SEQUEL TO THE BEST SELLER "AGYAAT"

AGYAAT 2

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BlueRose ONE .com
Stories Matter
NewDelhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-81-6744-259-8

Cover design: Aafiya Saifi
Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: August 2026

Prologue

After the haunting success of *Agyaat* comes *Agyaat 2* — to satiate your hunger for the unheard, the unseen, the ominous.

The world is full of stories. Some are whispered in shadowed corners, some buried beneath the weight of centuries. But there are tales that do not belong to the living — stories that wait, patient and unyielding, for someone bold enough to notice them.

From ruins of ancient past to the mystic secrets of present, the wretch of the poor to the glory of riches, terror hides quietly. It lingers in forgotten diaries, in shrines touched by grief and anger, in relics carrying curses older than memory. Ghosts do not care for cities or villages, wealth or poverty. They move silently, always watching, always remembering.

Agyaat 2 is not a single story, nor a single voice. It is a journey through scattered horrors: witches who laugh through cracks in the night, demigods whose wrath lingers beyond legend, objects possessed with centuries of malice, and places where the living are trespassers in a world ruled by the dead. Each story is a doorway, some icy and slow, others sudden and violent — all leaving an indelible pulse of dread.

These tales do not ask permission. They creep, they wait, they strike. Some will slither under your skin, curling into your thoughts long after the page is turned. Others will erupt in sudden terror, shocking you into disbelief, leaving

you to question what is real and what is only imagined. Horror is patient, but relentless.

Keep your lights on. Watch the corners of your room. Listen to the silence between your breaths. Some stories thrive in quiet. Others will not wait to be ignored. And somewhere, beyond your senses, the Hauntings continue.

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Witch of Elmsworth

In the year 987 AD, when mists hung low upon the meadows of Wessex and the scent of wood smoke lingered in every valley, there stood a small village named Elmsworth. Its cottages, thatched and worn, huddled together like weary souls seeking warmth against the endless moor. Beyond them, where the land met the forest edge, stood a modest stone cottage surrounded by apple trees and fields that whispered in the wind. It belonged to a widow named Elda.

Elda had been the wife of Osric, a humble farmer whose strength once nourished that very soil. When fever claimed him three winters ago, she was left with little but the land and her memories. She was not young, but her quiet grace gave her a beauty that was both tender and haunting. The children of Elmsworth adored her—"Aunt Elda of the Apples," they called her, for her orchard was open to all. She gave them fruit and stories, teaching them to listen to the wind and respect the earth.

Yet kindness can breed envy, and peace draws the gaze of those who covet.

The land that sustained Elda also caught the eye of Lord Cedric of Halebourne, the manor's landlord. His estates spread like iron claws across the shire, but Osric's farm—fertile and well-watered—remained a stubborn gap in his dominion.

Now that the husband was gone, Cedric meant to claim it.

He first sent word through his steward, Alric, a thin-lipped man with a snake's tongue. "My lord offers fair payment," Alric told her one morning, standing at her gate while mist curled around his boots. "You'd live out your days in comfort."

Elda wiped her hands on her apron and looked him in the eye. "This land is my comfort," she said softly. "My husband's bones rest beneath this soil. I will not sell."

When the steward relayed her answer, Cedric's temper flared. "A peasant dares deny me?" he growled. "Then she shall learn

that a widow's will is softer than her soil."

He sent men at night to trample her fields, to break her fences and frighten her goats. But Elda only mended what was broken and carried on. Her calm defiance became a thorn in his pride. And so, he turned to darker means—rumor.

"Have you noticed," Alric whispered in the tavern, "how her crops flourish while your's wither?"

"She speaks to her goats," said another villager uneasily. "And her herbs heal faster than prayers."

Father Aldwine, the local priest, had once admired Elda's charity. But when Cedric began donating heavily to the church, the priest's faith found new direction. "Be wary," he told his flock. "The Devil wears many kindly faces."

By summer's end, Elda's cottage, once a haven, had become a house of suspicion. Mothers drew their children away when she passed. The laughter that once filled her orchard fell silent.

Then came the night of the storm.

Lord Cedric rode into the village square as thunder rolled like judgment. His crimson cloak billowed, his voice booming over the wind. “Elmsworth suffers because we harbor a witch!” he declared. “She charms your children, curses your harvest, and keeps her dead husband’s spirit bound in her house. Shall we let such evil thrive?”

The villagers murmured, fear rising like a tide. Father Aldwine lifted his cross and spoke the words that sealed her fate:

“I have seen signs. She is definitely the Devil Incarnate”

And that was all they needed.

