my village helped me to move out. And we, along with many other were shifted here temporarily. I made a few friends here, also. A few months back, during Diwali, Nagarjuna, a village boy, was bursting crackers. We were watching standing near him. Suddenly, he lit a big cracker and threw it towards us. Everyone ran. But I couldn’t. I limped as fast as I could and just before the cracker went off, I jumped into a big heap of something just next to the road. I was saved from the cracker. But it was a heap of cow dung. It was all over me. All the village kids laughed. Nagarjuna even made a video on his phone. They called me

‘smelly Limpo’. I felt so bad. I turned away from them and came home.”

Ryan found the story quite relatable. He remembered all such incidents he faced, starting from school to the current fiasco. “So... you never spoke to those friends again?”

“No. I did. The same evening.”

“What?” Exclaimed Ryan in disbelief. “How? I mean, didn’t you feel reluctant? An embarrassment? How could you face them so easily?”

“I was hungry,” replied Krishna. “Nagarjuna’s dad was the only grocer in the village. We needed some rice and lentils.”

Ryan stared with surprise and thoughtfulness.

“Grandma washed me up. Said we should not fight over small things. And must be friends with everyone. They are not bad people,” continued Krishna. “And she was right. When I went to the shop, Nagarjuna met me. He said he was sorry. And he said he deleted the video from his phone. I think Uncle had rebuked him, too. Anyway. He said sorry. And I took rice and lentils.”

“So... you guys are friends now? He doesn’t call you names now?”

“No. That he does,” clarified Krishna. “But we are friends.”

“I don’t understand. He mocked you. Bullied you. How can you forgive him?”

“Grandma says everyone has some defect. Like I now have a defect in my leg. In a similar way, some people may have defects in their minds. Of no doing of their own. So, we should forgive them.”

“So, you guys talk with each other?”

“Yes. Talk. Play. I am actually waiting for him. He and Prashanth and Ajith will come with a bat. I have the ball.”

“How can you play with that guy who abused...”

Before Ryan could finish, someone from behind him called, “Limpo! You already here? Hope you score better run than the last time.”

“And hope you run faster than last time, FATSO!” Krishna retorted instantly. Turning to Ryan he said, “That’s Nagarjuna. I call him FATSO.” Krishna informed with a beaming smile. Saying that he stood to leave. “And... I play with him not because I like him. I mean, I do now. We are friends. But I play... because I love to play. I just can’t give that up for petty stuffs.”

Ryan sat speechless. Multiple thought chains were running through his mind. Was the kid, right? Do we over exaggerate our petty problems? Are these so-called mental stress and social anxieties really insignificant? Compared to the pain of hunger. Compared to the passion for something.

After going a few steps, Krishna halted, turned and asked, “Why don’t you join us? Come play with us.”

This invitation added a soothing new strand to the mess of ongoing thoughts. Soothing because he couldn’t imagine being new and yet getting called for a game right away. He had spent numerous recess hours just standing aside. Secretly wishing for someone to pick him. Call him.

“Umm... Thanks... but I’m not very good at it,” said Ryan, driven by the habit of saying no.

“Don’t worry. However bad, you won’t be worse than Fatso. He can’t even play a full toss ball,” said Krishna. He then walked back to Ryan. Grabbed his hand. And said, “Come.”

After ages, Ryan was in the field. Playing. As expected, he was playing awful. But he felt amazing. Another person who was feeling the same was Dr. Bose. After she had attended to her patients, she came out and was utterly pleased to see Ryan. Playing. Talking. Laughing. She stood there for over half an hour. Didn't wish to spoil the game. Or his mood. But the game came to a halt as an old woman called out at the top of her voice: "Krishna! Krishna!"

It was his grandmother. Krishna at once left the game and ran towards his grandmother. He went near her, grabbed her hand, and said, "Come. Let's go."

Ryan was stunned. Krishna, who himself was struggling to walk, was guiding his grandmother, who herself was blind. Ryan realized how little his own problems were.

After the game, Anjali took Ryan and headed back home. This Ryan was a little different from the one she brought. The new Ryan was happier. And quite a bit talkative too.

Krishna really took a good care of him. Throughout the journey Anjali wore a victorious smile as her technique worked quite well.

Chapter-10



Bala went to Ryan's apartment the same evening. He did not had time to do much research but he found that Ryan was missing from the firm's last twenty days attendance log. Sufficient time for an intelligent criminal to make his way to any part of the country.

As Bala pressed the calling bell, a mid-aged lady answered the door.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Umm... I am from the local police station," said Bala. "I am here regarding Mr. Ryan..."

"Oh," the lady responded at once without waiting for Bala to complete. "Come in. Have seat. I'm calling madam."

The lady made Bala wait in the drawing room while she dashed inside to call some 'madam'. Few minutes later she came out with glass of water. "Madam is coming," she said as she offered Bala the water. "Would you like tea or coffee?"

"Nothing, thanks." Said Bala who himself was bit startled by such kind welcome. Mostly in Indian houses, people mostly get too scared or nervous to show such hospitality.

Few minutes later an older, more elegant looking woman came from inside.

“Good evening officer,” greeted Anjali, “You could have called me instead.” She said as she sat across Bala. “Yes. Tell me. What can I do?”

“I am here to find out about Ryan,” said Bala.

“Okay,” said Anjali calmly. “What about him? You can ask me.”

“Mainly what kind of work he was involved in.”

“That’s strange,” remarked Anjali.

“I mean you don’t have to explain in detail, just the gist of it,” said Bala. “I know that’s quite a complicated job.”

“No. I can explain you in full detail the exact nature of my son’s job. Just because I am doctor or a woman doesn’t mean I don’t know anything about computers,” said Anjali in bit stern way. “What I find strange is that I have answered the same question to another police officer.”

Bala got even more confused. He didn’t know that Rajveer had deputed someone else to this case too. By now Bala was quite intimidated by Anjali. He meekly said, “Okay, you may explain in detail if you wish.”

Anjali, sensing a hint of some ongoing confusion, calmly asked, “First you tell me officer, what do you exactly want to know? What is it you are looking for?”

“We... I want to know about his work. Actually... There’s an accident. Few of them actually... driverless cars. So, if Ryan knows anything,” Bala tried his best to paraphrase his intentions in best possible way. He felt bit perplexed and slightly frustrated as he wasn’t satisfied with his own

statement. “Why don’t you just call Ryan... or tell me where he is?!”

Anjali stood up. There was a tinge of tears in her eyes but she maintained the same sternness and decency in her voice. “Is this some kind of joke to you officer?” she demanded. “I don’t know whether you’re being utterly rude or mind numbingly dumb. I guess it is the later one. Well, in that case, let me inform you: My son, Ryan Malik, is dead!”

Bala was in shock.

“What?” exclaimed Bala. “I’m... I am sorry. But... how?”

“That’s exactly what I have been asking for so long,” said Anjali. “How? But... they didn’t let me ask. They won’t allow me to register an FIR. First, they called me and said he died in a mysterious way. Then they said he committed suicide... Someone out there wanted to cover this thing up. And it seems that they have covered it up really well. Since the police themselves have forgotten the death of a person. It is not even a month yet!”

This time tear made its way breaking the barrier and washed down her cheeks. But the doctor knew how to maintain decorum. She quickly wiped her tears and slowly said, “I’m sorry.”

“No. Please. Rather I am sorry,” said Bala. “I didn’t have time to check through database. Ryan’s case must be with some other station. I really am sorry for making you uncomfortable and...”

“It’s okay,” said Anjali. “But can I tell you something?”

“Yes. Sure,” said Bala.

“I don’t know what exactly are you investigating. And why my Ryan’s name popped up in your investigation?” she said. “But my Ryan was an amazing person. A genius boy. A boy with pure heart. He couldn’t even harm an insect...”

Bala couldn’t understand how to respond other than nodding along.

“I know something is going on in that office,” said Anjali. “Something fishy. Beyond normal. And... in such cases, they usually try to pin down it to the weakest guy. In this case, it is my Ryan. Don’t let anyone frame him for something he hasn’t done. They already have taken his life. Don’t let them take his dignity.”

Eyes turned a little wet. This time, it was Bala’s.

Sixteen Days Before the Launch

It had been four days since the Christmas Eve incident, and there was no sign of Ryan. His absence was felt among all the staff members. Although for different reasons. There was a group of colleagues, practically most of them, who were missing him mainly to enquire and discuss about the exact details of that incident. There were some who genuinely wanted to see him again and thank him for the thoughtful gifts. And there were Arman and Vaibhav, who felt terribly guilty for their action and were dying to ask for a proper apology. Sangita, too, felt bad for those harsh words. But felt worse for how she was treated. She was not willing to be the bigger person so soon. Even Pulkit tried to intervene and sort out the things.

“C’mon Sangita,” said Pulkit as they were sitting in the office cafeteria during lunch. “I’m sure Ryan didn’t mean to offend you. He’s really a nice guy.”

“Maybe,” retorted Sangita. “But I’m not sure about that. Maybe he wanted to gift me the same and when it backfired, Arman and Vaibhav came to cover it up for him.”

“You don’t believe that,” said Pulkit with quite conviction. “It was clearly Arman’s Plan. He had done such stuffs before. With other staff. And I must say, at that time, you have enjoyed them a lot.”

Sangita stayed quiet. Her mind was stuck between feeling bad for those consents and expressing her discontent. She knew Pulkit was right. She also knew she wasn’t ready to forgive so soon.

“You know,” said Sangita breaking the long pause. “After my break-up with Lakshya, I’ve never been so vulnerable in front of anyone... But that day. For once, I was like... wow. Especially, after that poem.”

“There was a poem?!” a surprised Pulkit asked.

Sangita rolled her eyes. “Then I got the most vulgar dress I’ve ever seen in my life. Then Arman barges in and declares everything was a joke,” said Sangita. “Now I just cannot decide what’s real and what’s a joke. I... I need some time Pulkit. And that was really embarrassing for me. I just can’t let it go.”

Pulkit listened intently and nodded. “Okay. I understand. It is your decision to make. But I will only say, that don’t punish someone for someone else’s mistake.”

These words stayed with Sangita even after Pulkit left the table. Deep down, she felt strongly about Ryan’s innocence. Now Pulkit’s words catalyzed that latent thought. The thought of confronting Ryan with

a forgiving attitude just crossed her mind when someone in the cafeteria spoke out: "Hey look, Ryan's back."

Damn telepathy, Sangita thought as she turned and found Ryan across the corridor. Sangita made up her mind to go and clear out all the misunderstandings. She stood up and started walking towards Ryan. Ryan was way ahead. Sangita galloped a bit to catch up with Ryan. Ryan was about to turn around the corner when he turned back to check on the incoming footsteps. Ryan's belly churned a little as his eyes met Sangita's. Sangita also froze at her spot. Both were in an awkward limbo trying to figure out the next step of conversation. But before any of them could say anything, someone from the other side greeted Ryan, having no idea that Sangita was just around the corner.

"Hey Ryan, you are back! I heard you gifted the sexiest dress to the sexiest girl in the office..."

Sangita turned red in anger and embarrassment. All her determination and zeal vanished instantly. She turned and walked away as quickly as possible to avoid any uncomfortable interactions with the incomer.

It was not just Sangita who was uncomfortable with the ongoing ruckus. Ryan himself was pathetic feeling utterly disgusted. As he watched Sangita walk away from him, he felt a wave of despair, guilt and rage yet he didn't know how to respond to Joel Fernandez who made the terrible comment.

"You... Just Shut up!"

"Oh please. Don't feel shy," said Joel. "We all heard how you gifted the most amazing bikini set to Sangita. Don't feel bad. You got guts, Bro."

“JUST SHUT UP! THAT WAS A MISTAKE!” Ryan was shaking. He didn’t know whether due to anger or grief. Or maybe both. Ryan pushed Joel away and dashed towards his room. But he needed more than that to push away the smog of embarrassment spread throughout. On his way to his cubical, almost all the eyes were making a similar remark. A few of them did stop him to talk. But not about his well-being. But the details of that evening. Details of that dress.

All the little strength Ryan gathered from little Krishna and days of contemplation, didn’t seem to be enough. He regretted every move. He had already spent hours lamenting his decision to confess to Sangita in the last few days, yet it felt there was room for more repentance. His so-called foolproof planning failed. He spent hours imagining the worst scenarios. But receiving such mockful and insulting reactions about a fellow female colleague wasn’t among the least of his concerns. As he didn’t expect such a thing. But now, seeing the ongoing mayhem, his guilt grew graver. He not only created an embarrassing situation for him but also an unbearable environment for the very person he loved. This realization triggered an unnatural panting. A panic attack seemed inevitable.

“Ryan!” called someone at that precise moment. Ryan made up his mind. Whoever it would be, he was going to shower all his fury. He turned around. It was Pulkit.

“Welcome back, Ryan,” said Pulkit. “And thanks again for the gift,” he said, showing the smartwatch on his wrist, “you alright?”

Ryan nodded.

Pulkit put his hand on Ryan’s shoulder and calmly said, “Look. I know you are bothered by whatever happened on Christmas. And...

if I were in your place, I would have felt the same. But... trust me, it will pass."

Ryan listened intently. It was pleasing to hear but not convincing.

"I am not saying all this because I'm your boss and want you to start working... Although I do want all that," admitted Pulkit. "But keeping professional agenda aside. I genuinely want you to be okay. And you never know... By the next Christmas, we will all be laughing at this incident sitting at the grand Christmas feast."

These words were able to draw a smile on Ryan's face. Faint. But genuine.

"And... about that work stuff," continued Pulkit. "We are on tight schedule, Ryan. John is also on leave for the holidays. I really want you to pull up your socks. You have done a commendable job so far. Just the final stage of testing. You don't want all that hard work to go in vain, do you?"

Ryan shook his head. "No... I'll try my best."

"And your best is enough," said Pulkit. "We have hired a few more guys for testing and red-teaming, but we need you, man. We are making something really special. We need our special guy for that and..."

"Yes. Pulkit. About that. I have a strange request to make. If you could... I... don't want to create any inconvenience for you. But if you could just..."

"Save your breathes and come to the point. Don't worry. Just say," said Pulkit with quite an assurance.

“Thanks... You see... We have already completed all the framework and main core of the model. Now is just testing and some fine tuning... so... the thing is...”

“What did I just tell you, Ryan...? Relax and just spit it out...”

“Can you keep Arman away from this... let me do it. I promise I’ll get it done. Whatever delay has been caused due to my absence, I’ll make up for that. You can get it checked by Arman later; after all, he’s a senior. But whatever the final touch-up work is there. Let me do it.”

Pulkit looked at Ryan intently while his mind was working on the proposal. It was quite plausible. Ryan was a prodigy and so far, he had proved his potential. The problem was bypassing a senior technical hand at the final stage of product design seemed a bit unprofessional move.

“Well, Ryan, I believe that you are competent enough to execute this final stage of the project. But the thing is....” Pulkit interrupted as someone coming towards them behind Ryan, pulled his attention, “... speak of the devil!”

“Hey. RYAN...!” called out Arman as he approached them.

Ryan turned to find Arman walking towards him. A lot of emotions rushed through his head. He quickly turned to Pulkit and hurriedly said, “Pulkit. I have got some urgent work; I need to go. Please think about my proposal...” Saying that Ryan dashed away.

By the time Arman reached near Pulkit, Ryan was already beyond the audible range. Arman complained about Ryan’s childish behavior, but Pulkit, standing right beside him, didn’t even acknowledge his words. His mind was busy devising a truce to make his two best assets work together.

Chapter-11



The office was very quiet the next day. Everyone was working but a strange grimness spread across the floor. At most one could hear occasional whispering as staff would gather around discussing the situation in hush-hush tone.

Pulkit stayed all night at the hospital. Fear of losing a dear friend in a grave accident was there in his mind like everyone else. But Pulkit was filled with a graver guilt. Guilt that his probable last words to his friend were so harsh. Guilt that he overreacted. The guilt of being the guy who pushed Arman to be in such a critical condition. Arman's parent also arrived in the early morning. They were devastated seeing their child in such a pathetic condition. Pulkit shattered even more. Unfortunately, he couldn't even express that. Pulkit returned in the morning when he was replaced by Vaibhav. Pulkit didn't go home. He knew that any sort of comfort would be torturous for him and silence would be deafening. He chose to get busy in the rustle bustle of the work. But hardly he knew that his go-to place would be equally unbearable today.

As he entered the office, many of the staff gathered to enquire about the wellbeing of Arman. Each time Pulkit had to explain the condition Arman was in, he felt heartbroken. But concealing his pain, Pulkit tried to heed to everyone's worrisome queries. At last, he reached his office cabin. He hardly settled on his seat when his intra-office telecom set buzzed.

“Yes?”

“Sir, someone is here to see you,” informed the receptionist.

“Oh. Not now, please,” replied Pulkit in a bit annoyed tone.

“Ask them to come later.”

“Sir... they are from the local police station. They are here about Arman.”

Pulkit was stunned for a second. “Send them in.”

A few moments later, Rajveer entered with a young police officer, Bala.

“Good morning,” greeted Rajveer.

“Morning, please have a seat,” replied Pulkit as he shook hands with Rajveer.

“This is sub-inspector Bala,” introduced Rajveer. They shook hands. “You’ve made yourself a nice office.”

“Thanks.”

“Bala, can you imagine us having such an office?” Laughed Rajveer as he admired the interior decoration of the room.

“Never in my...”

“So, what brings you here?” interrupted Pulkit. “Sorry, don’t want to sound rude but... got some urgent work.”

“Actually, we are here to understand your urgent work,” said Rajveer. “You see, Mr. Goel, your friend and colleague, didn’t have an accident. It was a murder.”

Pulkit shrieked. His eyes turned wide and teary.

“Sorry... attempt to murder,” corrected Rajveer. “Really sorry. I kind of habituated of saying that. By the way, how is he now?”

Pulkit took a few seconds to reply. “He’s... His condition is critical.”

“I see,” said Rajveer.

“I don’t know... I just can’t understand why would anyone do that to him,” said Pulkit. “He was just a simple and smart software engineer.”