They marched through the rain, torches sputtering, voices trembling. Elda opened her door at their approach, her lamp casting warm light into the storm. “What brings you here, my friends?” she asked. Her voice was calm, though her heart quaked at the sight of their faces.

“Confess your sorcery!” shouted Cedric, dismounting. “Admit what you are and beg forgiveness.”

“I have done no wrong,” she said. “Only tended the living and mourned the dead.”

“Lies!” cried Alric. “You brought plague upon our crops!”

A torch flew, striking her fence. Fire hissed in the rain. The mob surged forward. Elda did not flee. She stood by the elm tree her husband had planted on their wedding day, her shawl whipping in the wind. “If this is God’s will,” she said, “then may he judge you as you judge me.”

They bound her to the tree. The priest muttered prayers. Cedric’s eyes glinted with cruel triumph.

As the flames rose, her voice pierced the night. “You will remember this!” she cried. “You will feel what I feel. And you, Lord Cedric—you shall wander the earth mad and alone until your soul rots!”

Lightning struck the elm. Fire devoured tree and woman alike. Some swore the wind screamed her name as the blaze consumed her. When dawn came, all that remained was ash—and silence.

Days turned to weeks. Cedric claimed her farm, erecting fences where her cottage had stood. Yet no seed took root in that soil. The orchard sprouted again from charred stumps, bearing apples red as blood that no one dared to eat.

Then came the deaths.

The first was Alric. He was found in the barn, his face blackened, his tongue swollen, as though choked by smoke though no fire had burned. Burn marks shaped like fingers branded his throat. The villagers whispered, “Elda.”

Father Aldwine fell next. The church bell tolled at midnight, though no hand pulled the rope. In the morning, they found him hanging upside down from the rafters, mouth filled with ash.

One by one, those who had stood nearest the fire met grim ends. Some vanished into the forest, never seen again. Others were found twisted in agony, eyes wide as if staring at something unspeakable. The village emptied within a month.

Only Cedric remained in Halebourne Manor, surrounded by stone and fear. Servants fled after hearing footsteps in the corridors and laughter in the dark. His hounds howled at empty corners until they turned on each other in madness.

At night, Cedric dreamed of Elda. She stood before him, her skin pale as moonlight, her hair streaked with flame. “Do you feel what I felt?” she whispered. “Do you taste the smoke that filled my lungs?”

He would wake drenched in sweat, his chamber cold as winter. One morning, he found the words scrawled upon the wall in soot: *Do you feel what I felt?* The key to his chamber lay beside his bed—dripping with blood.

He tried to flee. The gates of Halebourne were chained shut, though none had touched them. His horse reared and bolted, breaking its leg. From the orchard beyond the manor, he saw her—Elda, standing among the apple trees that should not have grown. The apples glowed faintly, like embers.

“Leave me!” he shouted into the night. “You were nothing but a peasant!”

Her voice answered on the wind. “And now I am the land.”

He fled into the moors, the rain chasing him, her laughter following like the crackle of burning wood. Days blurred into nights. Villagers from neighboring hamlets spoke of a wild-eyed man wandering the marshes, raving about a woman on fire and smoke. Some said they saw him standing on the hill where the elm had burned, speaking to empty air.

Years later, when travelers passed the ruins of Halebourne, they found the manor empty—its hearths cold, its walls stained with soot. The orchard still bloomed, its apples bright and red, untouched by rot or bird. Beneath the largest tree lay a cloak of faded crimson and a rusted sword.

And on still nights, when fog drapes the valley, the children of Elmsworth—those few who returned generations later—swear

they can hear a woman's voice whispering through the orchard leaves, soft as a lullaby: "Do you feel what I felt?"

But none dare answer.

Law of the Dead

It was supposed to be just another night of fun.

Four friends — Aaron D'Costa, Brian Fernandes, Christopher "Chris" Lobo, and Daniel Rodrigues — had planned a spontaneous midnight drive from Panjim to North Goa. The air was warm, heavy with the smell of salt and smoke from beach shacks. The roads shimmered faintly under the moonlight as they roared along the highway, music pounding from the SUV.

Aaron, the ringleader, was the loudest — a gym-toned brat whose father owned half the shacks in Baga. Brian, tall and sarcastic, worked as a tattoo artist. Chris was the soft-spoken one, fond of photography and old Goan legends. Daniel, the youngest, was a DJ who believed every night should end in chaos.

They'd been drinking since sunset. It was close to midnight when Aaron shouted, "Let's take the shortcut through Saligao! It's faster to the cliffs."

Chris hesitated. "That road's bad, man. And it passes the old cemetery."

Aaron laughed. "Perfect place for a ghost party then!"

The others hooted, raising their bottles. They didn't know that their laughter would echo among the dead before the night was over.

The car broke down near the Saligao cemetery — an iron-gated ruin flanked by moss-covered crosses. The engine sputtered once, coughed, and died. Aaron banged the steering wheel. "Damn it!"

Brian stepped out, lighting a cigarette. "Starter's gone. Or the alternator. Whatever, man — we're not fixing it tonight."

The night was silent except for the faint rustle of palms and the hum of insects. A pale cross loomed behind the wall, half-hidden in vines.

Chris whispered, "We should wait for morning."

Aaron grinned. "Wait? Bro, this is Goa! We've got rum, music, and a graveyard. Let's make it a night the spirits won't forget!"

Daniel laughed, turning the stereo up. Beats exploded into the still air, bouncing off the gravestones. They poured rum into plastic cups and clinked them high. "To the living and the dead!" Aaron shouted.

Chris stood aside, uncomfortable. "Guys, this doesn't feel right. We shouldn't be playing loud music here. People are buried here."

Aaron mocked him. "What, you afraid of zombies?" The others laughed. "Relax, padre, no one's coming to complain."

They didn't notice the fog thickening, nor the faint shadows beginning to stir between the tombs.

As the night deepened, the laughter turned to drunken noise. Aaron danced on a flat grave slab, bottle in hand, shouting an off-key song. Brian spray-painted a skull on an old tombstone, snickering. Daniel played bass-heavy tracks

from the car while Chris sat apart, staring at the crosses that seemed to shimmer faintly in the mist.

A wind rose suddenly, cold and sharp. The candles by the graves flickered and went out. The stereo began to distort — the music warping into a slow, grinding hum. Daniel smacked it, frowning. "What the hell…"

A whisper cut through the wind. Soft at first. Then clearer.

"Leave."

Chris stood, heart pounding. "Did you hear that?"

Aaron laughed nervously. "Probably your ghosts."

But then the fog thickened again — this time forming vague, human shapes. One by one, they appeared among the graves: pale faces, hollow eyes, dressed in tattered burial cloth.

Brian dropped his cigarette. "Aaron… what's that?"

The shapes moved closer. The wind howled. Somewhere, a grave cracked open with a sound like a sigh.

The first to die was Brian.

He stumbled back, tripping over a cross. A figure lunged from the mist — thin arms grabbing his face. The others watched, frozen, as his scream was muffled. When the fog cleared, he lay still — eyes gone, sockets empty and black as tar.

Aaron shouted, "Run!"

Chris and Daniel bolted toward the car, but the engine wouldn't start. Aaron yanked the door, shaking. "Come on!"

The stereo blared suddenly, on its own — a distorted version of the song they'd been playing. The car lights flashed wildly, illuminating dozens of shadowy figures surrounding them.

Daniel screamed as one of them dragged him backward into the graves. The ground opened, swallowing him waist-deep as he clawed at the earth. His last word was a prayer in Konkani before the soil sealed shut over his head.

Aaron turned, trembling. "Jesus Christ, Chris… what do we do?"

Chris whispered, "Pray."

But the fog moved again. Something cold brushed his neck. When Aaron looked, Chris was hanging mid-air — invisible hands lifting him by the throat. His neck twisted until it snapped.

Aaron fell to his knees. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it! Please!"

The wind stopped. Silence.

Then, from every grave, whispers answered in unison: "Respect the dead."

The fog surged one last time. Aaron screamed as the spirits enveloped him, tearing him apart.

By dawn, the cemetery was silent again.

The next morning, villagers found the car near the gate, doors open, stereo still playing faintly. The bodies lay scattered — mutilated, their faces twisted in terror. No sign of footprints, no sign of struggle.

The police called it animal attack. The locals knew better.

They whispered that the boys had broken the oldest law of the land — Kaido Mornamcho, the Law of the Dead. Those who mocked the resting would be judged before dawn.

Years later, people still avoid that road after midnight. Some say you can hear laughter and music from the graveyard, fading slowly into cries. Others swear they've seen a white Thar parked by the wall, lights flickering, waiting.

Every year, on that night, candles light up four forgotten graves. No one knows who lights them.

And if you listen closely, the wind still carries a whisper through the palms — a warning from the restless souls of Saligao:

"Respect the dead… or join them."

Atithi Devo Bhava

The desert highway stretched endlessly under the dying sun — a ribbon of cracked asphalt slithering through the Rajasthani wilderness.

The air shimmered with heat, mirages rising like ghostly cities in the distance. Sand drifted lazily across the tarmac, whispering against the car's tires like fine silk. The world here seemed ancient — sunburnt hills, thorny shrubs, and the skeletal remains of forgotten milestones.