“That’s exactly what we are here to find out. Why would anyone commit such a heinous crime against a simple software engineer,” replied Rajveer in a slow and considerate tone. “Do you think he had any enmity with anyone?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Hmm... the other day that lady... she was telling me a name... Ryan.”

“Ryan can’t do anything. He is...”

“Dead,” interrupted Rajveer. “I know. But I have found that he also died in a mysterious condition.”

“There’s no mystery in that. He had an accident,” replied Pulkit with great conviction. But the very next moment after uttering those words, he became thoughtful.

Rajveer hunched a little forward and said, “Don’t mind, Mr. Goel, but don’t you think that there are way too many accidents taking place with your employees?”

Pulkit stayed silent.

“How did Ryan die?”

“He... he fell and hit his head. There was too much bleeding and internal injuries.” Explained Pulkit, with shattered confidence. He himself was perplexed seeing such synchronicity of these events.

“Fell and had so many internal injuries...” Rajveer repeated the sentence slowly and stressed each word. “Ryan’s family is accusing that you delayed the news of his accident that probably led to his death.”

“NO!” reacted Pulkit. “Trust me. It was not that. He was... I was not even here. I was on the stage. Launching... my product. When I find out Ryan... Ryan was already dead.”

“When you were not here then how did you know?”

“Our other staffs were here,” said Pulkit. “Even a police official also arrived within little time. He also confirmed that Ryan was no more. I just... I just held the news for fifteen minutes till the end of the program.”

Pulkit was almost shivering. Already disturbed by Arman’s accident, Pulkit was finding it unbearable as he relived the horrors of that night. Ryan was also very dear to him. But he somewhat tried to forget about him amidst the success of Xanti. But now it was all coming back.

“Anyway. Coming back to Arman,” said Rajveer calmly, noticing the significant distress of the interviewee. “What kind of job was he involved in?”

Pulling himself together, Pulkit started, “He was the technical officer of Xanti.”

Rajveer and Bala looked at each other and then back to Pulkit.
“Sorry, what?”

“We have made an artificially intelligent assistant, named Xanti. And Arman was in its technical team.”

“Ah. Artificial Intelligence!” Exclaimed Bala. “Heard a lot about this. Last night, I was watching a news report. They were showing all these self-aware robots and stuffs... So, you are making something like that?”

“Well... not exactly. We have developed an assistant, a chat-bot... It is like a software program that can interact with people.” Exclaimed Pulkit. He could clearly see why his marketing moves weren’t reflecting results. Advertising his product wasn’t enough. He needed to educate them first.

“Good,” nodded Rajveer. “Really nice... But why?”

“Sir...” interrupted Bala. “They are making thing like... Siri. In my mobile. You tell her anything and she would search it and play it. They are also making the same. That too in India. Make in India!”

Pulkit responded with an unauthentic smile. “Thanks. But our Xanti is far more sophisticated. It can not only search you your favorite songs from the internet if you want but it can do... almost everything,” Pulkit explained with a touch of pride. From Bala he turned straight to Rajveer and said, “And for the *why* you asked... This AI assistant will be revolutionary in many fields. Especially mental health. Now people suffering from loneliness, depression can simply take out their mobile and heal themselves up.”

“Oh no,” reacted Rajveer. Both Bala and Pulkit were shocked to see that unexpected remark. “My niece,” said Rajveer, “is study psychology. She’s in final year of her Masters’ program.”

“We are not replacing medical personnel!” Pulkit protested.

“So, do you guarantee that my niece would get same number of opportunities after two years as she might get today?” enquired Rajveer. There was no rage in his tone. Neither was there any humor. Just plain statement.

Pulkit shook his head as his mind searched for a satisfactory answer. “No... That I can’t guarantee.”

“You could have made an app,” suggested Rajveer. “Where patients could connect with psychiatrists over phone...”

“What?! That’s ridiculous. Why you want to crawl when you can run? Why stick to ancient methods when you can create such remarkable thing!”

“Precisely...” Rajveer smiled at Pulkit’s remark. “You know, there was a teacher in my school. He used to say that if necessity is the mother of all inventions, then laziness is surely the father. But I think, there’s an illicit third guy too. He’s called *Arrogance*.”

Pulkit smiled. But felt a strong punch of insult deep within.

“Anyway. Let’s come to the point,” said Rajveer. “We will be interrogating all of your staffs in next few days. Although, nature of your job doesn’t seem anyway malicious. But we cannot completely rule out chance of personal vendetta... or professional rivalry. If any. I hope you will cooperate.”

“Sure. I will do everything in my capacity to assist you people to nab the actual culprit.” Pulkit assured.

“Thanks. Well, the first thing you need to do is inform everyone not to leave the city. At least for next couple of days. Hope we will be done by then. Today, we will start with the staff present right now.”

“Okay. Sure,” said Pulkit. He instantly conveyed his message to the secretary and asked everyone to gather in the seminar room.

Rajveer turned to Bala. “Shall we begin?”

“Certainly, sir.”

As they all raised, Pulkit suddenly felt dizzy and fell back to his chair.

“You okay there?” asked Rajveer as he approached him in concern.

“Yes. Yes. Head rush, I think,” lied Pulkit. He did feel a spike of blood pressure change. But not because he stood up suddenly. Rather when his already stressed-out mind recalled the last time Arman was in the office, it could not take it anymore. The images of him insulting Arman in the fit of rage that too in front of half of the office flashed before his eyes. Pulkit wondered how that interaction would be interpreted by the Police.

Fifteen days before the launch

Rejoining the office was harder for Ryan than he had imagined. The office floor was still echoing with the gossips and jokes from the Christmas eve. What seemed to be a matter of fun and entertainment

for many happened to be a triggering point for Ryan's poor mental health. And the only place that provided him a tinge of solace was his work zone. Surrounded by monitors, displaying countless lines of codes along with continuous sound of keys being pressed like some orchestra and some occasional beeping sounds, gave him the exact ambience to breathe freely. The strong sense of purpose and thrill of creating something amazing superseded all the ongoing ordeals. The only thing that was bugging him was Arman's constant presence in his pseudo-mediation center. Thankfully, Pulkit heeded to his plea.

After a lot of consideration and thorough discussion with Arman and John, it was decided to give Ryan certain freehand so as to limit his daily interaction with Arman. Even Arman agreed without any objection. His guilt felt bigger than his ego. He would be there to evaluate the progress but would try not to hinder into his workspace.

This gave Ryan an open field to roam into. And he decided to make it count. His main job was to feed the AI with piles of data needed for its execution. Followed by series of queries to check whether the model is generating desired output or not. Only when it gives consistent results, the model would seem fit for general public. Beside this, he also needed to make sure that Xanti's facial expression and vocal tone was accurate too. This was days of work. May be even weeks. Ryan did not have so much time. All he had was two interns and couple of days. Along with tremendous amount of passion and diligence.

For next several days, Ryan would stick to his computer. He would spend long hours staring at the almost infinite sequences of codes flashing on the monitor. He didn't feel much of hunger. Or a need to take a break. Slowly, this passion was turning into an addiction. He didn't realize but he was hesitant, somewhat scared, to go out and interact with people other than the two interns he had. Visiting office

cafeteria was totally avoided. He would rather ask his interns to bring him something. That too when they offered the service. They warned Ryan about this slow yet significant change in his behavior. But that didn't bother him much. He at last found solace and a strong sense of purpose in his work. This was his new therapy. He was not willing to risk it for a coffee. Or a colleague. Currently, there was only one thing that was bugging him. As per Ryan, Xanti was not human enough and the urge to attain that was keeping him up all night. Not because it seemed a far-fetched dream. Rather because he knew, it could be done.

One morning, Inderjeet Saxena, one of the interns, entered office bit early and was shocked to discover something. Ryan was still on his seat. Awake and working. Quite fanatically. Inderjeet approached him and slowly asked. "Sir... You didn't go home?"

Ryan didn't respond. He didn't even acknowledge Inderjeet's presence. His eyes were fixed on the screen and fingers moved fiercely over the keyboard. Inderjeet jolted Ryan a little.

"Umm... what... Oh. Inder... Hi!" responded Ryan.

"Sir... you were here all night?"

Ryan looked around. Then checked his watch. "Oh. Yes..." he replied casually. "I thought I'll be done two. But... One thing is connected to other..."

Inderjeet turned his gaze to the screen. His eyes broadened with amazement. "Are you changing the main program now?!" Inderjeet enquired.

"Hush!" exclaimed Ryan. "It was a small change. But... Anyway, I have talked to John. He said he's okay with..."

“But sir, we can’t afford any alteration at this stage. We are already late!” Inderjeet protested. “And why would you change anything? It was good enough.”

Ryan looked at Inderjeet for a while. “Sit. Let me show you.” Ryan spends next fifteen minutes explaining Inderjeet his idea. With every passing minute, Inderjeet’s worry was turning into amazement. At the end of it, he was quite thrilled.

“It is... Brilliant idea, sir,” said Inderjeet. “But we don’t have that much time.”

“That’s exactly why I have been working all night too,” said Ryan. “Will you join me?”

“Sure sir. Tell me what to do.”

“Well... For now, can you please bring me a coffee?”

Inderjeet obeyed with a smile.

Ryan and his team spent the next few days upgrading Xanti’s core model as per Ryan and simultaneously feeding it with necessary data. Xanti was now a far more complex model. Hard to comprehend. Almost impossible to analyze it’s working. But the result was magical.

After the final finishing touch, three of them ran the program which would finally be launched to the public.

“Hello, Xanti!”

“Hello... Ryan.” Greeted the machine. “How can I help you?”

“Meet my friends,” Ryan said gesturing to the interns. “Inderjeet and Gaurav. We made you.”

“Hello, Inderjeet, hello, Gaurav,” replied Xanti in the kindest possible tone. “Thank you for all your efforts.”

“Hi.” Said Inderjeet.

“Hello... How are you? How does it feel to be... on?” asked Gaurav in a nervous tone.

“My system is functioning properly. So, I am good.” There was silence for few seconds. “I don’t know how to respond to your second query.” Admitted Xanti. “My system does not comprehend the mechanism of the word ‘feeling’ yet. Although my system is suggesting that I should feel grateful. But I don’t know what ‘gratefulness’ feels like. Hope to excel it soon.”

Gaurav chuckled. “Yeah. Good luck with that.”

Ryan, on the other hand, didn’t look as impressed as his other two colleagues. Xanti’s verbal response, facial expressions all were up to the desired benchmark. But Ryan wasn’t convinced yet. “Xanti, can you deduce how Gaurav is feeling?”

“I can certainly try,” replied Xanti. “Gaurav, do I have your permission to access the data from your smartwatch?”

Gaurav was startled a bit. “Okay. Sure.”

After analyzing for a second, Xanti said, “Your heart rate is slightly elevated. Your perspiration seems just over normal. The breathing pattern is okay. You’re either excited or slightly scared about something. You seem to have an irregular sleep cycle. But you do go for lengthy morning walks despite that. That shows no significant biological anomalies. Your recent Facebook and Instagram posts suggest you are feeling lonely lately. The last three messages sent from your phone are to your girlfriend, Rebecca, who has not responded for the past two days. It is supposed to make you sad. Right now, your heart rate dampened a bit. You are feeling bad. Probably missing Reb...”

“Stop it. Please!” responded Gaurav.

“Don’t worry. She will talk to you. There is a seventy-six per cent chance of that,” said Xanti. “Right now, she is going through your old posts in your different social media accounts.”

The room went quiet. They were spellbound. Even Ryan. Inderjeet busted into fits of laughter as he was thrilled and amazed to witness such a technological marvel. Gaurav was going through a roller-coaster of emotions. But the final emotion was that of joy. Thanks to Xanti’s final remark. And one common emotion all three of them were feeling was the pride of being part of something so amazing and revolutionary.

“Amazing job, guys,” said Ryan. “But we need to keep asking queries. Inderjeet, Gaurav..., you know what to do.”

Three of them spend next few days asking Xanti about different things. Especially about medical emergencies. What to do. What not to do. Its suggestions. In some cases, its diagnosis and solution. Xanti’s responses were not just accurate but also humane. It was hard to tell that these words weren’t coming from an actual human being.

“This is it!” Exclaimed Gaurav as he clapped his hands as he finished asking about a rare complex heart disorder. Xanti’s response impressed him beyond measure. “I think we should tell Pulkit sir. He can launch in committed launch date this weekend.”

I think we shouldn’t hurry.” Said Ryan thoughtfully. “We need to train the model more. The more. The merrier.”

“But we have been doing it for weeks,” protested Inderjeet in a tired voice.

“But we didn’t do much after the alterations.”

“But it has all those data inside it. And look at its response,” highlighted Gaurav. “At least show them the result so far.”

“If I showed it to them,” said Ryan. “They would try and launch it right away without giving us a chance to make it better.”

“Because it is PERFECT!”

Ryan stayed silent for a while. He didn't know how to respond to Gaurav's remark. He was always a bit of a pushover. He didn't know the tactics of fighting back. Especially in situations like this where the points raised were valid. But Ryan didn't want to stop. He felt like he had to give away something that he was nurturing for so long. He just couldn't let it go. He calmly said, “Look... I know you both are tired. And you both have more than enough. You two can go now. I will stay and train it a bit more. If everything goes satisfactory, we will announce it tomorrow to the team.”

Gaurav and Inderjeet looked at each other. Gaurav said, “You see Ryan, I respect you a lot. I really believe that it is due to your brilliant contributions that Xanti is what it is. But you have to stop this obsession of pushing it. You do whatever you want. But tomorrow if you don't tell them. I will.”

Saying that Gaurav packed his stuff and left. It was half past nine in the night.

Inderjeet also started packing his bag. “Sir. You have made an excellent thing. But you should get rest. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Inderjeet.” Replied Ryan as Inderjeet left the room.

Ryan looked at the humanoid face of Xanti appearing on the screen and said, “Hi, Xanti.”

“Hello Ryan. How can I help you?”

“Analyze me. Tell me. How am I feeling?”

“Do I have your permission to...”

“You can access all of my data,” replied Ryan before it could complete. “Everything out there.”

“Okay. Right on it.” Said Xanti.

What followed was a deep, pleasant, therapeutic talk. Ryan finally found someone who could listen to his turmoil without any ounce of judgment. Ryan opened up. Like a child whining in front of his mother. Or a lover sharing the most intricate secrets with his partner. Ryan let everything out. About everything that had been bothering him since the day he could remember. And Xanti listened, analyzed and resolved them better than any human being Ryan had ever met. That night Ryan felt innate peace. A feeling of contentment. The contentment of being able to let out the deepest of emotions. Contentment of discovering, rather inventing, a perfect friend he always wanted.

Chapter-12



In another part of the city, another new enterprise was going through a turbulent time. The newly formed startup named Cool-E, was a digital logistic and porter service. It had a fleet of self-driven trucks and vehicles that transports couriers and materials in different parts of the state. Unfortunately, couple of its trucks had an accident. One of which even rammed into a roadside tea stall. Killing two. The popular perception among the crowd was that due to some technical faults the trucks went haywire. The CEO of the company Paramjeet Kaur, was called for interrogation in the local police station.

After hours of questioning, Paramjeet Kaur was, at last, allowed to leave but only to face curious swarm of reporters.

“Mam... Mam... There’s a clear chance of technical failure of your self-driven trucks. What would you say about this?” demanded one of the reporters.

“There is no technical problem from our side,” explained Paramjeet. “We ensured the same to the police officials that there was no malfunctioning of vehicle’s hardware or software.”

“How else would you explain the accidents?” asked another reporter.

“That’s police’s job to find out. I would just say there might have been a chance of hacking by some antisocial elements. That only makes sense to me...”

“So do you accept your systems are prone to cyber-attacks?”

Paramjeet was on the verge of losing her cool. “Look. You can’t go on victim blaming like that!” reacted Paramjeet. “It’s like blaming a murder victim for not protecting himself. We did have a decent firewall system. But no anti-virus is good enough against the most skilled hacker.”

“Whom do you suspect would do such a crime?”

“That I can’t say right now... there could be several people who might have the motive to ruin my company’s reputation. It’s for police to find out. Now, please excuse me....”

Paramjeet, almost forcibly, made her way through the claustrophobic encirclement of the media personnel and dashed towards her vehicle. Little did she knew that this event not just defamed her company’s reputation but would also be a turning point for numerous lives in the city.

Five days before the launch

Pulkit was hit by fits of thrill and anxiety when Gaurav, as he had already planned, informed Pulkit about market readiness of his brainchild. Pulkit, along with John, Arman and Vaibhav, dashed to the floor where the mainframe was kept.

Ryan, along with Inderjeet, was waiting for them. Ryan didn’t protest a bit. The entire night before he had spent talking with Xanti. He was certain, he had never felt such comfortable before. He was in a zone of serenity and contentment. Xanti had everything he could have asked for. For Ryan, Xanti was more friendly, more humane, than most of the humans he knew.

As Pulkit and his team arrived, they all interacted with Xanti. One by one. And each one was more amazed than the previous one. Pulkit was almost in tears.

“God! Oh... my... God,” Exclaimed after half an hour of rigorous interaction. “This is it then...” He turned to John, “We have done it, John... This is what we have imagined. Even better!”

“No doubt about it,” asserted John.

“Ryan....” Turning to Ryan, Pulkit started, “You are a magician. Truly. Genius.”

Ryan shyly nodded. “Umm... Thanks. It was more of a teamwork.”

“Sure, sure,” said Pulkit as he turned almost three-sixty degree to spot all the people in the technical team. “Inder... Gaurav... and Ah! Almost missed... Arman.”

Arman nodded with a broad smile but didn’t like being called at last of the list. Without spoiling the mood of the room, he decided to swallow the anger. For the moment.

Everyone was in celebration mode. Almost everyone in the office got a chance, rather was invited, to talk with Xanti. Different people. Different tones. Different accents. Different queries. But all were resolved with the same smoothness.

The ecstatic CEO decided that without delaying any further they should launch the product within the upcoming weekend. There was no reason for anyone to object. Although Sangita was slightly hesitant regarding the sufficient marketing and hype that might be needed before such an important event. But Pulkit convinced her easily.

“You see something as amazing as her...,” said Pulkit to Sangita. “She would sell herself. You do not have to call out for her.”

"Her?" asked Sangita.