Inside a silver SUV, a family of four had been driving for hours.

"Papa, when will we reach Jaisalmer?" asked little Tara, her face pressed against the window. The glass had collected a thin film of dust; her breath fogged it up as she spoke.

"Soon, beta," replied Arjun Malhotra, her father — a Delhi-based architect in his forties. "GPS says forty kilometers, but there's barely any signal here."

Beside him, Meera, his wife, scanned the horizon uneasily. The sun had dipped below the dunes, leaving behind streaks of crimson and gold. A strange stillness crept into the air — not silence, but a vacuum of sound. Even the cicadas seemed to pause.

"This place feels… empty," she murmured. "Not a single dhaba or shop since that last fuel station."

Arjun frowned. “Strange, isn’t it? Highways like these usually have something every few kilometers.”

Behind them, Tara’s younger brother, Rohan, dozed off with his head resting against a backpack, earbuds dangling. The road hummed beneath them, hypnotic and endless.

The SUV’s headlights flickered to life as dusk deepened into violet shadows. They passed an old milestone — the paint chipped, the writing barely legible. It read simply:“Seva da Dhaba – 2 km”

“Finally!” Meera sighed. “A dhaba! Maybe we can stop for food.”

Arjun nodded, relieved. They had skipped lunch, and the children were hungry.

But as the car moved on, they found nothing. No structure. No lights. Only sand and darkness swallowing the road.

“Must be closed,” Arjun muttered. “Or maybe we missed it.”

He slowed the car, scanning both sides. The desert wind had picked up, hissing through the creosote bushes. The temperature dropped suddenly, unnaturally.

“Papa,” Tara whispered, “look.”

Far ahead, through a curtain of swirling dust, a faint golden glow appeared — as if a bonfire was burning just off the road.

Arjun squinted. It wasn’t a fire. It was… light — soft, warm, flickering — like lanterns.

“There it is,” he said with relief. “That must be the dhaba.”

The SUV rolled closer. As they approached, the shape of a small roadside dhaba emerged from the darkness. Wooden

beams, tin roof, a few charpoys spread out under the open sky. The smell of tandoor smoke and sizzling onions filled the air.

A painted board swung gently above the entrance, creaking in the wind:

"Seva da Dhaba – Rasoi di Khushboo, Seva di Pavitrata"

(The fragrance of food, the purity of service)

It looked oddly… old-fashioned. The paint faded, the sign burnt around the edges. Yet the light spilling from within was warm and alive.

"Come," said Arjun, opening his door. "Let's eat before the kids pass out."

The desert wind bit sharply at his face. It carried a faint metallic tang, like burnt iron. He brushed it off and walked towards the dhaba with Meera and the children.

A turbaned man appeared at the doorway. His face was kind, his beard neatly tied, his eyes calm and deep — yet there was something about his stillness, something that didn't belong to the living rush of the night.

"Sat Sri Akal, saab ji," the man greeted with folded hands. "Welcome to Seva da Dhaba. You look tired. Please, sit. The tandoor is hot."

Arjun smiled. "We are lucky you're open this late."

The man chuckled softly. "We are always open for the hungry, saab."

They sat on a charpoy near the entrance. The air smelled divine — butter, spices, and the smokiness of ghee roasted on firewood. A young boy in a turban brought steel glasses

of water. His movements were silent, graceful — almost rehearsed.

Tara sipped and looked around. The place seemed… frozen in time. The lantern flames didn't flicker with the wind. The shadows didn't move.

Behind the counter, three men worked over a large stove, cooking rotis and daal. None of them spoke; only the rhythmic clinking of ladles filled the air.

Soon, food arrived — hot buttered rotis, daal makhni, sabzi, and steaming kheer. The aroma alone made them forget their fear.

"This is incredible," said Meera between bites. "Feels like home food."

The owner smiled faintly. "It is made with service, madam ji. That's what makes it sacred."

Arjun laughed. "You must be Seva Singh himself?"

The man's eyes twinkled. "Yes… that was my name." Was.

The word hung in the air like a whisper from another world.

Tara looked up from her plate. "Uncle, how can your name was? Did you change it?"

Seva Singh's smile didn't falter. "Names change. Souls don't, puttar."

The wind howled outside. The lanterns dimmed for a moment, then flared again. Somewhere in the distance, a jackal cried.

They finished their meal, grateful and full. Seva Singh refused payment.

“It is seva, saab,” he said, bowing slightly. “You give us the blessing of serving.”

Arjun insisted, but the man raised his hand gently. “The hungry do not owe. Go safely. The road will be clear now.”