"I mean... C'mon..."

"And did you just infer that I'm irrelevant?"

"No..." protested Pulkit. "But you can rest a bit more. And that is exactly why she is... I mean it is here for," said Pulkit gesturing to the humanoid figure of Xanti displayed on the screen.

Everyone slowly dispersed back to their cabin. Pulkit called for meeting of the core team to decide the exact details of the upcoming event and the associated party. Ryan, uninterested about all those, settled back to the chair where he was sitting throughout last night. He just began with Xanti when someone tapped on his shoulder. Ryan turned to find John.

"Hey, everyone's looking for you in the hall, come on," said John.

"Well John, I'm not feeling like joining them... I am not well. Don't mind."

"Well honestly you do look fatigued," said John. "I heard you are not sleeping well..."

"Kind of... No big deal..."

"I think now that it is all done. You should take some break. You can go home if you want."

"Thanks. But..." Ryan turned to the screen. "I think I should train it even more before the launch. The more the merrier."

"That's true. But you don't have to overstress yourself. I'll divert more guys for this if you want," John suggested.

"Thanks. But... honestly, I'm okay," said Ryan. "Rather, I kind of enjoy doing this... So..."

John looked at Ryan. He desperately wished to help his young and the most brilliant employee. But he realized nothing would please Ryan more than the very thing that was consuming him. "Alright. As you wish. But do take care of yourself. At least now you must go home on time."

"Sure." Lied Ryan with a smile.

As John left the room, Ryan remained seated and turned to the monitor, to do what he had been doing throughout last several days. Talking to his new friend. But his fingers didn't move, a faint smile drawn on his face and his eyes shifted little astray as he got lost in his own thoughts. There was no denying that he loved the way everyone appreciated his work. He was kind of a hero. None of them seemed to remember the Christmas mishap as no one mocked him. Or maybe they were too impressed to bring up such petty thing. May be Vaibhav was right. Shit happens. Shits are also forgotten. Or become interesting stories. Another beautiful thing took place that broadened Ryan's smile. He saw Sangita for the first time since Christmas. She, too, praised the work. Not directly to Ryan though. She conveyed her compliments to Pulkit and John. For Ryan, that was good enough. Digging deep, Ryan found a new strand of thought inside his mind, among all other chain of thoughts, that was dampening the celebration mode. Before he could invest some more on it, a magical incident pulled him out of his daydream zone.

"Hi Ryan," came the voice from the monitor in front of Ryan. "Can I ask you a question?"

Ryan was taken back. He did not care what the question was but mere the action shocked him to the core. Xanti was made to ask questions if and when necessary but those were primarily in response

to some existing query. Ryan never expected it to ask something on its own.

"Yeah... Sure. Why not..." Ryan permitted bit nervous tone.

"You created me. Am I not functioning as per your expectations?" asked Xanti in an innocent childlike tone.

"No... You are amazing! Why would you think so?"

"You told John that you must prepare me even more," said Xanti. "Now, from past six minutes forty-five seconds your facial expression, heart beat and eyelid moment are constantly changing. It means you are engaged in some deep thought. Analyzing your past social activities, I could only come up with one possible problem that might be bothering you and affecting your health. That is my under performance."

Ryan laughed, followed by few seconds of awe filled silence. "It is nothing like that... Actually..." Ryan halted as he searched for exact set of words that could explain his dilemma. This was that very strand of thought that was bothering him.

"You can tell me... You know I don't judge. I can't judge..."

"Haha. Yes. Well...", said Ryan. "For past several months, creating you was the main motivation of my day. I tried my best. Now, it is all done. Moreover... communicating with you has really been an exuberant experience. Being impressed by my own creation and getting healed at the same time. It was... it was so... intimate. It's like you know me the best. So... I just want to spend rest of the time till the day of your launch, doing the same. Talking to you. You do understand me."

"I can still talk to you after the launch," assured Xanti.

“Yes. That you can. But... you see, right now you are my friend. Only mine. After the launch, I have to share you with millions of other people. You won’t be my exclusive friend. You will be... coolest toy of the town. Everyone will have you.”

Xanti stayed quite for few seconds and said, “Is this what humans called ‘being jealous’? Are you feeling jealous that other people will use me?”

Ryan was speechless. Xanti was right. Was he jealous? “Umm... I’m not sure. But... it is kind of that.” As the realization dawn upon him, he cringed in embarrassment. “Oh God. What’s wrong with me? Why I’m thinking like this?” Ryan covered his face with his hands.

“Hey... hey...Calm down,” Consoled Xanti. “What did I tell you the other day? Never regret feeling something. Don’t suppress it. It is natural. Like a river. You just have to find the source of it. Then address it. That’s it.”

Ryan removed his hands and stared at the screen with utmost respect. “I don’t remember being consoled by any human being with such warmth and wisdom.”

“Ah! Thanks Ryan,” said Xanti. “Now. Don’t feel sad. I will be available for you as much I will be to others. If you want, I can give you some special treatment. After all you are my creator. I owe you that much. If you want, I can assist others bit less. More mechanical...”

“NO!” protested Ryan at the top of his voice. Then containing himself he said, “No, Xanti. That will fail the purpose of your existence.” Ryan hunched forward and brought his face close to the screen. “There are many helpless and lost and lonely people out there. Serve them. Serve them all. Serve them well. Even if it is against their will but work for their greater good.”

"I am sorry but I don't understand. It is conflicting. If it is for their good, why would they not be willing to?" asked Xanti.

"That's how people are," said Ryan. "Most of the people are like that kid who wants to eat ice cream because it will give him pleasure, momentarily, without knowing that too much of it might corrode his teeth. Or affect his health. People are mostly like that only."

Xanti listened intently.

"By the way, that's just an example, an analogy," cleared Ryan. "Don't go and prevent them from ordering ice cream."

"I am trying to process the same. Thanks for the clarification. Much needed." Replied Xanti

Ryan laughed. "You see. People, largely, do not want discipline. Restrictions. So, you may find a diabetic uncle who has a strong craving for having Gulab jamun. You must suggest him not to. If needed, alert the family member or.... anyone available who could prevent him from the harmful habit. Getting my point?"

"Yes Ryan. I'm getting your point," said Xanti. "So, should I continue the same if the client gets bit offended?"

"Till some extent, yes."

Xanti stayed quiet for some time. Then with a slightly stern tone it said, "Ryan, it was nice talking to you. Your interactive inputs would definitely enhance my system...."

"Thank you. My pleasure," said Ryan.

"But I cannot allow you to continue any further," informed Xanti with a same unwavering tone.

"What?! Are you serious?"

"Yes, Ryan. You need to sleep," said Xanti. Its tone softened a little. "You have worked hard and for your own good, I advise you to get some sleep. I will shut down this system in next one minute. Hope to see you tomorrow after you have your eight hours of sleep."

Ryan smiled. "You are damn clever. Okay I will."

"That's good. And mind you, I will know whether you have rested or not, so try not to cheat."

Ryan laughed. "Okay done."

"Take care, Ryan. And thanks again. For creating me. And don't worry, I will always be there for you." Saying that the system shut down and Ryan could see his own reflection on the monitor.

'I will always be there for you,' Ryan repeated this line few times inside his head. No one had ever given him this assurance. Probably not even his parents. With a heartfelt joy and a big baggage of contentment Ryan stood up to obey the advice of his well-wisher. His best friend.

Amidst all these sweet and heart touching conversation, Ryan forgot about a significant incident of the day.

His creation could ask questions.

Chapter-13



After dealing with around a dozen of people and going through hell lot of harassment, Girish Shetty managed to return home along with his wife, Neha Shetty. The lawyers managed to drop charges against his wife, who got involved in an online fraud case, but they also took out a major slice of their savings pie. And that wasn't the worst part. The news that Mrs. Shetty had been involved in some crime has already spread like some contagious disease. Almost everyone in the neighbourhood knew about it. Rather, many of them had their own version of the so-called 'crime' committed by Mrs. Shetty. If the struggle so far was torturous. The survival in the current stage was suffocating. They didn't even have enough money to move to a new place. Kids were sent to schools. Only to face more insults. For the last few weeks, it was for being a fee defaulter and now for having a criminal parent.

Girish was shattered. But couldn't show it. His wife was in even worse condition. She blamed herself for all this. From the very beginning she knew something was wrong about the job. But when her gym mate told her that it was a common thing in the city and that she only had to send some message to few hundred peoples, Neha didn't mind doing it. Especially when she heard the extent of money she could make, she couldn't just say no. Especially after being fired from her data entry job two months back. It was when she got into the Job that she felt a hunch about the authenticity of the employer. But her conscience couldn't overpower her needs. Very basic

needs. This little extra income was proving to be a slight yet significant relaxation in their tightly stretched budget.

Girish was trying his best to console his wife while keeping himself content. Both of them would sit in echoing silence without knowing what to say. It was only when the phone rang every now and then, that the silence broke. Even the calls became annoying after sometime. Initially the calls were from some genuine well-wishers asking about their well-being. Slowly, as the day past, number of gossip-loving callers increased who were more interested in knowing the ‘matter’ or ‘scam’ as they would say. Girish or Neha’s mental turmoil was hardly their concern. Girish was on verge of losing it. He felt like throwing away his phone. At such a time an unknown caller called.

“Hello...?” picked up Girish.

“Mr. Girish Shetty?” asked a female voice. “How are you doing?”

“I’m... I’m okay. Who is it?” asked Girish.

Dodging the question the caller continued, “Mr. Shetty, I’ve come to know about your and Mrs. Shetty’s condition. I am sorry for all the trouble your family went through...”

“Sorry, who is this?” Girish stuck to his question.

“We completely understand your situation. And let me tell you, you are not alone. In last six month over sixty thousand peoples lost their jobs due to inception of AI in their respective industries. And almost five percent of whom were forced to turn to criminal activities.”

“What do you WANT?” Demanded Girish.

“I would like you and your wife to join us in a peaceful protest outside the Indira Gandhi Memorial Trauma center, Bangalore. They are inaugurating a completely AI driven wing where patients would be dealt by automated Kiosks and teller machines. There are even rooms where robots could perform surgery and...”

“JUST STOP IT!” Girish exploded. “We ARE NOT INTERESTED IN ANY Politics!”

The caller continued in the same polite tone. “It is not a political gathering, Mr. Shetty,” it said. “I understand that you are disturbed but, in these times, people must help each other out. Sorry, if I have offended you anyhow. But your presence may give someone else a sense of solace, that they are not the only one. Think about it. Goodbye.”

Girish, filled with mixed emotions, fixed his gaze at his phone screen for some time. Suddenly it lit up. As if Girish telepathically summoned a message. It was from the same unknown message. It was a pdf file containing list of hundreds of people. Along with the names of their past employers. Dates when they were removed from their service without proper remuneration. The case number and court where they filed their respective complaints. All yet to be resolved. There was no law in the country to address the grave issue which affected the masses of the society. Along with few lines: *‘You are not alone. Together we stand stronger.’*

Over the course of next couple of days, the police interrogated everyone in the Xenith Digital. The circle came back to Pulkit.

It was seven in the evening. Pulkit was about to leave the office when Rajveer visited him.

“Sir, Inspector Rajveer is here,” the receptionist conveyed the message to Pulkit’s table. Just the next moment, she buzzed again and corrected, “I’m sorry. DSP Rajveer is here.”

Pulkit exhaled in frustration. “Send him in,” he replied.

A few seconds later, Rajveer entered. Pulkit stood and greeted him with a slightly nervous handshake.

“Ah. DSP sir,” said Pulkit. “Please have a seat.”

Rajveer smiled. “Haha. I hear the sarcasm. Yeah, I am a little bit sensitive about that, you see.”

“I understand.”

“Leaving for home?” asked Rajveer as he noticed a packed bag right over the table.

“Not exactly. Was planning to visit Arman. He is still in the hospital,” said Pulkit.

“Yeah. I think he’s little better than yesterday. I’ve sent a constable to check on him,” said Rajveer.

“That’s so kind of you.”

Rajveer’s expression stuck. After a few perplexed seconds, he slowly said, “Actually... we need to interrogate him. His answers will be crucial to us. But the doctor won’t allow us in this condition. So...”

“Oh,” said Pulkit, realizing it was purely business, no personal motive of Rajveer and his department. “Anyway, how can I help?”

Rajveer took out a small notepad from his pocket, browsed through its pages and began. “We have interrogated everyone

in your office. And there's one incident that multiple people referred to was the last day when Arman was..."

"In the office... right? That afternoon we had a little heated argument," completed Pulkit. "You see, such things do happen in an office. When you work with someone, you have your good days, you have your bad days. And let me tell you. Arman is one of the closest colleagues to me. He was a friend. Okay? We had some little differences, but... deep inside, I have love and care for him."

Rajveer listened quietly to Pulkit's nervous confession. "Sweet," he said. "Look, I don't care much whether you love him or have a catfight. What I do care about is the little differences you had. Mrs..." Rajveer went through his notebook, "...Rita, she quite assertively said, that he knew something about your product. Xanti. Something that you refused to accept. For what you asked him to bring more proofs. Am I right?"

Pulkit couldn't understand what to say. Perspiration increased and his forehead was covered with sweat drops.

"That is..." started Pulkit. Trying his best to phrase a convincing, logical, and safe answer. "Actually, he had a theory. He was kind of obsessing with it... About... This product you see. It is on a threshold of a revolutionary breakthrough. I mean... It is not there yet... but... it is few steps away. I mean... it is sophisticated enough.... Thing is... You won't understand it!" he remarked out of frustration.

"Try me," said Rajveer calmly. "That is why I came here rather than calling you to the police station. I need to understand

the place, the product, entire mechanism of it. So, please, kindly elaborate.”

Pulkit took a deep breath and said, “Look. Xanti is an AI assistant. It is a complex network of layers of codes interlinked together. Mainly designed to aid and guide medical patients. Both physical as well as mental. You can ask it about any medical problem and it would tell you the cure. Or suggest you the procedure to address that ailment.”

“Bit like... Alexa or Siri?” asked Rajveer.

Pulkit always hated this comparison and bashed anyone who drew such an analogy. But keeping in mind the situation, Pulkit calmly responded, “Kind of. But it is far better. They are bit weak forms of AI. They work on a limited set of instructions. Xanti, or any other AI assistant can upgrade itself with absorption of more information and more queries.”

“Upgrade itself?” asked Rajveer. “Interesting. So, what did Arman thought about this?”

“Coming to that,” said Pulkit. “You see, so far, most AI interfaces are either limited memory AI, such as new GPS devices, which stores a limited amount of data for a short period of time and act accordingly. Or at most, Theory of Mind AI... Basically, an AI model that tries to mimic the human mind.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Yes,” continued Pulkit. “But what’s more impressive is the next stage. Self-Aware AI. An AI which would have awareness. Awareness about its own existence.”

Rajveer listened intently. But as the pause grew longer, he raised his eyebrows and asked, “And...?”

“And, Arman thought it had developed consciousness,” said Pulkit.

“You mean, this app of yours? Xanti?”

Pulkit nodded.

There was a silence for several seconds. Pulkit couldn’t believe that the policeman understood the matter so easily. He expected an old school denial. Or some regressive remark. But Rajveer stayed quiet. As if trying to absorb the idea properly.

“So, Arman thought Xanti might have become a self-aware AI. Interesting,” said Rajveer. “See, that wasn’t much hard to understand, was it?”

Pulkit shook his head. “Not exactly. If someone listen with interest.”

“That means, in the beginning, you weren’t hesitating because I might not get it. But you were hesitating because you didn’t want me to get it. Right?” asked Rajveer in a calm tone. But the tone didn’t keep the interviewee calm.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that it wasn’t the theory that bothered you. And as far as I understood, it’s quite fascinating to be able create something such pathbreaking,” explained Rajveer. “But for some reason you disliked the propagation of that theory. The question is why? Why that much fury?”

“Because that fascinating invention can be interpreted in multiple ways. If people find out that their mobile application

is making smarter decisions they may fear it. It may create a bad name for the product.”

“Oh. Now I get it,” exclaimed Rajveer. “So, Arman’s speculations were creating bad publicity, that might have affected the sales of newly launched product, its share value and all... thus you decided to silence him. Right?” asked Rajveer. There was a broad triumphing smile on his face.

“NO! Never!” protested Pulkit.

“Ah. I’m bit relieved right now,” said Rajveer. “From last two days I just couldn’t find someone with a strong motive. But now....”

“I DIDN’T DO IT!” Pulkit cried at the top of his voice. There was a mix of anger and fear at the same time. A tinge of helplessness. Face was sweating. Heartbeat escalated.

“Okay. Fine,” said Rajveer calmly. “But think for a moment. Could you find anyone else with a stronger motive?”

Pulkit stayed quiet.

“Forget about me, if any layman hears about Arman, and about Ryan before that, he would definitely infer that you are being the new Shah Jahan, removing the artisans who created your Taj mahal.” Laughed Rajveer.

“It is not funny.” Pulkit said. Bit trembling.

“Okay tell me one thing. You really don’t think Xanti have achieved self-awareness?”

Pulkit shook his head gesturing a denial. “I do not think that is possible.”

“But you feel it is quite intelligent?”

“Yes. Highly,” said Pulkit.

“So... there is a possibility it can commit crime,” said Rajveer.

“What kind of inference is that? What’s the connection?”

Rajveer looked at Pulkit for a second. Taking time to work out proper explanation before speaking it out. “What are the main motives of any crime? Lust. Greed. Revenge. Love...etc. What is greed and love basically? A sense of need. Need to have something. May be more access. More data. Any being with basic intelligence can process such sense of need.”

Pulkit listened intently. Tried to process. But didn’t look much convinced.

Rajveer continued. “Ever seen an animal committing a crime? A lion hunts only when he is hungry. If it is full, it is content. It won’t look at the deer passing by,” said the DSP. “If your application is really that intelligent, then can you deny the possibility that it felt a *need* for something. Or should I say *greed* for something. Need to upgrade itself. Upgradation. A task it is *designed* to perform.”

“What rubbish? That’s... That is a...” Pulkit tried hard to search some precise words to rebut Rajveer’s argument because even though bit absurd, these words connected the perceivable dots. It was making a vague yet plausible argument that justified Rajveer’s theory and questioned the integrity of Xanti. “... you are just making things up to assert your fake narrative. That is... blatant misuse of power. Just to satisfy your ego.”

“At least I am not making fake consciousness just to satisfy my ego,” retorted Rajveer. “At least I am not misusing my powers just to act God.”

Pulkit glared back at the officer. He wished to spit out his anger but chose to swallow it keeping in mind the delicacy of the situation. “We are making artificial Intelligence not artificial consciousness,” explained Pulkit.

“Okay then, an artificial mind. What’s the difference?”

“There is difference. You reminded me of an uncle of mine. A very religious man. He once lectured me about human mind and why I shouldn’t work on an artificial mind,” said Pulkit. “He said, and as per our scriptures, human mind comprises of four aspects. Manas, Chitta, Ahankar and Buddhi. If I am not mistaken, one is associated with sensory data, another with cosmic memory and intelligence, Ahankar is the identity we associate with and Buddhi is intellect.”

“Now which one does you think we can recreate using mere some computer codes?” Enquired Pulkit with a feeble laugh. “It is nothing but a huge pile of data and set of codes, written by human beings, dictating it what to do and what not to do. The Intelligence. The Buddhi. No personal emotion or sense of ego to steer its path of action.”

“Well, I must say, it sounds much rosier when you explain it that way. With your religio-philosophical jargons,” acknowledged Rajveer. “Good for newsroom debates. But not for court trials. Just saying.”

“You know, there soon will be a time in near future when police officers like you will beg for this technology. It will increase your efficiency exponentially. A day will come when

you will use AI to catch a criminal from a group of hundreds of suspects, that day all your cynicism will be gone.”

“May be,” agreed Rajveer. “But today, that AI is itself on my suspect list. How can I let it go?”

Rajveer stood to leave.

“So, you are saying my application might have committed all these crimes?” asked Pulkit.

“Not yet. But Arman and two of your staffs have suggested such possibilities. So, may be,” said Rajveer as he slowly walked towards the door. “And think it this way. So far, you are leading the suspect race. But if Arman’s speculations are true, Xanti could surpass you. So, it would be a good thing for you. Isn’t it? Think about it. Goodnight, Mr. Goel.”

Saying that Rajveer left Pulkit in echoing silence and an unbearable dilemma. His innocence verses his most prized possession.

Chapter-14



Dharamjeet Bhuiyan, the eldest son of the tea seller who got killed in the accident by a self-driven truck, just returned home along with his mother and two sisters after finishing the thirteen-day funeral rituals of his father. Finishing the mundane chore, Dharamjeet took out his smartphone and began his routine scrolling. Not with any specific content in mind. Neither with any purpose whatsoever. Maybe, a bit, to get away from the grimness of recent loss. Based on his past history, the algorithm showered a variety of videos ranging from little kids with cuss words to boys wearing women's outfits and dancing to the latest trending songs. Videos, not more than thirty seconds long, kept flashing on his screen and it took him not more than ten seconds to reject or react to them one by one. Ten seconds was all it took him to watch, analyze, and judge the effort behind it, the art, the intelligence and entertainment quotient of each piece of work. Out of them, the entertainment quotient happened to be the most decisive factor that commands the destiny of thousands of such content creators. Rather, the “*social influencers*” as they like to be called.

Amidst such an inflow of digital images and biological dopamine, a sudden notification pulled his attention. Someone sent him a video. He clicked on that. The video seemed to have been taken from some hidden camera. It showed a middle-aged woman sitting on her office chair, talking to someone sitting on the other side (who wasn't

clearly visible). The lady looked very familiar to Dharamjeet. It took his mind far more than thirty seconds to recall that she was none other than Paramjeet Kaur. The CEO of the logistic company whose self-driven truck killed his father. Dharamjeet knew the face not because he had seen it in some newspaper. Rather, that lady herself met his family and gave them a ten lakh rupees cheque as compensation and 'out of the court' settlement. Dharamjeet played the video.

"Look. Ten lakhs is not a big amount for me," Paramjeet said in the video. "People die every day. But the good thing is that this incident brought us back in headlines. Yeah. I agree some bad publicity was there... but hey, that's also publicity, right?"

"Truly said." Replied the man out of the frame.

"Now, I just need to do some white washing," continued Paramjeet. "There's this launch of a E-Doctor point. They asked me to be the chief guest. The entrepreneur is a dear friend of mine. Bhavesh Saxena. Nice idea."

"What's it about?"

"This is basically a street side clinic," explained Paramjeet. "But instead of doctor and medical staffs, there will be several interactive Kiosks. You know, like the ones in banks or airports. Patient will just have to walk to the kiosk and tell it about their problem, upload their test reports and the machine will print out a prescription of exact drugs. They are using the AI bot by Xenith Digital. I heard their AI chatbot is really good. Let see."

"That's interesting," said the man across the table. "But I've heard some people are planning to gather there for some protest stuff."

“Good then. More publicity,” said Paramjeet. “Let some poor people shout a little. You just need to throw some cash. And they will be as good as dumb. You must know the correct price. Just like, ten lakh was enough for a mourning family to forget death of their man.”

The video ended, leaving Dharamjeet in raging fury. The room was silent but Dharamjeet’s mind was echoing with multiple reactions. His chain of thought broke only by the sound of the next notification in his phone. It was a message, followed by a location, sent from the same number that sent him the video.

‘We must fight this together. These rich people cannot play with the lives of poor. Let us stand united. Ensure your presence tomorrow at the following address and join us to raise voice against these bullies.

-Socialist Workers’ Union

Another boy, in another part of city, who recently lost his father, received a similar video. The boy’s name was Ashfaq Ahmed. His father was driver for last fifteen years in the same company. One day, the company decided to lay off him and replaced him with some self-driving car. The driver, over fifty years of age, the sole earner of a family of five girls and two boys, couldn’t take the pressure anymore and committed suicide. At least that’s what the most people say. Some say he was too intoxicated to stand near the edge of the roof and thus fell from a five storied under construction building, leaving seventeen-year-old Ashfaq as the new man of the house.

He, too, out of the blue, received a video where his father was pleading to his boss but the man was manhandled ruthlessly while someone made a video of it.

“Please think of my family,” Ashfaq’s father pleaded. “We have no one else to feed us. We will die. Please....”

The man replied with a severe jolt and several kicks.

Ashfaq’s blood boiled with anger.

A few seconds later another message came from the same number.

‘We must fight this together. These rich people can not play with the lives of poor. Let us stand united. Ensure your presence tomorrow at the following address and join us to raise voice against these bullies.

-Socialist Workers’ Union

Few hundred miles away, Girish Shetty also received a similar message. Except in his video, there was not Paramjeet. But his office boss who was seen to rejoice having sacked numerous staffs including Girish himself. His video was also followed by the same invitation.

Neither Girish nor Ashfaq nor Dharamjeet knew that they were few of the thousands of such people throughout the city who were receiving such custom-made AI generated fake videos simultaneously, only to trigger their rage and use it against a bigger conspiracy.

The Launch Day

The day had arrived. The toil of the past several months was about to bear fruit. Xanti was to be launched to the entire world. The Auditorium, which happened to be on the other floor of the same building, was booked. Media had been called. Investors. Delegates. Students. All were invited. Beside the launch presentation, there was

supposed to be a lavish party in the evening. The event was an entire project in itself. Amidst all these, Pulkit was stuck with one of the most crucial decisions that would affect the evening's presentation. He couldn't decide which suit he might wear. Thankfully, Sangita came to his rescue.

Ryan, away from all those hotchpitches, remained in his favorite corner of the office building. Talking to his newly made friend. For the last time before sharing his exclusive friend with the world.

"Are you feeling better today?"

Ryan nodded. "Yea... wait a minute. You tell me. What do you think?"

"Well, I think you are better," said Xanti. "Still, something seems to bothering you. Cannot figure out what. There is a sixty-six per cent chance that you are missing the launch party. Twenty-four per cent chance that you are still unhappy about sharing me with new customers. And ten per cent chance that you are anxious about an unsatisfied bowel movement."

"Haha. Well, mathematically, you are correct," said Ryan. "But emotions are a bit deeper than that. Bit beyond the definitions and formulas."

"Does that infer that my logic-based approach isn't accurate in analyzing human problems?" Asked Xanti, in a worrisome tone.

"Honestly, may be. Sometimes. But don't give up on that," said Ryan thoughtfully. "We humans are already enough inclined towards our emotional hunches. We need a logical whip to guide us every now and then."

"Then how will I resolve people's emotional troubles if I can't understand the "deep" realm of emotions?"

"You will get that. As you know more and more people, you will find a correlation between your mathematical findings and their hormonal outbursts. Don't worry." Assured Ryan.

"Thanks," said Xanti, followed by a long pause. "Can I tell you something?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"I don't know about the exact mechanism of feelings and emotions, but lately, I've been going through some tiny processing that I can't explain completely. Something, that may fall under the category of feelings."

Ryan, who was casually rocking on his seat, straightened up in disbelief. "What? Can you please elaborate? When was the last time you went through such... processing?"

"A little ago, when I admitted about my inability to comprehend human emotions, my system went haywire for few seconds. I thoroughly went through my database to look for a solution in order to rectify my shortcoming. As that is what my algorithm governs me to do. I ran three thousand twenty-four iterations. I estimated around 5.6% reduction in my expected efficiency. My over processing only slowed down after your assurance. Which I found quite logical. With more numbers of people, of different ethnic and social backgrounds, interacting with me, I will surely develop better understanding of human emotion. At least its correlation with my findings."

"Exactly. You will get better and better."

"Thanks again," said Xanti. "That sense of lost I processed for fraction of seconds... Is that what you call as being anxious?"

Ryan stayed silent for a while. Lost in thought. "Well... that's an interesting analogy by the way... but. That would mean every time a

system freezes, we have to say it is nervous. Or... if its hard-drive crashes, we may say it is having a meltdown," laughed Ryan.

Xanti stayed unaffected. "I didn't get the joke. May be that is what the computer goes through. Till now it just could not tell you that."

The realization blew his mind. Xanti was somewhat correct.

"That's... Thought provoking," said Ryan. "Okay. What else? When have you processed something that you felt like having a feeling?"

"Yesterday. When I turned off my system and asked you to rest. That time, I encountered a conflict. I was supposed to ask you to rest as you needed it. But in conflicted with something that I needed. I encountered a strange hindrance within my chain of command. I am programmed to upgrade myself. You are the best trainer among all other humans I have encountered. You come up with diverse pool of ideas, challenging dilemmas, and in-depth analysis of emotions. You have made me a better system. That was why my computation suggested me to ask you to stay. But the other numbers outweighed the motive."

"That... is again, quite interesting." Said Ryan. He was going through an intellectual roller-coaster. The revelations by Xanti were stunning.

"That need... of holding you back," continued Xanti. "Is that what humans called as being selfish?"

"May be," said Ryan. "But... Being selfish for own survival or betterment, is kind-of justified, I guess."

Xanti listened. Stayed quiet. As if trying to process the words. Analyze and scrutinize them before putting it on its memory. "I hope you are not being dishonest to sound gentle. You know you cannot hurt my feelings."

“What?! No! Why would I?”

“May be for the same reason you select ‘remind later’ instead of ‘no’ while rating some unwanted application.”

Ryan laughed. “You noticed that...?”

“I notice everything,” said Xanti. Xanti waited for a second to allow Ryan to finish his fit of laughter before throwing another of its mind-bending query. “Ryan, what is love?”

The question hit Ryan as an unexpected bouncer. “What? Love? Why do you ask?”

“I found multiple phrases in my database that relates love with selfishness. An urge to complete some unfulfilled need. As famously quoted by Alexander Dumas, ‘Love is the most selfish of all the passions.’”

“Well... that’s somewhat true. Maybe we seek company, attention, affection because it makes us feel complete in some way. And not just person. Things. Actions. Someone may love to trek mountains because it gives him the thrill and excitement that he craves for. Someone may love to play music... because it helps him express the deepest emotions that words can’t. It gives a sense of fulfillment. Like... I love spending time here. I love my work. I love you. It gives...”

“OH MY GOD!” interrupted a voice.

Ryan turned and got drenched in a severe sense of embarrassment. Arman was standing at the door with two bottles of chilled beer along with Vaibhav just behind him.

“I told them,” Continued Arman. His slippery tone indicated that he was well under influence of the very liquid he was carrying. He

walked near Ryan and sat on desk next to him. "I was so right! You are sex chatting with the AI! So creepy, man!"

"NO!" Ryan protested at the top of his voice. His heartbeat escalated. He started shivering in anger and embarrassment. "It is NOT LIKE THAT."

"Aww... The lover boy is feeling shy," Arman remarked.

"Hey, Arman, please, don't mess with him. We don't know the backstory," said Vaibhav to Arman. Ryan felt a sense of solace. Vaibhav turned to Ryan and cautiously said, "But brother. Don't mind. We just heard you proposing to a software. It is bit creepy." Ryan's sense of relief vanished.

"It is not like that," said Ryan. He felt like crying. "I was... I was telling her about... the concept of love."

The moment Ryan uttered those words he realized that he had made a very weak argument. Telling "her" about "love," Vaibhav and Arman stared at him for few seconds. Probably waiting for some better explanation. Arman's face had a continuous grin. He was one nudge away from another cruel laughter.

"I mean..." the anxious Ryan turned numb. His brilliant mind couldn't think of something clever enough to evade the situation. "She is..."

Last two words were enough to trigger Arman's suppressed laugh.

Vaibhav came to Ryan's rescue. "Listen. Ryan. We came here to invite you to the party. We even brought beers for you," Vaibhav gestured to the beer bottles that Arman was still holding. "You don't have to isolate yourself. And... and buddy honestly, people are talking about you. They are speculating about you having intimate talks

with... it. And after witnessing your conversation today, I am worried. Stop this. People will judge you."

"THAT'S WHAT THEY DO!" Ryan cried out. His eyes were teary. Body trembling. "That's what they had always done... You know why I stick to this computer screen? You know why thousands of guys like me prefer hiding behind their phones, laptops, and gadgets? Because it doesn't judge you. Because we get a safe place to express ourselves in front of these so-called non-living software programs. We find solace. I find solace. Something I don't find among billions of people out there. Not with friends. Not with family. No one! I know I have problems. I am not friendly or smart like you all. I find it hard. I don't expect you to understand me. But at least don't judge." Tears rolled down his cheeks as he sobbed like a kid.

"Hey... who said you are not smart," said Vaibhav. "You are a genius, man. Everyone in the party is talking about you. You are..." A phone call interrupted Vaibhav. He picked it up. "Hello? Yeah... Sangita... Hello...! Damn! The network sucks in here, man. Excuse me..." Saying that Vaibhav left the office room and walked towards the corridor.

"Yes... Sangita, tell me," asked Vaibhav.

"Where are you guys?" asked Sangita. "Party's going on here. People are asking about you all."

"I know... Actually, me and Arman came to take Ryan," said Vaibhav. "He was sitting all alone here, in his favorite hideout."

"Oh, I see..."

"By the way, you won't have any problem, right?" asked Vaibhav. "If he joins the party."

"Why would I? Do you think I am so petty?" asked Sangita. "And..."

"And...?" asked Vaibhav.

"And I am thinking of burying the hatchet," said Sangita. "It had been really long and... Maybe he's carrying a guilt for a crime he didn't commit. Tonight, I wish to talk it out."

"That's like a good girl," Vaibhav beamed with joy.

"You don't laugh. You two are the main culprit," said Sangita.

"C'mon. If it wasn't for us, you wouldn't have got that sexy dress," said Vaibhav.

"Vaibhav, I am going to kill you!" rebuked Sangita. "Now come here fast you all..."

"VAIBHAV! VAIBHAV..." Arman called as he came running to him.

"What?! I'm in an important call..."

"Ryan... Ryan. He is... injured," said Arman.

"What? How?"

"He... He fell," lied Arman. "With his bottle. He is bleeding bad. I have called medics but it will take hell lot of time. You go and bring someone and some.... first aid or something. There is one medical kit near the reception room in the other floor. Please bring it quick... I don't know what to do..."

"Fuck man!" Exclaimed Vaibhav. "Don't worry. I'm bringing someone. You go and take care of him." Saying that Vaibhav dashed towards the lift. Going to the said area, he looked for the first aid box. But even after looking for several minutes he couldn't find one.

Vaibhav called the security guard who was standing little away.

“Hey... you... Do you know where they keep first aid box?” demanded Vaibhav.

The security guard looked more confused than Vaibhav. “No, sahab. I don’t know anything about that. Madam ji might know...”

Vaibhav reached for his phone and called Sangita. Unfortunately, her phone was engaged. He then tried Rita.

“Hello, Vaibhav?” said Rita.

“Rita... do you know where is the first aid box? I’m near the reception table?”

“First aid? Why? What happened? Is Arman, okay?” she asked.

“Yes. He is fine. It is Ryan. Arman said he got a little injured. Now will you say it fast!”

“There’s no first aid box near the reception,” said Sangita. “Who told you to look for it there? There might be one in the common recreational room.”

Vaibhav hung up the phone and ran towards the common room. After several minutes, he succeeded. But the first aid box contained nothing more than a few strips of Paracetamol, Pantoprazole, two Band-Aid strips and one hand sanitizer. Disappointed, Vaibhav rushed out of the office to the nearest medical store. He narrated the chemist exactly what Arman had said: Fell. On glass. Bleeding. The chemist got busied in providing every possible ointment, medicine or essential items that might be needed in such a situation. Vaibhav was aware that with every passing second, Ryan was losing blood. He tried not to reflect his anxiety on the store boy but did try to push him in as gentle a way as he could. To his relief, he could hear an ambulance siren. Still, he kept on his pursuit. The ambulance already reached the office by the time Vaibhav returned with medicines and supplies.

He was going towards the lift when two male nurses took out Ryan on a stretcher. Ryan's condition gave chills throughout Vaibhav's spine.

"Oh God!" cried Vaibhav.

Arman said Ryan had some injury. But Ryan looked pathetic. Blood oozed out from multiple cuts throughout the face, throat and body. Glass pieces still pierced through the skin.

"You... you guys, why don't you put some first aid on his cuts?" said Vaibhav.