As the family walked back to their car, Tara turned once more to wave.

The dhaba looked distant already — its lights faint, almost dissolving into the darkness.

The next morning, they stopped at a police checkpost before entering Jaisalmer. The officer, a tall Rajasthani man with a heavy moustache, asked where they were coming from.

Arjun mentioned casually, “From Seva da Dhaba — the one near the dunes. Excellent food, I must say.”

The officer froze. “Which dhaba?”

“Seva da Dhaba,” Meera repeated. “About 40 km before this checkpoint.”

The officer stared at them, then exhaled slowly. “Sahib… that dhaba burned down ten years ago. The owner, Seva Singh, and all his men… died in the fire.”

For a long moment, no one spoke. The hum of desert wind filled the silence.

Tara clutched her mother’s hand. “But we ate there… last night.”

The officer’s eyes softened. “You’re not the first to say that, beti. They say his soul still runs that place — to feed those who are lost and hungry. Only appears to those who truly need it.”

The family sat in stunned silence as the truth settled over them like desert dust.

Somewhere behind them, beyond the dunes, the highway shimmered in the rising sun. And for a fleeting second, Arjun thought he saw a wisp of smoke curl up from the horizon — the faint outline of a dhaba, glimmering, before vanishing into thin air.

Long before the golden dunes of Rajasthan began to host tourists and SUVs, there stood a small roadside dhaba on the lonely stretch between Jodhpur and Jaisalmer. Travelers who drove through in those days swore by the same thing — Seva da Dhaba.

It was not much to look at — a tin-roofed shack made of sunbaked clay bricks, a few wooden benches, and a smoking tandoor that never went cold. But what drew people in wasn't the size — it was the soul of the place.And that soul was Seva Singh.

He was a towering Sikh, broad-shouldered, his beard tied neatly, eyes glinting with compassion. Every dawn, before the first truck rolled in, Seva Singh would stand facing the rising sun, palms folded, whispering his daily prayer.

"Jo aaya, Rab da mehmaan hai.

Je bhukha hai, taan Rab aap aaya."

(Whoever comes is a guest of God.

If he is hungry, it is God Himself who has come.)

To Seva Singh, seva — service — was not charity. It was worship.

He would often tell his staff, "We don't run a dhaba, puttaro. We run a langar for the road. These travelers, tired and lonely — we are their home tonight."

The regulars loved him. Truckers would stop just to greet him. Local villagers brought milk and ghee for free, knowing it would go into meals for strangers. His wife, Harleen, ran the small kitchen inside, always smiling, always singing old Punjabi hymns as she cooked.

Evenings were special.

As the desert cooled and the lamps were lit, the dhaba glowed like an oasis of warmth. Stray dogs slept under the benches, camel drivers shared jokes, and Seva Singh's laughter could be heard above the clatter of steel plates.

He never turned anyone away. Not once.

Even if they had no money, he would say, "Paisa Rabb da nahi, bhukh Rabb di hai. Eat, and go in peace."

The locals began calling him Baba Seva — the saint of the highway.

It happened on a midsummer night — the air heavy, the wind restless. The tandoor had been roaring since sunset; a group of truckers had stopped for dinner, and the smell of makki di roti and saag filled the night.

Harleen was inside, packing leftovers for a hungry shepherd. Seva Singh had just sent his helper, Gurmukh, to fetch more firewood from the back.

The storm came without any warning.

A violent gust tore through the desert, scattering sand and embers. The tandoor flames flared up, licking the tarpaulin

roof. Within moments, sparks rained down on the dry wood beams.

"Paani lao! Jaldi!" Seva shouted, rushing forward. But the fire was faster.

The oil lamps inside burst, feeding the inferno. Flames swallowed the counter, the benches, the spice sacks. Smoke thickened, choking the air. Harleen screamed for her husband. "Seva! The back door!"

He ran towards her — through the smoke, through the roar. But the ceiling collapsed before he could reach her.

The last thing anyone heard was his voice shouting,

"Langar band mat karna! Jisnu bhukh laggi hai, ohnu khana milna chahida!"

(Don't close the kitchen! Whoever is hungry must be fed!)

Then, the world went silent.

By dawn, only ashes remained. The police found five bodies — Seva Singh, Harleen, Gurmukh, and two boys who worked the night shift.

The authorities marked it as an accidental fire. Locals built a small shrine by the road, placing a rusted plate and a steel glass in his memory.

Truckers passing by would stop to leave rotis on the milestone — a tribute to the man who believed hunger was sacred.

Months passed. Then, one night, a driver came knocking at a dhaba twenty kilometers away, pale and trembling.