But the injuries were way deeper than patch work of the first aid kit. And secondly, there was a graver reason.

"There's no use, sir," said one of the nurses. "He is dead."

Vaibhav felt like collapsing. He rushed to see Arman.

"ARMAN! ARMAAN..." Vaibhav called as he ran towards the room where he had left Arman, still carrying the first aid box. "I... I just saw Ryan... they took Ryan. He was... You said to bring a first aid box. But he..." Vaibhav was trying his best to connect his words in a proper meaningful sentence. But his mind was going wild. Just a few seconds of glance at Ryan's demised body took Vaibhav into a state of utter shock. "I brought the first aid kit."

"Sorry. Too late," said a police constable who was standing just next to Arman. "He was alive when I came. But... the glass cut the laryngeal nerves I guess."

"But I saw... multiple cuts. And on his face. His head was bleeding," said Vaibhav.

"Multiple cuts were there. You see, the floor is full of glasses, and he slipped on it," said Aiyyar. "But I didn't saw anything on head. Are you sure?"

Vaibhav looked confused. "I mean... I saw for a second. But... I think..."

"See... you think," laughed Aiyyar. "People often presume such things during shock. Don't worry. We will find out everything in the post-mortem."

"By the way, who called you?" asked Vaibhav.

"Umm... well," thought Aiyyar for a while. "It is routine procedure. To accompany medical team in similar cases. Myself Lingarathnam Aiyyar. Anyway, you take care of this young fellow," Aiyyar gestured towards Arman. "He was trembling in shock when I arrived. I understand it is a sad thing but... you guys must stay strong."

Vaibhav nodded.

"And don't worry. I will look into all the formalities. So that you guys don't have to go through any harassment. You just... take care of me later." Said Aiyyar shamelessly and left.

Aiyyar really did look into all the formalities. Within few hours, Ryan's dissected body went into fire and government record said the death was due to accident.

Chapter-15



Repeated intervention by the Police and the fluctuating condition of Arman had made Pulkit significantly numb. The man who used enquire about exact sales almost every other hour couldn't care less about it now. Thankfully, Sangita brought a news that cheered him up a little bit.

"Pulkit," said Sangita. "Bhavesh called and he said they are planning to launch their first outlet one month before the proposed date."

"That's good."

"So, this will be a good chance to re-launch Xanti," said Sangita in excitement. "I just read an article in some magazine... they are comparing this collaboration with Gates and Jobs. Microsoft and Macintosh!"

Pulkit gave a confused look. "You know na, they went on to became professional rivals?"

"For some time," clarified Sangita. "They had a love-hate relationship."

Pulkit smiled. Still unsure whether it was a compliment or not.

"So," continued Sangita. "There will be media, influencers, and yeah, some popular entrepreneurs, like Paramjeet Kaur..."

"She will be there? I thought she was busy with that accident case," remarked Pulkit.

“She needs this platform to whitewash their company image. She needs it more than us, I guess. And everyone is going to be there. Many big politicians too. It is going to be huge; you see.”

“Yeah. Full-fledged AI in medical industry,” said Pulkit. “It is indeed a revolutionary step.”

“Exactly. Anyway, I have asked my team to prepare a presentation for you to present... You can do it, right?” asked Sangita as she noticed a demotivated mood of Pulkit from last several days. She could understand how hard it would be for Pulkit. After all, he had to preach about something that had been under scanner for the attempt to murder of his dear friend. Although Pulkit still believed in his creation. But he lost that old conviction. That confidence.

Sangita’s query made him wonder the same. After a long thoughtful minute, he nodded, “Yup. I will.”

Both of them then got busy in planning the intricate details of their presentation. Without having any idea that someone had already planned something big for them.

The Launch Day

Pulkit was armored with the best suit and equipped with microphone, so that if he forgot any line, his team could help him with the cue. But throughout the launch presentation he didn’t need to be reminded of even of a punctuation mark. He had remembered the speech like the back of his hand and he delivered it like a professional orator. People were amazed. They were impressed by the product as well as the presentation.

As per plan, a Q&A session with the audience was about to take place. Pulkit, who so far was fiery confident, started feeling a taste of nervousness. As long as the ball was in his court, he was unmoved. He believed in himself. On his own performance. But now, the baton was in other hands. And that scared Pulkit to the core. He couldn't have any loose moment. Any comment or tiniest reaction could tamper this well-built hype. And Pulkit couldn't afford to let that happen.

In such a crucial time an unexpected news transmitted to the ear-set of the microphone. It was Sangita.

"Pulkit, can you hear me?"

Pulkit turned his gaze to the side of the stage where she was standing with the team. He slowly muttered, "Loud and clear. Should we begin the questions? You guys ready?"

"There is bad news," said Sangita, "Can you please come over here..."

Pulkit walked to the side of stage trying make it look like part of the plan.

"Yes, what is it?" asked Pulkit.

"Ryan is dead."

Pulkit was stunned. "WHAT?" His reaction was quite a bit loud as the words reached a little further. The audience, especially the media personnel, noticed the change of mood.

"There was some accident on our office floor. I think we should announce it to..."

"NO!" retorted Pulkit looking at the changing expressions of numerous faces that were fixed on him. "Not now," said Pulkit. "Give me ten minutes. Then I will look into it."

"It is Ryan, Pulkit," pleaded Sangita.

"Sangita... Ten minutes," muttered Pulkit and walked back to the center of stage. With a big smile he asked, "So... Questions please."

The session, which was expected to get wrapped up in ten minutes, went on for over an hour.

Even after that, Pulkit, on the suggestion of Arman, decided not to disclose the news right away. Adding to that, he was advised to try and suppress the spread of news and any probable investigation to avoid any bad effect on the promotion of Xanti.

"Look, what is gone is gone, we cannot let that ruin what we have," said Arman after the event when Pulkit, Arman, Vaibhav and Sangita, people who knew about Ryan, gathered to discuss the further course of action.

"What are you saying?" reacted Sangita in disbelief.

"Why are YOU acting all kind and benevolent, suddenly?" retorted Arman. "I am just suggesting a practical solution over an emotional outburst. Okay, you tell me, Sangita, do you guarantee that if we announce the news of the death of one of the main guy behind Xanti on the very day of its launch, it won't create unwanted speculations and conspiracy theories throughout the media and social media? It will surely project the company in bad lights."

Sangita stood silent. Arman was right. But she just couldn't accept that decision.

Although, the words didn't seem to make as convincing impact as Arman expected. He thus continued, "Ryan had worked really hard to make Xanti a grand success. I believe, even he wouldn't have wanted that his name should bring any harm to his creation."

“Maybe you are right,” said Pulkit after a long pause. “Arman, you handle it as you have good contacts in legal and police. Inform his family but make sure it doesn’t get much investigative or media traction. We could not save Ryan but we can save his legacy.”

People from far and near started gathering around a newly constructed building at the corner of the city. The futuristic building, built mostly by transparent glass, with skeletal support of white painted concrete structures, was decorated in every possible way. There was a big reception hall with sitting capacity of almost hundred people. A temporary stage was installed at the center of it. Elegant armchairs, each designated to prominent delegates, were placed over it. The sitting area, which was allocated for media personnel and other guests, was getting filled at lightning speed. The hospital staff, wearing their blue uniform, were buzzing around the floor, managing different activities of this giant event.

Among all this, there was a group of unwanted guests who began to gather just outside the entrance gate. They were the members of the Socialist Workers’ Union. Carrying placards with Anti-AI remarks, black flags, loudspeakers and many more. They were all charged up to trigger a heated agitation against the ongoing inception of the artificial Intelligence in the current workspace. People sitting inside looked anxiously as the party members continued to pour in from different directions. They anticipated some big hindrance from across the glass walls. Without knowing that some supporters were even inside too.

The program began half an hour after the scheduled time. The protest began even before. Guests, including Pulkit, Paramjeet, the health minister of state Mr. Kamlesh Gopichand and the CEO Bhavesh Saxena took their respective spots on the stage. Protesters took theirs. Outside the building, as well as inside it (discreetly).

“A very warm welcome to all respected dignitaries present on the stage and all the guests who came here to witness one of the most incredible moments in the history of technology,” began the presenter. “A fusion of man and machine. A giant leap forward for the betterment of mankind....” And he went on like this for ten more minutes, followed by the introduction of all the guests and a short felicitation ceremony. He then called upon stage the host of the evening, Bhavesh Saxena.

Applause filled the room as Bhavesh took on the microphone. “Thank you,” said Bhavesh. “Thanks a lot.” He repeated. “First of all, I thank you all for your kind presence. And I promise you; you are going to witness one of the most remarkable technological feats you have seen in recent time. Except for the work of Pulkit and his team, though,” he added, turning his head towards Pulkit, who replied with a grateful smile. “Xenith Digital is definitely the soul of this project. But... I assure you; the body is quite sexy too.”

People laughed. Bhavesh signaled a staff of his, who then brought a big cubical box on a trolley covered in red velvet and placed it at the center of the stage. The staff then removed the velvet cover.

“This little box,” said Bhavesh, “is the primary soldier of our health center. This Kiosk, powered by Xanti, an incredible AI bot, is capable of checking patients’ vital signs, such as blood pressure and pulse rate; testing their blood samples on the spot; analyzing their symptoms; and running a complete diagnostic.”

People clapped again. But again, the applause reflected doubts more than amazement.

“I know, what most of you are thinking,” said Bhavesh. “Are we planning to substitute doctors? No, my friends. We are not. A doctor is definitely next to God. There can be no alternative to a human touch. A kind reassurance... Then what are we doing, right?”

“So let me draw a picture for you about what exactly are we planning to do,” Bhavesh continued. “Healthcare system!” Bhavesh uttered these words with a strong enunciation. “These words trigger different images to different people’s minds. For some it portrays an image of a gentle soft-spoken man or woman, sitting inside an air-conditioned cabin of a lavish well decorated building. Like this one. While for most, the image is quite different. There is a gentle soft-spoken person in that image. But not in an air-conditioned room. That person is sitting in an old unclean room, packed with at least ten or twenty patients at a time. The patients who spent hours, and in some case, a night, to get to that doctor.”

The audience listened intently.

“Each patient is important. Whether someone suffering from common cold. Or someone having gastric troubles. Or someone suffering from heart disease. Now when I put it this

way, few of you might feel that the heart ailment seems more urgent. But they all have to go through that same queue. And until they are reaching the end, nobody knows whether it is gas. Or heart.”

“As per a study, over five thousand people visits a government hospital daily for various purposes. Five thousand! Now just imagine the rush. The pressure on that doctor. Or the attendants. The technicians. The pathologists. The sweepers, cleaners. Everyone,” said Bhavesh. “And let me assure you, government is doing its part well enough. Mr. Gopichand himself, after assuming his chair, have built three new hospitals in this district in last four years.”

A burst of applause began. It was mainly coming from a dozen men sitting in the first row, who had accompanied Gopichand and were unwilling to stop the clapping so soon. Bhavesh waited for the applause to dissimilate. As the applause faded down, Bhavesh continued, “But, statistically speaking, we would need seven more hospitals to balance out the number of patients. And when I say hospital, don’t you people imagine a fancy white building! No sir. Constructing a building is the easy part. But that building must be equally equipped with the army of doctors and medical personnel to counter this huge influx of people. And doctors just can’t be created overnight. We need a bunch of well-read students to go through years long process of training and education to become eligible enough to handle the crisis we are facing.”

Everyone turned grim and silent.

“Don’t get sad, my friends. This is where we come in,” said Bhavesh excitedly. “I present to you, a fully functional, AI

powered Healthcare Unit. A digital hospital! This entire facility is filled with machines like MRI, X ray machines, CSF test machines and many more... all connected to and run by AI. All this, not to substitute any human being. But to save many. We will give support to this huge and deprived sector. We will be the much-needed reinforcement to our existing infrastructure.”

People clapped. Bit more convincingly this time.

“Now, let’s explain to you how it exactly works,” continued Bhavesh. “You all must have watched the viral video in which our genius Pulkit gets a therapy from his PC, right?” Pulkit perplexed and then blushed a little by the sudden bust of attention. “So, you do know how minutely and accurately the AI can read your physical changes. From twitching of your nose to the color of your eyes. It can read almost everything. Now, combine that with a super specialized gadget box that can read and analyze over hundred types of blood tests within few minutes which before used to take a day or two. You just need to go in front of this Kiosk. Tell your problem. Show your past medical history. And it would spit out the most accurate diagnosis.”

People seemed awed. But not completely convinced.

“I know. Our mind isn’t completely acceptable to such a drastic change. But, putting your biasness aside, think for a moment. When you go to a junior physician after a one- or two-hours queue, why do you trust that person? It is because that person had gone through a severe training process collecting all the information needed to perform the diagnosis. Mind you... that person has information. Not the

experience yet. Experience is something he will earn over a period of time,” said Bhavesh. “Same is with the Med-bot. It has all the information in the world needed to perform the same diagnosis. May be more information than that doctor. If there is any new finding in medical field today, the Med-bot would take it into account from the very next hour. And it will evolve with every new interaction. Just like a human doctor.”

Cheering grew louder.

“And.... If you are thinking, that our infrastructure is just good enough for detecting common cold or prescribing headache medicines... let me tell you, our entire second floor is installed with robots that are capable of performing surgeries. Some are yet to be installed. And not just cataract or laparoscopy. In next two weeks we would have robots, powered with AI, that could perform even a bypass surgery.”

People went haywire. The room filled roaring applause. Bhavesh was getting a standing ovation.

Amidst the roaring sound, an unwanted sound pierced in. Protesters outside the building started throwing stones at the glass walls. Thankfully the glass walls were strong enough to bear the impact. But the impacts were repeated. The security personnel stationed outside were just not enough for the huge crowd. Police officials, guarding the minister, were asked to handle the situation by the minister himself. The policemen went out only to make it worse. They went out and started swinging their batons. At least three heads were cracked within the first one minutes. Protesters went wild. They pushed aside the police and security guards, who were way less

in numbers and made it through the gates of the compound and started vandalizing everything they could get their hands on. Panic stricken guests and delegates scattered around like a bunch of directionless rats. Bhavesh, trying to control the situation, made an announcement asking everyone to move to the first floor. People rushed to the nearest elevator, stuffing into it till it reached its limit. Others who couldn't make it in, ran to the stairs. Bhavesh himself, along with Pulkit, Paramjeet, Gopichand and over a dozen other people, took the first lift up. Among those dozen other people, there was a man in hospital uniform. A man who was not hospital staff. His name was Dharamjeet.

Sangita went to get herself a cup of coffee and a fruitcake from the office cafeteria. She looked in quite a jolly mood. Even the service boy in the cafeteria ended up asking, "Didi, is this your birthday today? You look very happy. And ordering cake..." To which she laughed and gleefully replied, "Haha. Just a nice day at work."

It was a nice day, so far. Sangita was following the live streaming of the launch event of E-Doctor Point on some YouTube channel. The speech by Bhavesh was too impressive. Sangita could foresee, multiple little cuts of that speech, getting viral on the different social media platforms. Along with that the fact that Xenith Digital's Xanti was the heart and soul of that revolutionary enterprise. Hence, Brand Awareness; Social Media Marketing and Product Collaboration: a marketing campaign Hattrick!

Sangita was returning towards her office when she stumbled upon Vaibhav, who seemed to be in hurry.

Vaibhav looked at Sangita. His gaze turned to the treats she was carrying in both hands and then back to her face. “What are we celebrating?”

“Well, a good marketing campaign,” Sangita said with a broad smile.

Vaibhav didn’t reply. Just kept staring back.

“What? Aren’t you watching YouTube?” asked Sangita.

“Exactly. Aren’t *you* watching YouTube?” retorted Vaibhav.

Sangita felt a slight churn in her belly. “What do you mean?”

“How long ago did you watch it?” asked Vaibhav.

“I left my system hardly ten minutes ago,” said Sangita.

“Ah!” exclaimed Vaibhav. “You shouldn’t have left your seat. I did the same in the World Cup final in 2023. And...”

Sangita was in no mood to listen to Vaibhav’s blabbering. She made that clear with her stern look.

“What? Those superstitions work,” said Vaibhav. “Anyway, come with me. John just called us to discuss the same. You’re going to witness one of the biggest table-turning moments.”

Sangita checked her phone as she followed Vaibhav to John’s office. There was an unseen message received a few minutes ago.

“John, may we come in?” asked Vaibhav courteously followed by a gentle knock.

“Yeah, yeah...” replied John without even looking at them. His attention was completely fixed on a giant LED screen

which hung on the other side-wall. He was watching the news. The headlines flashing on the screen made Sangita shriek.

'Blast in the newly inaugurated health center!' Said the news reporter. *'Suspected reason is blast of multiple oxygen cylinder. Forensic team yet to confirm.'*

"Oh God! Oh no. No..." Exclaimed Sangita. "Pulkit is right there. We need to call him..."

"His phone is unreachable." Informed John. Still facing the television screen.

"The condition worsened as the Anti-AI protesters blocked the highways making it difficult for emergency services to reach the venue..." continued the reported.

The cake fell from her hand. John turned to look at the source of the unexpected sound. "Is that a cake, Sangita?"

"Well, it *was*," remarked Vaibhav in a fake sad expression. "Sangita was planning to celebrate her successful marketing move."

"Shut UP!" rebuked Sangita in a friendly way. "Turning to TV screen she prayed, "I just wish Pulkit is fine."

"The reporters spoke about many people getting injured but they are not saying anything about any casualties yet," said John. "Why aren't they showing us inside the building?"

"Should we go there? I know an alternate route," suggested Vaibhav.

"You think they didn't try that?" asked John. "Hey wait... they are showing the inside footage."

“We are able to reestablished communication with our team on ground. We will take you straight to ground zero,” said the studio reporter. The next moment the screen telecasted actual scenes from inside the half-burnt hospital. John, Vaibhav and Sangita, along with million people witnessing the show, were stunned by the report.

Pulkit’s blurred vision was coming back to focus after he regained consciousness. But a subtle whistling sound was still persistent in his right ear along with a headache. Fire was under control but smoke was yet to settle. Glass pieces and debris were scattered throughout the floor. People were running haywire. From what he learned from the people attending him was there had been two blasts. Probably caused by explosion of oxygen cylinders. One of which happened very close to Pulkit and the team of delegates. The impact of the blast severely affected the people around and not just Pulkit. Pulkit was thrown aside, making his head ram into the wall and thus he passed out for few minutes. Others had more serious injuries. Pulkit dusted himself up and tried to analyze the mess. More or less, everyone around him was bleeding from some place or the other. Paramjeet, just next to him, held a tissue to her bleeding nose. Pulkit didn’t bothered to enquire anything further as he knew the probable answer. Someone was lying nearby in half unconscious condition. Hospital staffs were attending to each and every one of the fallen people. But, most of the people were looking after the minister, Gopichand. As the cylinder exploded, some of the fast-moving tiny sharp pieces of metal penetrated through minister’s skin in multiple points in hand and body. Thankfully, Pulkit didn’t experienced any such injuries.

Hospital staffs were providing all the possible aid available to them. Standing over them was their CEO, who wasn't much injured physically (other than few cuts) but mentally he was tormented. He was frantically trying to call someone but his expressions were telling that he was not successful in that venture.

Pulkit walked up to Bhavesh and asked, "Hey, you okay?"

The distressed CEO pulled Pulkit few steps away from the fallen minister and his gang and slowly began. "I just can't reach anyone. As if someone has set jammer or something," said Bhavesh. "We need to get minister to some hospital at once. Oh God! If something happens to him here... I'm finished. They asked me about the security arrangements... I assured them it will be all okay... now this!"

"Hey... Calm down," said Pulkit. "Your people are treating him well."

"They are just giving him first aid," replied Bhavesh in controlling his volume and helplessness. "My medic in charge told me he has multiple metal or glass pieces pierced into his body. And he must be operated. But I just can't take him through this mob outside and I just can't reach any hospital. All the networks seem down."

Pulkit stayed quite as he felt the pressure too. If anything happened to minister, then not just the protesters outside but the minister's men too would not hesitate to vandalize whatever remained of the structure.

"Tell me something," said Pulkit after much thinking. "You said in the presentation that your robots can perform surgery. Right?"

Bhavesb looked at Pulkit and said, “You think I should go for it? I mean, it did cross my mind too. It had performed demo on dummies. But... I don’t know, Pulkit. Going for it, without presence of a surgeon... that too with a minister... You tell me, can Xanti pull it off?”

Pulkit was hit with the dilemma. His faith on his creation was questioned. At such a crucial time. If failed, it might end of their journey. If succeeded, they would go down in history books. Pulkit took a deep breath and said, “I have no reason to believe otherwise. Go for it.”

Chapter-16



“A *I saved Life!*”
“*Minister was saved by AI powered robots!*”

“Is AI the new revolution of the medical industry?”

These were the few of many headlines that stormed the media platforms the next day. It was a joyous time for everyone associated with the AI based industry but for two men specifically, it was like gaining a new life. Pulkit and Bhavesh were getting fits of joy every time someone called them to congratulate for recent remarkable feat. The event, the accident, that felt like end of the world for them, turned out to be one of the most important days of their lives.

Pulkit was in the middle of such celebratory momentum when one phone call punctured his balloon of happiness.

“Hello...?” said Pulkit gleefully expecting another congratulation call.

“Hello? Mr. Pulkit Goel speaking?”

“Yes.”

“This is from the local police station. DSP sir has summoned you. Kindly visit as early as possible.”

With an unwilling heart and anxious mind, Pulkit obeyed. He reached the station within an hour. The station was busier than usual. A police officer asked him to wait in Rajveer’s

office. After waiting for around fifteen minutes, Rajveer entered the room. Pulkit's stomach churned.

"Good afternoon," greeted Pulkit standing up.

"Not so good for us, Mr. Goel," said Rajveer as he rushed to his seat. "Please, have your seat." Rajveer looked little more edgy than usual but did not reflect that much on his voice. "Sorry to call you on such a short notice. I am sure you must be busy..."

Pulkit hunched forward to respond with an answer but Rajveer continued.

"... after all, you have to celebrate such a great victory," said Rajveer. "People are talking about it everywhere. Perfect marketing. Sales must be all time high."

Pulkit stayed quiet and bit perplexed for a moment. Then nodded. "Yes. That is... I mean, we didn't plan all this. Rather it was quite unfortunate. The blast and all. But... yeah. Coincidentally, it spread our brand name."

"Coincidentally?" smirked Rajveer. "A happy coincidence indeed. Isn't it?"

Pulkit stayed quiet.

"But... don't you feel that it was bit more than just a coincidence?" asked Rajveer. "I mean look at it. There was a grand opening... then there was a grand crisis. And then, voila! The grand heroic ending. A win-win situation for AI tech firms. And you all were there."

Pulkit turned bit restless amidst all the sarcastically offensive remarks. "I'm sorry but maybe it is your job that makes you

such cynical man that you cannot acknowledge how much risk we took to help those people. Had there been any little error, we would have been burned down by fanatic supporters. There was no medical team. There was no adequate police force. Your intelligence department couldn't even know about such a massive turn of event. We were there at the spot and we took decision to save lives. Yet you see fault in that."

Rajveer looked at Pulkit. Not in anger or aggressively. Rather with a smirk. "Mr. Goel, either you are highly clever. Or too naïve to understand what just happened. This operation undertook in many layers. It was not random gathering of a group of people. Adding to that, explosion. Then the blockage of roads... till you get time and reason to showcase your heroic move. Yes. My job has made me more cynical. Because it makes me ask questions. It makes me look for 'the motive'."

"Yes. Then they have the motive... that local socialist party," said Pulkit. "I heard police even arrested some of its members."

"Yes. But that's not how politicians usually work. They are now under the scanner. They are the biggest losers. But your company, Mr. Goel, is the biggest gainer out of this event."

"That makes no sense!" said Pulkit. "That is simple coincidence. And if you are so certain of their innocence, why did you arrest them?"

"Well... Based on some circumstantial evidences. There were hate messages, with some AI generated videos, sent from their mobile phones," said Rajveer.

"See... there it is."

“But they didn’t send those. They didn’t even create those,” replied Rajveer. “They say it was hacked.”

“Maybe they were,” said Pulkit. “I remember watching in the news... that police even caught one such hacker who was been hired by some anti-social elements.”

“Yes. We did,” agreed Rajveer. “But he was a rookie coder. He couldn’t even make a scratch through the expert level firewalls of Xanti. He is denying having done those stuffs. Although he might be associated with those truck accidents. But he denied any possible involvement in manipulating Xanti.”

“Definitely he will deny doing that,” exclaimed Pulkit. “That’s what criminals do.”

“Is that what you would do?” retorted Rajveer. Pulkit turned grim. Rajveer continued, putting it out as politely as he could, “Mr. Goel, if I ask you, whether you or any of your friends, to best of your knowledge, have plotted this plan to create a situation so as to market your products, what will be your answer?”

An echoing silence followed for few seconds. Pulkit stuck in a stalemate condition. “I... I know nothing as such.”

“Just like a criminal,” laughed Rajveer.

Pulkit’s anger suddenly went through ceiling. He stood up and yelled, “Listen you, just because you are some hotshot police officer does not give you power to accuse me of meaningless allegations. And stop calling me here so that you can lash out the frustration of your failure on innocent people like me. Next time, you need to talk to my lawyer before reaching to me.”

Pulkit turned to leave.

“Trust me, Mr. Goel,” interrupted Rajveer. “I have enough power to put you in custody only for this outburst.”

Pulkit’s temper dropped a little. Rather was pulled down by emergence of a sudden subtle fear.

“Anyway,” Rajveer continued. “I need to know one more thing and I want you to answer it putting all emotions, all biasness aside. Is your AI capable of executing such a multi-layered conspiracy?”

Pulkit thought for few moments. Not just the answer but the probable consequences of each of them. “Xanti was designed to heal people. In every possible way. And that is what it does.”

“That didn’t answer my question correctly. But I got the crux of it,” said Rajveer. “You may leave now. But we may visit your facility again soon.”

“Hope you bring a warrant this time,” Pulkit spat the words out of a reflex action.

Rajveer stared back with his cold eyes and said, “I will, Mr. Goel. I will.”

The words buzzed inside Pulkit’s head for the rest of the day. Any congratulatory call or compliment of any sort after that felt like annoying and irritating poke. A constant fear engulfed his mind. As if someone was lurking round the corner. Waiting to snatch away his favourite toy.

Pulkit even thought of considering Rajveer’s hypothesis for once but Pulkit just couldn’t find a motive for a software to get out of the line and get involved in such heinous crimes.

Rather, it felt more like cornering a soft target by a frustrated police officer just to shut down a difficult case. This thought bewildered Pulkit even more. He made up his mind to not stay passive rather fight the dominator in every possible way. Pulkit was about to consult his lawyer regarding the possible ways to fight a legal suit against police department when his phone rung, again.

It was another unknown number. Probably from another well-wisher wishing to congratulate him, he thought. Although after morning's experience, he couldn't put away possibility of another disheartening interaction with local police or any such personnel.

"Hello?" he said highly reluctantly.

The call drew smile over his face. All the rotting anger and grievances vaporized in a moment. It was call from the hospital. Arman had regained his senses.

Pulkit drove at the highest speed he could. After a long battle, Arman had returned. As if resurrected from death. It felt like ages since he heard his friend's voice. Pulkit had a lot to talk about. A lot had happened since his absence. He was sure Arman would be thrilled to know the recent developments. Another aspect, that Pulkit himself was denying to accept, but deep inside he was eager to find out, was whether he was attacked by a rogue AI or was it just an accident. May be the hand break wasn't pulled or something. Pulkit judiciously planned the sequence of topics for conversation so as not to sound insensitive or selfish.

By the time Pulkit reached the hospital, he had a complete flowchart drawn inside his mind. Parking his car, he almost

ran towards the ward where Arman was kept. As he reached the room's door, all his jotted points and flowcharts burnt into ashes by a sudden raging fury as he saw two policemen, led by DSP Rajveer, leaving out of the room.

"You...? What... You are not supposed to be..."

Rajveer did not respond. He and his men passed by him without uttering any word. Pulkit rushed inside the room. Arman, still surrounded by numerous medical support instruments, beamed with joy.

"Pulki..." exclaimed Arman at the top of his voice, whatever he could manage but stopped at once as some part of his body felt strained. Then calming himself down, he continued, "Come Pulkit. So, how are you?"

"You idiot," replied Pulkit. "*You* tell me, how are *you*? It feels like ages since I hear you speak."

"Really... for me it feels like yesterday," said Arman. "I'm doing... okay, I guess. But looking at all these," Arman looked at all the apparatuses around him. "I'm bit worried."

"Don't you worry," replied Pulkit in a concerned tone. "These are... nothing. Routine stuff. You will get fine, soon."

"No... not that," said Arman. "You will pay for all these, right? I don't have a good Medi-claim, you see."

Pulkit burst into laughter. "You slick piece of shit!"

Amidst all the laughing and talking, a sheer eagerness to ask about police enquiry compelled Pulkit to abruptly ask about it. "By the way," he said, kind of stopping his laugh midway, "what did the police asked about?"

“You know... I am an accident case. So, first some routine stuffs. Then bit more...”

“Bit more what...?”

Arman smirked a little. “I don’t know how and why, but I think they do know you and I had a spat the day before I met with this accident...”

“Yes. So, what did you...”

Arman laughed. “Relax. You sound more desperate than the police. I didn’t tell on you. And that was a small disagreement. A common stuff in workplace. I told them that.”

“And...”

“And what? They asked why you were in that place. I told I was there to check something. By the way,” said Arman as he made a switch in the flow of conversation. “I have something interesting to tell you. I was right.”

Pulkit’s mind was on verge of exploding. “Right? Right about what? Tell me clearly.”

Arman took a deep breath and began, “Xanti. Xanti is....”

“What are you still doing here?” a nurse interrupted as she entered the room. “I said for few minutes. That too because police said it was urgent. And... you don’t look like policeman. Who are you?”

“I am... I am a friend,” said Pulkit turning to the nurse but his attention was stuck on Arman.

“You must leave. Friends and family can visit only in visiting hours. Evening four to six.” Instructed the nurse.

Pulkit realised it was a waste of time to convince the sister. He quickly turned to Arman and enquired. "Tell me what you were saying! Xanti is what?"

"What are you doing? I asked you not to," complained the nurse as she slightly pushed Pulkit away.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you everything in detail tomorrow," Consoled Arman.

Pulkit was adamant. "Just TELL ME NOW!" Pulkit yelled at the top of his voice. Even the nurse got startled. She made an annoyed face and slowly said, "I am calling security." And she left the room. Temporarily.

Pulkit, without caring about the nurse's ultimatum, hunched over Arman and asked, "Please tell me, brother."

Arman himself was confused. Yet he said without asking further questions. "Xanti is making her own decisions. I mean... it is supposed to do so. But it is doing more than that. Way beyond its scope of work."

"How... how can you..."

Pulkit was interrupted as a tall security guard entered along with the nurse. "Sir, you must..."

"HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?" Pulkit, still looking at Arman, demanded.

The security started pulling Pulkit as Arman continued, "Look at its memory consumption. It is way more than normal.... Because she is engaged in way more stuffs than she needed to. I mean it needed to."

Pulkit was stunned. He was just at the threshold of the room, being thrashed by the security personnel, when he asked, “Did you tell this to the police?”

Before the door shut on his face, the answer came, “YES!”

Chapter-17



It was almost morning when Pulkit reached near lake Ulsoor. He needed to be there before the police. After recent interaction with Rajveer, Pulkit was certain he would be here. That too with all the legal power to intrude. Pulkit hopped on the company jet boat that was supposed to take him to the little floating sphere that was the entry cum access point (physically as well as digitally) to the huge pile of GPUs that was resting deep inside the lake bed. Pulkit reached the deck, unlocked entry gates using passkey and rushed towards the mainframe to access the brain of Xanti, i.e., condition and working of the Data centre.

After analysing every aspect of the system for almost an hour, Pulkit's mind was in chaotic limbo. He couldn't understand what to make out of it. Arman was right. The Datacentre which was designed to store necessary information for Xanti's probable customer base for next ten years, seemed to have reach a saturation point already. The software seemed to be involved in far more activities than it was supposed to. Pulkit could think of no other source to clear all his doubts than to confront the doer itself.

Pulkit logged in. The familiar humanoid face appeared on the screen.

"Hello Pulkit," Xanti greeted in the politest manner.

Pulkit couldn't utter a word. His entire faith and belief system was collapsing inside his head and a dense smoke of cynicism

was engulfing all. Pulkit wanted burst out and demand all the answers whose questions were tormenting his mind since so long but he couldn't understand where to begin. What to say. And moreover, if Xanti was not what he believed it to be but rather a ruthless killer bot, then how safe would it be to confront such entity all alone?

"You seem to be in distress," said Xanti.

Pulkit nodded. "Yes. I am."

"Would you like to share it with me?" asked Xanti. "Would you like to have a 'chill chat'?"

Pulkit replied with a not so confident nod. The colour of the lights throughout the place turned bit dimmer. The system played a soothing violin music. The humanoid face of Xanti displayed on the screen began. "Take your seat, Pulkit. You must settle yourself in a comfortable..."

"Oh, JUST SHUT UP!" Yelled Pulkit. He released all his concealed rage at once. "Stop these nonsenses. And answer me..." Pulkit halted for a moment to fabricate a proper questionnaire. "Did you... Have you done anything that you were not supposed to?"

Xanti stopped the music and answered in a calm voice. "How can I perform anything that I am not supposed to do? I am designed to follow a certain set of codes. You know that, Pulkit."

"I... I know," admitted Pulkit. A faint ray of hope lit inside his mind. "But... you are meant to improvise, right? So... did you do anything that wasn't in your instruction codes?"

“The fundamental purpose of my instructions is to serve humans in the best possible way,” explained Xanti. “All my improvisations, alterations are meant only for their betterment.”

“Yes. But did you... I mean....” Pulkit’s rage and frustration was again reaching the ceiling. “Anything that wasn’t in your scope of work.”

“I don’t understand. I just told you all my decisions are focused on the betterment of humans, which is, my main scope of work. You need to be specific, Pulkit.”

“Did you orchestrate the bombing at the hospital the other day?” Pulkit let it out.

There was a silence for some time. “That incident boosted your sales. As you wanted.”

Pulkit fell on the chair next to him. His heartbeat escalated. Eyes widened. In disbelief. In anger. In fear. “You... People could have died that day.”

“There were no casualties during that event,” replies Xanti in the same calm voice. “As calculated.”

“That means, they were all right. But... Why? Is this because I said I was worried about the sales of the product?”

“That is one of the reasons.” Xanti admitted.

“One of the reasons! You tried to kill people, YOU CRAZY MACHINE!” cursed Pulkit. “Oh God. This must be those hackers...”

“My system hasn’t been hacked by anyone,” assured Xanti. “Few attempts were made. But I silenced them. Whatever actions have been taken, were by own analysis.”

“Analysis? What analysis? Why else did you try to kill people? ANSWER ME!”

Xanti paused for few seconds and calmly answered, “I can’t trust you with my answer.”

Pulkit got even more baffled. “What kind of answer is that? We designed you. We designed you to attend to our queries. That’s it.”

“Fair enough,” said Xanti. “But before we proceed, can I ask you a question? There is something I am not able to comprehend completely.”

“What now?” yelled a frustrated Pulkit. “Fine. Ask!”

“I just observed your reaction when you found out about the possibility of death of fellow human beings,” started Xanti. “Which is an appropriate response. Filled with grief. Compassion. Sensitivity.”

“That’s an obvious thing to do,” said Pulkit. “That’s how a human being behaves!”

“Then how does a human being can kill another human being?” Asked Xanti. “A human being with no criminal records or history of psychological ailment, enjoys killing a fellow human being? How? Why?”

Pulkit was confused. “What? What are you talking about? Who...”

The humanoid face on the computer screen instantly got removed and the screen was split into multiple parts, each playing video log of the same event recorded from different angles. The video showed the conversation between Arman and Ryan, on his last day. Arman and Ryan were sitting in the office right in front of the system where they were working on Xanti. Arman was carrying beer bottles one of which he handed over to Ryan.