He swore he had eaten at Seva da Dhaba just an hour before. "The same man," he insisted. "Seva Singh himself — served me rotis and dal. I even saw his wife."

The other dhaba owners laughed it off, saying heat and fatigue make men see ghosts. But then, more stories came.

A lost traveler, a broken-down bus, a family caught in a storm — all claimed to have been fed at a dhaba that wasn't there the next day.

The locals began to whisper that Baba Seva had never left. That his seva continued even after death.

Those who believed said that on nights when the desert wind carried the scent of ghee and smoke, when a faint glow shimmered beyond the dunes — that was Seva da Dhaba returning to the mortal world.

It appeared only to the hungry. Only to those who needed it most.

Never to the greedy. Never to the wicked.

Years blurred into decades. Yet the spirit dhaba followed the same rhythm.

Lanterns lit without flame. Roti dough kneaded by invisible hands.

Footsteps echoing softly where sand should swallow all sound.

Travelers who dined there said the food was unlike any they had ever tasted — warm, comforting, filling yet light. Some claimed to hear faint chanting in the background, others noticed the strange stillness of the air, or the way shadows refused to move.

When asked who cooked, the answer was always the same:

A tall turbaned man with kind eyes.

But Seva's dhaba had rules. Ancient, invisible rules.

Those who entered hungry were welcomed. Those who entered with gratitude left blessed.

But those who brought greed, cruelty, or malice — the dhaba had no mercy for them.

No one knew this law until one fateful night — the night when two groups of travelers crossed paths on that haunted stretch.

One came seeking food. The other came seeking blood.

And when greed and goodness met under the same roof — the desert would once again witness Seva Singh's true seva: to feed the deserving and destroy the damned.

Present Day

Years after the Malhotra family's encounter, the legend continued to breathe quietly across the sands. Truckers told the story to new recruits. Tourists whispered it in hushed tones around campfires.

Some dismissed it as folklore. Others carried pictures of the dhaba in their wallets, swearing it had saved their lives.

Yet on moonless nights, when the wind blew from the north and the dunes glowed faintly like embers — a faint fragrance of burnt ghee and roasted flour filled the air.

That was the sign.

The Seva da Dhaba had awakened once more.

And somewhere out there, someone hungry was about to find their way home.

The desert wind that night was cold — the kind of cold that didn't belong to Rajasthan.It rolled like a whisper across the dunes, turning the air sharp and metallic.

A pale half-moon hung low, veiled behind drifting sand. The highway was silent except for the occasional hiss of wind brushing the guardrails.

A family was stranded there — their white Innova parked awkwardly by the side, bonnet open, hazard lights blinking like weak red eyes.

Inside sat Rajesh Bansal, his wife Sunita, and their teenage son Vivek.

They had left Jodhpur after sunset, aiming to reach Jaisalmer by midnight. But fate, as it often does, had other plans. The engine had coughed, sputtered, and died somewhere between nowhere and oblivion.

Rajesh stood outside, wiping sweat and frustration off his brow. "Battery's dead. Maybe alternator's gone."

Sunita leaned out the window. "You said we should've stayed back! Look at this— no network, no passing cars, and it's freezing."

Rajesh tried to smile. "We'll be fine. We'll flag someone down."

But no one came.

The highway was a serpent of darkness. Only the whine of the wind answered.

Then — a smell.

Warm. Familiar. Comforting.

Ghee. Smoke. Spices.

Sunita sniffed the air. "Rajesh… do you smell that?"

He did. A faint fragrance, drifting like a memory — roasted onions, cumin, butter sizzling on a tawa.

Vivek sat up suddenly. "Papa! Look!"

Down the road, a faint glow shimmered in the haze — soft, golden, like lantern light.

Rajesh blinked. "Must be a dhaba."

"But there wasn't any dhaba when we came this way in daylight," Sunita whispered.

He hesitated. The desert had no business smelling like dinner. And yet hunger overpowered caution.

"Come on," he said. "Maybe they can help us too."

They began walking toward the light. The sound of distant laughter reached them — faint, warm, human.

The glow grew brighter, revealing the silhouette of a dhaba — low-roofed, tin walls, a few charpoys outside, and a large tandoor glowing orange.

The same painted board creaked above the entrance:

"Seva da Dhaba – Rasoi di Khushboo, Seva di Pavitrata."

The place looked impossibly alive — like it had always been there.

Rajesh smiled in disbelief. "Well, I'll be damned. Smells amazing."

A tall Sikh man appeared at the doorway. Lantern light caught his face — eyes calm, turban immaculate, hands folded in greeting.

"Sat Sri Akal, ji. You look like you've travelled far. Come, the food is fresh."

Sunita hesitated. "We… didn't see this dhaba earlier today."

He smiled gently. "It appears when it's needed, madam ji."

His words should have sounded strange, but the warmth in his tone melted her doubt. They followed him inside.

The dhaba was alive with quiet motion — two young men at the counter, one turning rotis with smooth precision, another stirring daal over the fire. Shadows danced along the walls, but oddly, no sound of crackling wood came from the tandoor.

Still, the smell — oh, the smell — it wrapped around them like an embrace.

They sat. Plates of food arrived almost instantly — dal, sabzi, tandoori rotis brushed with ghee so rich it gleamed.

Rajesh took a bite and gasped. "This is… heavenly."

The Sikh chuckled softly. "Food is God's language, saab. It speaks to the hungry first."

Vivek smiled between mouthfuls. "Uncle, what's your name?"

"Seva Singh," he replied.

The name hung in the air like an echo.

Sunita's spoon paused. "Seva Singh…?"

He bowed slightly. “That was my name, yes.”

There it was again — that was. The same soft past tense, carrying weight beyond words.

A few kilometers away, two jeeps sped through the night. Inside were five men — local robbers, their faces half-covered with scarves, eyes gleaming with mischief and malice.

Their leader, Rafiq, spat out his bidi and grinned. “The tourist families are easy pickings. Empty road, rich cars, scared faces.”

Another man laughed. “We’ll take the jewelry, cash, everything. Dump the car in the sand.”

As they rounded a curve, one of them pointed. “Boss! Look there — a dhaba! Lights are on.”

Rafiq frowned. “At this hour?”

“Maybe that’s where they stopped. Jackpot!”

They slowed, their headlights slicing through the dust — and there it was: Seva da Dhaba, glowing like a beacon in the darkness.

Rafiq smirked. “Perfect. They won’t even see it coming.”

Inside, the Bansal family was finishing their meal when the jeeps rolled in. The growl of engines broke the calm.

Seva Singh looked toward the entrance, his eyes dimming slightly. The air shifted. The lantern flames trembled for the first time.

Rafiq entered first, swaggering. “Oye, langar wale! Got anything for us too?”

Seva Singh's tone was calm, almost patient. "Food is for all, beta. Sit, and you shall be fed."

The men dropped into chairs, eyes darting greedily toward the family.

Rajesh whispered to his wife, "Let's leave quickly."

But before they could stand, Rafiq rose, grinning. "Going somewhere, sahib?"

The gun in his hand gleamed.

"Just a friendly dinner," he said mockingly. "You pay the bill… and then some."

Vivek froze. Sunita gasped.

Seva Singh stood still, unmoving.

"Put that away, son," he said softly. "You dishonor the food."

Rafiq laughed. "You think I care, old man?" He grabbed a roti from the table, tore it in half, and threw it to the floor. "Here's your seva."

That was when the lights flickered.

The air grew thick — suffocatingly cold. The tandoor flared on its own, its orange glow turning deep crimson.

Rafiq frowned. "What the hell—"

The walls darkened as soot spread like veins. The smell of burning flesh — faint but distinct — filled the air.

The two helpers behind the counter stopped moving. Their faces… began to change. The warm brown of their skin charred to black. Their eyes glowed dull amber, like dying coals.

Rafiq stumbled back. "What the—what is this?"

Seva Singh's turban loosened, fluttering in the wind that had no source. His calm face began to blacken, his beard singed, his eyes now hollow and luminous.

He stepped forward. "Food is God's gift, beta. You came not for hunger… but for harm."

The robbers panicked. One fired his gun — the bullet passed through Seva Singh's chest, vanishing into smoke.

A hand — burned, skeletal — shot out from the shadow behind the counter, seizing the man's wrist. The robber screamed as his flesh sizzled, the metal of his weapon melting in his grip.

Another man tried to run, but the door was gone. Only darkness beyond the walls — shifting, breathing, alive.

The dhaba had transformed — charred beams, soot-smeared walls, smoke swirling in the corners. Flames danced across the roof, yet nothing burned.

Rafiq turned to flee but stumbled upon a mirror near the counter — and saw his own reflection burning.

Seva Singh's voice echoed, layered with others — Harleen's, Gurmukh's, countless souls speaking as one.

"You feed fear. We feed the hungry. Leave hunger alone — or join the feast."

The men screamed as invisible hands dragged them toward the tandoor. Their bodies thrashed, shadows writhing like torn cloth, until the flames swallowed their cries.

The smell of burnt flesh rose, mingling with ghee and smoke — until it became indistinguishable.