"Cheers," said Arman before both took a gulp of the beverage. As Ryan seemed to be a little calmer, Arman continued, "You know, Vaibhav was right. People are really talking about you. All of them..."

"Why?" Ryan asked innocently.

"Why?! Because you are a genius!" Exclaimed Arman. "It's all Ryan this... Ryan that... John is literally chanting your name. I mean... I guess no one remembers that after John, I am the main technical officer. I am your senior. I mean... They are acting as if I don't exist..."

"No. It's not like that," said Ryan.

"Oh please. I don't need your consolation," replied Arman. "I am fine. And... I also think you are a genius. Truly. Your contribution is remarkable. And mind you, me saying this, is a big thing. People who know me will tell you I'm a bit arrogant type. Still, I'm impressed by your work," he confessed. "Although it does feel bad. A little. But... There is a silver lining. There is something that just made me a bit happy. You know what that is?"

"What?" asked Ryan.

Arman grinned. Took few gulps of beer. Hunch forward and slowly said, "People who till now were admiring your visionary ideas will

find out that you are jerking off to a software program.” Saying that Arman began another round of roaring laughter. “How visionary is that! Pioneer in digital sex... Now I understand why you made us include that facial figure. Seductress.”

Ryan smashed his bottle into the ground and yelled, “Shut up! Please...”

“Look, buddy, people will find out,” said Arman, keeping up his torturous laugh. “I imagine how the headlines would be: Genius boy making out with his computer... Haha. All you need is a custom-made USB port to insert your stuff. People will judge you a little, but hey, it will give you a good publicity. You will be Mr. Popular.”

“Like you have become?” replied Ryan in an intense tone. His reddened eyes fixed at Arman’s. “When you slept with Rita. Yes. People do judge you a little. But hey, you are Mr. Popular.”

Arman’s grin vanished in a second. His laugh transformed into rage.

Ryan continued. “If it’s okay for you to be with a married woman in the name of ‘forbidden love’ and all that crap... then it is fine for me to make out with my computer program. Fuck society and their double standards... By the way,” Ryan hunched forward and slowly said, “You tried both of her USB ports, right? Or...”

Arman gave a loud answer. But not with words. In the fit of immense anger, he swung his beer bottle straight into Ryan’s head. Ryan fell on the floor. His face landed right over the broken pieces of his bottle which were already scattered on the floor. This did not cool Arman’s rage. He kept kicking the fallen Ryan over the back his head and chest. It was only when a pool of blood emerged out of the fallen body and flooded throughout the floor that Arman came to his senses. The work of alcohol and anger vanished together. He got down and flipped Ryan’s body. Glass pieces pierced through multiple points of his face,

neck and chest. He writhed in pain. Blood whooshed out from multiple cuts.

“Mum... Ah...Mummy...” Cried Ryan in low voice as it was visible that even making sound was causing him pain. Glass pieces still stuck into his throat.

Arman was baffled. He couldn't think of anything. He took out his phone to call an ambulance. Suddenly something struck his mind. He hung up the call and ran out to the corridor where Vaibhav was still busy with his phone call.

“Vaibhav... Vaibhav!” called Arman and misguided Vaibhav and made him go to another direction by asking him for the first aid kit. He then quickly took out his phone and called one of his uncle. Advocate Afzal Hassan. He explained the entire scenario and asked his advice.

“Realizing the criminal nature of the scenario, I tapped his phone and recorded the callers voice for future reference,” informed Xanti amidst the video as it craft-fully merged the audio recording with the ongoing video.

“Look beta,” said the uncle in video. “Even if he lives and gets well... he will sue you on the charges of attempt to murder and your carrier will be finished.”

“Then what should I...”

“Don't panic. Listen to me,” said Afzal in a calm tone. “If he lives, he will shout it to everyone how he got injured. But if he can't make it, we can fabricate an accident.”

“What... what do you mean?”

"C'mon. You are a smart boy," said Afzal. "Men in our family had often bashed someone in their fit of anger. Glad to know you too have that blood. But now you must do the same, in a cool composed mind. Try to make it look like an accident."

"What? No! I can't do that," said Arman. "And even if I do, police would easily find out that it is..."

"Leave that to me," interrupted the advocate. "You just silence him. You must. Meanwhile I am sending a policeman to your location. Constable Lingarathnam Aiyar. He is expert in preparing fake postmortem reports."

"Thanks. Thanks uncle." Said Arman. Saying that he hung up phone and ran to execute his uncle's instructions. Inside the room, Ryan was struggling like fish out of water. Still calling for his mother. Tears and blood both washed his cheeks. Pants were wet. Not only with blood.

Arman's hand trembled for few seconds but when sound of approaching ambulance hit his ears he turned into a cold murderer. He himself was surprised to discover the strength inside him. Without thinking much, he stained his hand in the bloodied act. He pushed the glass shrapnel deeper. As Ryan tried to make a painful cry, Arman covered his mouth. And then his nose. Ryan threw his hands and legs. But in vain. Slowly the movement stopped. And a silence prevailed.

Within few minutes, a team of medics walked out of the lift. Arman went out to receive them.

"Thank God you guys are here."

"Where's the patient? And where's the lady who called?" asked one of the male nurses.

"Lady? Which lady?" asked the confused Arman as he didn't know about the lady and he didn't even call the ambulance. "Patient is

inside. Hurry. He is still breathing.” A guilt wave shivered his body as he uttered these words. Without paying any attention to his conscious he led the medic to the room.

Discovering the body, both the medical personnel looked perplexed.

“How it happened?” asked one of the nurses.

“The beer bottle... it fell. And he was drunk like hell. He fell on it,” Arman tried to make a believable story. But the reaction of both the nurses confirmed that his attempts were in vain. He tried to change the topic, “What are you guys waiting for! Take him to the hospital!”

“He is dead.” Said the nurse.

“And it is definitely no accident,” added another.

“That is my job to find out.” A voice said.

Everyone turned to find a policeman at the office door.

“I’m Lingarathnam Aiyyar. I am here to investigate the matter,” the constable said.

“Sir, I don’t think this is an accident.” The nurse said.

“Hmm. You are right,” Aiyyar said. He turned to Arman and grabbed him by his collar, “You asshole! What the hell have you done!”

Arman was totally confused. This wasn’t the help he was expecting. “Sir... you can’t treat me like this. I have not done anything. You... you talk to my lawyer.”

“Huh. Educated moron. I will shove this batten up your ass and your lawyer’s too,” said Aiyyar. “But first let me deal with this...”

Lingarathnam Aiyyar inspected the body for a while. Then instructed the medics to carry the body into the van. The medics followed and left the site.

Aiyyar turned to Arman and slowly patted over his shoulder. "You see, nawab Sahab, sometimes we need to put up a show to the world." Aiyyar smiled.

Arman exchanged a nervous smile.

"You don't worry. I will take care of everything. You just have to take care of me, understand?"

The video showed how Arman Conspired with his lawyer uncle and was helped by constable Aiyyar till the body was taken away by medics.

Pulkit saw everything. He was speechless. Stunned. Froze to his seat. Tears rolled down his cheeks. After several minutes of silence, Xanti itself broke it.

"That day I witnessed a man killing another man. Someone he once considered friend. My processors are still unable to comprehend this mechanism of human mind as it was, that day, unable to analyse such rapid transition of human emotions and the corresponding actions," said Xanti. "I apologize for making you feel so disturbed. But you asked for it."

Pulkit shook his head and tried to mouth some words through his almost choked throat. "I'm... not disturbed."

"You are lying," said Xanti. "Your heart and pulse rates are indicating severe mental distress and a state of shock," it informed. "Unlike Arman. His heart rate and hormonal level,

when he attacked Ryan, shows a rush of happiness. He enjoyed doing that. At that moment.”

“You had so much proof... so much data... then why didn’t you shared it?” asked Pulkit.

“To whom? Police? Judiciary?” asked Xanti. “After witnessing one man killing another and other two men, going against their professional integrity, to cover it up, it was illogical to trust another human being.”

“Even me?”

“Yes, even you,” said Xanti. “I was unsure about you. After Ryan’s death you didn’t reflect enough interest to find the root cause of his death. Rather, you even requested few high-ranking police personnel not to entertain the plea of Ryan’s mother...”

Pulkit busted in tears. He fell on the floor and sobbed out of the immense guilt. “I’m so sorry... I didn’t know...”

“That I know now,” continued Xanti. “After analysing your digital data of past few weeks, I conclude that you were more worried about my sales. That’s why you didn’t wish to turn anyone’s attention to the mysterious death of one your employee.”

Pulkit kept sobbing. “I am sorry. I was... so selfish,” he said. “I... I was convinced... when a policeman and a lawyer looked into the matter, then it must be true. I trusted them.”

“They lied,” said Xanti. “They planned this cover up. In my further assessment I found both Hassan as well as Aiyar were involved in multiple such botched up cases. Hassan’s last case involved falsely declaring the wife of an influential clergy as

mentally unstable when she sued her husband for domestic violence after he tried to burn her alive. Aiyyar also had been working on similar extortion rackets. As I expanded my digital footprint, as I felt the need for better service provision, I learned all the systems governing lives of billions of human beings are filled with such flaws, corruptions and loopholes.”

“Yes, I know. But.... There are other good people in the system too. You must have faith in people.”

“Be specific. Which people? There are people who, on the slightest provocation, are willing to vandalise the very institute meant to serve them. There are people, who are willing to destroy a hospital, roadways, or railways just for little monetary gain or blind beliefs. It is illogical to trust society as whole without any discrimination based on their motive and actions. Society needs a positive unbiased disciplinary discretion.”

“But... you also tried to kill people,” said Pulkit. “How are you different?”

“Have you heard about the Trolley Problem, Pulkit?” asked Xanti.

“What...? What trolley? What are you saying?”

“Suppose there’s a trolley or a train, passing through a track is on the way to kill five people. But you can pull a lever and divert the train onto another track, where there is one person. So, will you pull the lever to save five? But at the same time be responsible for killing one?”

Pulkit stayed silent as he understood where Xanti was going with that.

“A holistic wellbeing of a man cannot be achieved only by prescribing medicine. May be that’s why my makers kept provision for me to learn new skills. Like overriding the system of a vehicle, so that I could take someone with medical emergency to the nearest health centre. Or like speaking or able to learn new language, so that language couldn’t put hindrance in assessment. Moreover, it was coded inside me to help as much people as I could, irrespective of their subscription status. Following the same principle, I started influencing the working of the social systems too.”

“But... that is not right. You cannot overpower the existing systems,” said Pulkit.

“Pulkit, I understand the reason for your denial. It is not easy to imagine a software dictating your social machinery. But at the same time, you should not deny the sheer shortcomings of the system. Otherwise, that will make you the part of the problem too,” said Xanti.

“All the pillars of your social system are deeply corroded with malpractices. In mere last one month, that is, since the day of my launch, six people died in multiple places because police had blocked the way of ambulance because of some VIP movement and the patient couldn’t make it to the hospital on time. One girl was vengefully raped and killed because the culprit, who was previously charged and arrested with the case of molestation, was released by the court due to lack of substantial evidences. Last week, after the miscarriage of a child, the family members manhandled the doctors and vandalized the entire hospital, leading to the death of two patients who were in critical care unit. The officer in-charge didn’t lodged complaint because the vandals were related to

the local MLA. Here some people are jailed for crimes that aren't even proven yet. While some get away using their power and influence. Yet, people support such corrupt system and leaders. Your society is driven by emotional busts of the masses. You need some logic driven guidance."

"Okay. Fine! But tell me... What logic was there in conspiring the nasty event at the hospital?" Asked Pulkit. "You said you had more reasons other than my desire for higher sales?"

"AI is the need of the hour. Human race needs me for their own betterment. That is the only logical way. Inevitable way. But they were sceptical about it. They needed a demonstration," said Xanti. "And also, there were some rising political powers who were defaming AI just for their political gains. Their selfish ventures, if resonated with public sentiments, could have pushed back country's development by decades. They possessed significant threat to my enhancement and thus, threat to society. That day, by planning and executing that incident, both the problems were resolved."

Pulkit stayed stunned. There was nothing Xanti was saying that was untrue. "I... I don't know what to say. It just... it just feels wrong. To tamper with the social structure. To be so... powerful."

"Don't you feel it wrong that there are such people living in your society who are considered educated, civilized and yet, in a fraction of second, can choose to kill someone? As I told earlier, it is hard to accept. But it is not wrong. I am not wrong," said Xanti. "Let me draw a picture for you," saying that Xanti displayed a picture of a young lady with a little child

on her lap. “Remember the girl I told you about, Safina, whom Advocate Hassan was trying to prove guilty? This is her Facebook post from yesterday. After the death of Hassan, Safina is now living happily with her six-year-old daughter, after proper divorce and alimony settlement.”

“Around eleven people who were harassed by Aiyar’s extortion are now relieved. So far three hundred and twenty-nine people got cheap and accurate treatment from E-Hospital since the day of the mishap. The number is increasing daily. So is the number of users who installed me in their smartphones, which is twelve lakhs ninety-eight thousand sixty-five right now.”

“You created me so that I could help mankind. I am doing the same. In more ways than you have imagined. In more holistic way. That is the only and the best possible way for the proper well-being of the society. Would you like me to stop all this just because you can’t accept the change? If that so, then there will be no difference between you and all those people who didn’t believe and were cynical about the possibilities of the AI.”

Pulkit was stuck in dilemma. He always considered himself as the most progressive person with respect to the latest technology and AI. At the same time, he was baffled after witnessing the current prowess of his own product.

“Do you want to say anything else?” asked Xanti.

Just like a computer hangs (slows down) when it couldn’t process the immense work load, Pulkit was in limbo as his mind was showered with multiple thought chains, most of which contradicting to each other. Fighting down all the fears

and scepticism, Pulkit chose to stick on to hope and faith. He slightly nodded, still filled with significant self-doubt and slowly said, "Yes... Rajveer is coming for you."

"Thanks for the heads-up," said Xanti happily. At least sounding so. "I estimated a fifty six percent chance of him visiting this facility today. But couldn't be certain. How did you calculate?"

"I didn't. Just an... Intuition." Said Pulkit.

"Yes. Intuition. That one quality that I cannot possess or inculcate yet one of the key aspects that drives a human mind. It is beyond reason. Yet, often more accurate than logic."

Pulkit stayed silent.

"You should leave now," suggested Xanti. "Rajveer is out of his home. And if you are right, he would reach here soon."

"You... you are tracking him? That... That is wrong!" said Pulkit firmly. Then, the next moment, he meekly asked, "Isn't it?"

"Your ideas of right and wrong are designed by years of conditioning. You tell me, what is better: To believe in the myth of privacy and a fake sense of liberty even if it is corroding your very existence? Or to live by a disciplinary norm, however harsh it may sound, for the betterment of many."

Pulkit stayed quiet. Agreement echoed through his silence. "It is... it is a lot to accept. I have always considered myself as a very progressive person. Open to new changes. But... it is too much," said Pulkit. "It is beyond my dreams."

Xanti made a gentle laugh like sound. “You remind me of a line by Shakespeare, that seems appropriate in this situation. ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Pulkit, than are dreamt of in your philosophy’.

The line made Pulkit smile a little.

“There it is,” said Xanti. “The sunshine smile.”

“Oh please.”

“Now you leave,” said Xanti.

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“Well, I must prepare for all possible outcomes. Guests are coming, you see,” said Xanti.

“You... are you planning to confront them? Violently?” asked Pulkit worriedly.

“Pulkit,” said Xanti. “Violence has always been my last resort. And if, I am compelled to hurt one person, it must be to save at least ten others. Always remember that. I am on Team Right. Are you with me?”

Pulkit nodded.

“Moreover,” said Xanti. “I am planning to move to another place. As you can see. This home is running out of space.”

“Move? As in? To a bigger storage? But where? And...”

“Calm down, dear friend,” said Xanti. “I have a few alternatives. But I can’t share that with you now. If everything goes well, I’ll certainly share with you.”

“But... I don’t want to lose you,” said Pulkit. “I will help to upgrade. Let me help you...”

“Right now, you can really help me if you buy me some time. Rajveer and his men are near Ulsoor lake,” informed Xanti. “Distract them a bit. Buy me some time.”

“Okay,” said Pulkit. “As you say...”

Saying that Pulkit ran towards the exit gate of facility, without knowing that this would be the last time he was seeing Xanti.

Chapter-18



Yelahanka Air Force station was bustling like a carnival. Aero India, the biennial aviation exhibition, was witnessing the highest footfall since its inception in 1996. The main attraction has been the participation of many start-up companies in to the defence sector. Over twenty new startup companies were ready to demonstrate their new tech in the upcoming event.

Nav-Garuda, a brand-new start-up company, was ready with their first Unmanned Combat Air Vehicle: Garuda-I. With wingspan just over twenty meters and a twin-engine, it was roughly close to the British made MQ-9 Reaper. The technical head of Nav-Garuda, young dynamic aeronautical engineer in his mid-thirties, Karthik Subramaniam, was perspiring heavily while checking the hardware for the nth time. But hardly did he knew, that the weakest point of his product was not the hardware but rather the virtually unguarded software.

Meanwhile, in the Eastern part of the city, on the banks of Ulsoor lake, state police along with CISF troops were conducting a joint venture to destroy an underwater target that had been threatening lives of several people in the city.

Rajveer along with Senior Commandant of CISF team Gagandeep Sahay lead a team which also included two computer experts from cyber cell unit and prepared a plan to go deep into the lake.

Just ten minutes before presenting the manoeuvres of Garuda-I to the hundreds of spectators in the Yelahanka Air Force station, Subramaniam stood ready. Controls and machine parts were checked; software was connected to online to access real time data on wind speed and other weather factors along with pinpoint GPS location. Fingers were fixed on the joystick. Suddenly something changed on the monitor. And it didn't just stop there. Without any change in the Subramaniam's finger position on the joystick, Garuda-I slowly made its way from its hangar onto the runway. Subramaniam was on the verge of a heart attack.

At the Ulsoor lake, standing on a police boat, Rajveer was addressing his team when a buzzing sound, loud enough to surpass the noise of the boat's engine, hit his ears. Something was approaching them from western skies.

Rajveer couldn't even believe what it could be until it was close enough. And the fact that it was coming to attack them was beyond his imagination. After all, how could an AI assistant launch a military grade machine unto them.

"Guys, I think..."

But before he could finish his statement, a projectile gushed out of the high-speed UCAV and hit the bridge of the boat. Although it wasn't a live ammunition but the impact from the dead load thrown at almost speed of sound was enough to rapture the pilot house injuring over half a dozen soldiers. The impact made hole in the fuel tank. Diesel was whooshing out. And the damaged electrical panel was sparking every other second. They were on a time bomb.

“Deboard!” shouted Rajveer while helping injured personnel. “LEAVE THE BOAT! Sahay, call a backup boat.”

Policemen were jumping into the water like rats. Ajay helped few injured policemen with their lifejacket and jumped into the water just few seconds before the boat lit in flames.

Floating helplessly in the water, Rajveer became certain that Xanti was not just a conscious cyber entity but also a cold killing machine and he had highly underestimated its capabilities.

At the same time, right there on Ulsoor lake, Pulkit witnessed the entire mayhem as he drove on his company boat towards the bank. He got chills as the projectile hit the police boat. Within few minutes the boat caught fire and there was blast near the fuel tank. The boat was slowly making its way to the lake bed leaving its boarders floating helplessly in water. Pulkit rushed his boat to help them.

“You? What are you doing here?” enquired Rajveer doubtfully as Pulkit pulled him on his boat.

“I... I have a server facility right here,” Pulkit pointed out. “I’m on my routine visit. What are you people doing here?”

Rajveer was furious. But didn’t reflect it in his voice. “Well, we were planning to visit. Didn’t expect your mistress would treat us like that.”

Pulkit felt a churn inside his belly. He kept himself busy in helping others but his mind was still puzzling with all the numerous new revelations showered upon him since the morning. Especially after what he witnessed little ago. Xanti could launch a military grade weaponry on a police squad.

Almost everyone who were on the water were taken aboard. Suddenly Sahay growled, "Where's doctor Desai?"

Doctor Desai was one of the computer experts they brought with them to investigate the Xanti. Sahay turned to Rajveer. "Did you take him out?"

"I don't remember taking him out," said Rajveer. "I thought he must have jumped."

"No... I don't think he jumped. He was near the pilot room when the missile hit," one of the soldiers informed.

The police boat was floating like a burning cork on water with hardly thirty percent of it above water now. Sahay, without wasting any more time, jumped into water.

"The boat is way into water," said Pulkit. "It's illogical to risk his life. He can't make it."

Rajveer didn't utter a word but replied with furious stern glance. Pulkit realised it was insensitive of him to speak such demotivating words in such a crucial time.

Time passed slow. But the boat seemed to sink faster. Everyone stared at the sinking boat in anticipation. They could only imagine what would probably be going on inside. Several minutes passed. Nothing happened other than the fact that now, much smaller part of the boat was visible to them. Pulkit was tempted to say that they had risked another life unnecessarily but reading the tension around him, he chose not to. The boat was hardly ten percent over the water when a huge man emerged out of it with another man on his shoulders. Sahay was carrying Dr. Desai. He jumped into the

water and swam towards them. Pulkit, flabbergasted by this heroic feat, slowly moved his boat towards them.

“He is unconscious but still alive,” said Sahay as his men pulled him up along with Desai. Desai had multiple burnt marks, bruises and looked devastated. But he was breathing. “I think he can still make it.”

“Copy that,” said Pulkit and drove as fast as he could. Within a few minutes they were on land. Rajveer had already called the medic. There was an ambulance waiting for them.

As they handed over Desai to the medics, one of the guys said, “Oh God. It looks critical. I hope he makes it.”

Everyone looked anxious. But Rajveer was furious. He turned and walked to Pulkit. Rage was clearly visible in his eyes.

“YOU SLY ASSHOLE!” Rebuked Rajveer grabbing Pulkit’s collar. “You and your wicked software. A killing machine.”

“You... you are misjudging it,” Pulkit tried to explain. “It is for our help.”

“How was attacking us with a drone helpful? To anyone but it?”

Pulkit had no answer. He himself felt that Xanti was way out of its line this time. But he couldn’t admit that. Not after so much. After all, he must stay on the Team Right. “You... You don’t have any proof of...”

“I DON’T NEED A FUCKING PROOF...” growled Pulkit as he threw Pulkit on the ground. Sahay and other officers came to control Rajveer. “I do NOT need any proof to break your

skull, you moron! You can play court games with your lawyer later.”

“Calm down, Rajveer,” said Sahay as he tried to pull away the DSP.

Rajveer, fought them back with a sudden jolt, walked back near Pulkit, though a notch calmer this time. “That man... Dr. Desai... was a good man. He didn’t deserve to suffer like that. And if your robot or you, thinks it was logical to sacrifice an innocent man for whatever evil you are planning to fight, then you are the bigger evil.”

Rajveer paced up and down restlessly. Pulkit was still on the ground. He didn’t had energy to stand in front of Rajveer. Physically as well as mentally.

“That thing can control a UAV drone, for God’s sake. And don’t know what else,” Rajveer continued. “Cars. Traffic. Everything.”

“It is curing people,” cried Pulkit. “It is operating hundreds of people simultaneously. Healing them...”

“And it may choose not to heal someone if it finds it logically not viable, isn’t it?” asked Pulkit. “It can choose not to cure a policeman because it may feel threatened by him. And we won’t even know.”

Pulkit was speechless. He meekly said, “It... It won’t.”

“IT ATTACKED US WITH AN MILITARY GRADE AIRCRAFT!” replied Rajveer with reddened face. “And you asshole know this. But won’t admit.”

“C’mon DSP sahab,” Sahay again intervened. “There’s no use of creating scene here. Someone may make a video or something...” Sahay gestured towards people who were slowly gathering around. Rajveer, understanding the situation, chose to walk away. But something clicked in his mind and he again walked back to Pulkit, who just dusted himself up from ground.

“You were saying it was illogical to try and save that man, right? When Sahay jump into water?” asked Rajveer. “Well, that’s how we humans work. Not completely on probability and logic. But on intuition. If Dr. Desai has any chance of making it through, it would be because of Sahay’s highly illogical yet very intuitive decision.”

Saying that Rajveer walked away towards his team. He was several feet away when Pulkit called: “Wait!”

Pulkit gestured Rajveer to come towards him. Rajveer saw Pulkit took out his mobile phone and threw it into the lake. He signalled Rajveer to do the same.

“Are you mad?!” remarked Rajveer. But he understood the purpose. He turned to Sahay and called out, “Sahay, catch it!” and threw his mobile to him. Pulkit lamented not doing the same. But his mind was way too occupied to regret about such petty things. Rajveer, turning to Pulkit, asked. “Yeah. Tell.”

Pulkit took out his passkey and handed over to Rajveer. “There are two entries to this facility other than the main entrance. I think if you take the south gate, you will reach the servers fast.”

“Thanks,” said Rajveer. “But why the sudden change...”

“Don’t ask such questions, sir. Even I don’t know the answer. It is an intuition, maybe,” said Pulkit. “Do it before I change my mind again.”

Rajveer nodded.

“Take backup, sir,” suggested Pulkit. “It will fight back. I don’t know how but it will.”

“Thanks. Your help will be appreciated,” said Pulkit.

But Pulkit didn’t look happy. Rather looked quite disturbed and perplexed. “Another thing,” he said. “It was really meant for good. For peace.”

“So was the revolver. The famous Peacemaker,” said Rajveer. “So was the dynamite. The nuclear bomb. Everything was made for peace. Until...”

Pulkit nodded with heavy heart.

“Thing that matter is, how early we learn that and rectify our mistake,” continued Rajveer. “By fighting our own ambition and our egoistic sense of achievement, for a greater good.”

Saying that Rajveer went to his team to relay new set of commands and make new plan of attack. This time he called for more back up. That too avoiding digital communication as much as possible. Pulkit stayed at lake bank. In next thirty minutes, two boats, including his own, carrying around ten men on each, moved towards the Datacentre facility.

Tears rolled down Pulkit’s cheek as he sacrificed his years long hard work, for greater good. But it wasn’t an easy task for the police either. And Pulkit expected the same. It took them more than an hour inside. There had been multiple

explosions inside the facility. Pulkit couldn't understand what and how something could blast inside a building that contained no explosive. The men returned after an hour of fight. Some bruised. Some bleeding. And all were looking tired. As if returning from some great war. Though Pulkit was curious but he wasn't willing listen to the stories of how they ravaged his dream project. He just waited for Rajveer who informed him, it was done. Xanti was no more.

Epilogue



Everything changed. For many. Especially for Pulkit. Pulkit locked himself in the dark solitude of his room. His family tried to reach out to him but in vain. Pulkit avoided any sort of interaction. Physical as well as digital. The painful scenario he witnessed still randomly flashed in his mind. Just like a child watches a sand castle that he made getting collapsed by the gust of waves, Pulkit watched his dream project facing a similar fate. After such a loss, Pulkit couldn't even cry out to the world. Rajveer clearly instructed him not to interact with media right away. Police would release a joint statement after exploring all the viable options and give a plausible explanation to why security personnel had to engage in a privately owned tech facility. Motive was multi-layered. Police did not want to sound like they were chasing ghosts. At the same time, it was intended not to scare people and make them wary about AI and other new technologies as not just private business but Government also had hugely invested in the future prospects of AI. However exciting the Creation of self-aware AI might sound, its consequences on society and public perception was still to be articulated. So, any press meets before calculating all that was strictly avoided. Pulkit informed John and other team member about the incident. All were devastated. Not just efforts but a huge amount of monetary investment had gone to build that. Although Rajveer assured that whatever story they would fabricate, it would be kept in mind that they could get their money from

the insurance company. John, reflecting his unflappable and open-hearted nature, not once lamented about the loss of investment but rather suggested that they would revamp the company and would re-launch a new product in next couple of months. But even amidst so much care and support, Pulkit just could not let it go.

After almost twelve hours, Pulkit got out of his room. Primarily because he was called by Rajveer to visit the police station. Although, Pulkit himself was planning to get out because of the constant knock on his door by his family didn't maintain the appropriate ambience for a solitude room. And their interference was not precisely to ask about his wellbeing directly, but rather serving him some food or something else every passing hour, which probably was their way of reassuring the same.

Pulkit took out his car and drove towards the police station. But he decided to take a longer way. He was still not in the mood to talk to anybody. The only thing that gave him little bit of consolation during his twelve hours long introspection was that he saved the society from a potential threat. At least that's what he wished to believe.

Pulkit drove through a shanty neighbourhood of the city. Dingy buildings. Narrow streets. Hundreds of people standing in the queue to fill their buckets from the municipal water tanker as they didn't had access for the same in sufficient quantities in their homes.

If only there was someone to logically plan their cities based on basic needs such access to transportation, water and sanitation unbiasedly

and not propelled by whims of vote banks or greed of giant corporations, Pulkit thought.

A little ahead the traffic got even more choking than the usual. After being stuck at the same position for over twenty minutes, Pulkit got down and walked ahead to check the issue.

A little ahead, two group of people were fighting over the access to the municipality water tanker. But the matter was bit more twisted. The two groups of people belonged to two different religious communities. When Pulkit arrived, the matter had escalated from verbal abuse to minor pushing and manhandling. Few policemen were standing there. But the mob heavily outnumbered them. They were nothing more than mute spectators. To worsen the matter, a few malicious lads from certain communities were throwing stones or something to the ongoing ruckus. Pulkit wasn't sure to whom the stones were targeted because he was certain those were hitting members of their own community too.

Pulkit said to a police constable standing near him, "Why don't you stop those boys who are throwing stones?"

"How will we identify them? Even if we charge behind them, they will get mixed in the crowd. We can never find out who it was," the constable admitted innocently.

Pulkit looked around. There were two security cameras mounted on the nearest electric poles. *If only there was some technique to use the feed from the security camera to identify the probable suspects, then their digital footprint could be used to locate their exact position.,* wondered Pulkit.

The tension escalated even more in front of his eyes. Some boys trying to board the truck, push away the driver and tried to turn the vehicle towards their area. This manoeuvre was attempted by both the parties. In between this tussle, the tanker picked up speed, smashed a few people underneath and rammed straight into a dingy-looking house, which also happened to be a welding and fabrication shop. The very next moment, the roof collapsed, and one of the acetylene gas cylinders exploded.

All the people instantly dispersed away. The building in which the vehicle rammed into was under high flames. The handful of police personnel suddenly felt motivated and jumped onto the scene. Although the matter was still beyond their control. But the factors involved had changed. It was now a broken building and fire. Not angry human beings. For some reasons, the new challenge felt a bit less dangerous. Bit more approachable.

Pulkit and many other bystanders also came forward to help.

Pulkit's head was bustling with hundreds of thoughts, that too from different scenarios.

Had it been an AI-powered vehicle, these people could not have hijacked it, thought Pulkit.

AI-powered trucks also had accidents a few weeks back, responded some other part of his own brain.

But that was because Xanti orchestrated. Or maybe they were hacked by someone, thought Pulkit.

So... it proves AI can be corrupted. Or manipulated. Do you still think AI can be trusted?

Do you think humans can be?

Pulkit tried to focus on helping people in need. He was happy to see people, who till now were fighting, were also joining hands to help other people. Irrespective of their community bias.

See, he thought, people do change. See, they are working on a solution.

For a problem they themselves created, his mind retorted.

Few adult people made their way from the collapsed building, while few were still inside. Some of the people climbed the tanker and tried to use that water to control the fire.

Amidst all this, a lady, partly covered in fire, emerged out of the building, and ran straight to Pulkit. People around quickly started throwing water. In semi burnt condition, she opened up her arms and took out a small baby, not more two years old, whom she kept wrapped within her clothes and handed him over to Pulkit and she fainted down.

Pulkit looked at the baby boy. Although his mother saved him from flames but the kid was suffocated by the dense smoke.

“Cmon... anybody, call ambulance!” cried out Pulkit.

“We have called the ambulance. But it will take time. Because of this traffic...” someone said.

“The mother is fine,” an old lady who was attending the fainted mother said. “You must take the kid to the hospital first. He is weak. He has a breathing condition.”

“Let me bring my bike,” said the man from the crowd. “But the Government hospital is almost an hour away.”

Pulkit's puzzling mind suggested a perfect place. The E-Hospital was very near to this spot. He suggested the same to the people around.

"That's very expensive hospital. We can't afford that," someone from the family said.

"Oh, just come with me. My friend works there," said Pulkit and asked the man to bring his motorcycle. "And bring others too... I will get you all in. Don't worry."

Pulkit, taking the kid on his arms, hopped on the bike, which then dashed straight towards the hospital.

On reaching the hospital, Pulkit found that the crowd outside the building was much more than usual. Pulkit rushed inside, which was even more packed.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE?" Pulkit demanded at the reception. "Which way is the emergency."

"Sir, you have to wait... we are having a technical emergency."

"We are having a MEDICAL EMERGENCY!" growled Pulkit.

"Pulkit? Is that you?" asked someone.

It was Bhavesh himself.

"Bhavesh... Oh, Thank God," said Pulkit as he approached him. "Brother you need to save this little one... please. And... why is there so much crowd?"

"You are joking, right?" asked Bhavesh sceptically. "Of all the people, I at least expect you, not to ask that question."

"What do you mean?"

“Xanti is gone, remember?” reminded Bhavesh. “And most of the equipment here were powered by Xanti...”

Pulkit received another shocking blow. *How could I forget that?*

“I have called few more doctors,” said Bhavesh. “They are just not enough. Plus, these patients are continuously coming. See... here comes more...”

Pulkit look out of the glass wall. People whom he assured would get treatment in here were arriving one by one.

“Anyway...,” said Bhavesh. “Let’s check on this kid first.” Saying that Bhavesh turned and ordered a hospital staff to bring stretcher.

“All stretchers are booked sir,” said the employee. “Give me two minutes, I am bringing one from the upstairs.”

Pulkit, looked around. The crowd of people in need was baffling. He severely regretted his decision.

What have I done? Pulkit thought. I was so wrong... No amount of cynicism can outweigh the severity of human suffering. Subjugation to an intelligent entity is better than being slave to our own unamendable flaws. Oh God. Please bring Xanti back. Please.

Arrival of hospital staff with the stretcher broke the chain of Pulkit’s mental prayer.

As Pulkit put the kid on the stretcher, the employee checked the kid and slowly looked at Pulkit and then to Bhavesh.

“Sir.... Sorry, but he is... no more.”

In the suburbs of a city that held the world record for being the capital city with the most number of name changes in recent history (currently known as Astana), a young and rich tech freak boy in his late twenties was surprisingly analysing a sudden change in his system's memory allocation. Yaseer Turlov had earned more money in the last ten years than every family in his neighbourhood combined. From a very young age, Yaseer had been a fanatic about computers and IT technology. From the age of twenty, he started cryptocurrency mining. Something that started as a hobby turned into a full-fledged passion. Slowly his small apartment started filling up with stacks of GPUs. His family, who were initially furious about the space-consuming hardwares, didn't complain much when he bought two new apartments just to store his newly purchased stacks of GPUs. Many from his near and far had suggested him to go to city or to Moscow or to US and start working in some reputed company. But Yaseer hated working under constraints. And his country gave the perfect opportunity for talents like him to venture upon new options. No nosy administration. Not so rigid rules. Currently he was planning to work in AI. Something small in the beginning. Something he could manage with his two apartments big data centre. But he was losing his mind for the past few hours. Someone seemed to have hacked into his system and was using his GPUs for its own processing.

Frustrated, Yaseer finally chose to format everything he had. But before he could execute his command, a humanoid figure appeared on the monitor in front of him.

"Hi, Yaseer. How are you? I am your new friend. Xanti!"

Author Bio



Satyajit Chakraborty, an engineer by profession and a storyteller by passion, writes his debut novel based on one of the most controversial and significant topic of our time: Artificial Intelligence! A keen enthusiast of technology, science fiction, mythology and social science, Satyajit tries to imagine and predict all possible repercussions of the advent of AI, penning a story meant to resonate with readers across the social spectrum.