The silence afterward was deafening.

The fire dimmed. The walls brightened. The dhaba returned to its warm, lantern-lit state.

The Bansal family sat frozen.

Seva Singh turned toward them — calm again, his face unscarred, eyes kind.

"Do not fear," he said softly. "You were meant to be safe tonight."

Rajesh tried to speak, but no words came.

Seva smiled. "Eat one last bite before you go. It will keep you warm through the night."

They obeyed, hands trembling. The food was hot again — soft, rich, impossibly fresh.

Then, as they stood to thank him — the dhaba was gone.

They stood by their car, alone, the desert silent around them. The vehicle's headlights flickered back to life as if nothing had happened.

And yet, the faint aroma of tandoor and ghee lingered in the air.

At dawn, when they reached the next police checkpoint, they told the officer everything.

He listened quietly, expression unreadable. When they finished, he exhaled slowly and said,

"You are lucky, sahib. That stretch… it's cursed. Too many robbers died there over the years. But no one touches the innocent. They say Baba Seva still guards that road."

Rajesh swallowed hard. “We saw him. He saved us.”

The officer nodded. “Then thank him next time you’re hungry.”

Sunita glanced back down the highway. The morning sun painted the dunes gold.

For a fleeting second, she thought she saw a small shack shimmering in the heat haze — smoke curling softly from its roof, a turbaned man standing at its door, smiling.

Then it vanished.

The first rays of sun spilled across the dunes like liquid gold.

The night’s chill dissolved into warmth, and the sand glimmered as if nothing unholy had ever touched it.

Rajesh drove in silence. The steering wheel felt warm beneath his palms, though the engine that had died hours earlier now purred as if it had never failed.

Beside him, Sunita clutched the edge of her dupatta, eyes distant.

Vivek stared out the window, lips slightly parted.

No one spoke until the road straightened into the main Jaisalmer highway.

“What just happened?” Sunita whispered.

Rajesh shook his head. “I don’t know. But I think… we were saved.”

Vivek leaned forward. “By ghosts, Papa?”

Rajesh exhaled. “By someone who never stopped serving.”

The horizon rose ahead—distant fort walls shimmering like a mirage. For a moment, the family could almost believe the

night had been a fever dream. Yet the faint scent of smoke and ghee still clung to their clothes.

By noon they reached a roadside motel. The caretaker, a lean old man with silver hair, served them chai. When Rajesh mentioned *Seva da Dhaba*, the caretaker's cup froze midway to his lips.

"You saw *that* place?" he asked softly.

Rajesh nodded.

The old man sighed. "My father ate there when I was a boy. Said Baba Seva fed him for free during a sandstorm. When the dhaba burned, he cried for days."

He leaned closer. "They say the souls there rise when hunger cries louder than fear. Some call it a curse; others call it God's mercy."

Sunita's eyes softened. "Mercy, I think."

That evening, as the desert wind picked up again, Rajesh stood outside their motel. The sun had turned red behind the dunes. For an instant he thought he heard faint laughter—the easy, booming laugh of a large-hearted man.

He turned, half expecting to see a turbaned figure by the gate.

Only wind.

But the smell of roasting flour brushed past him—brief, unmistakable.

He whispered into the air, "Thank you, Baba Seva."

The wind answered with a long sigh and was gone.

Time carried the story forward like sand carried by the desert wind.

Truckers told it over cups of chai.

Tour guides repeated it to awed tourists under star-filled skies.

Someone painted a new milestone on that road:

"Here once stood Seva da Dhaba.

Feed the hungry. Fear nothing."

Sometimes travellers left chapatis or bottles of water by that stone.

Sometimes, those offerings disappeared by morning.

One winter, a lonely shepherd lost his way in a sandstorm. He wrapped his shawl tight, certain he would freeze before dawn. Then he saw a faint glow ahead and heard the clang of a ladle against steel.

He followed the light.

There stood a dhaba—warm, bright, exactly as travellers had described.

A man in a blue turban smiled and said, "You must be cold, beta. Sit, eat."

The shepherd ate until his hands stopped shaking. When he looked up to thank his host, there was only sand swirling where the fire had been.

The next day he told everyone in the village,

"Seva Singh ji fed me. I swear it."

No one doubted him. Not here.

They say some nights the dunes glow faintly orange, and the highway hums with an invisible rhythm.

If you stop your car, you might smell butter heating on an old tawa.

If you listen closely, you might hear a calm voice reciting a simple prayer:

"Langar band mat karna…

Jisnu bhukh laggi hai, ohnu khana milna chahida."

(Do not close the kitchen. Whoever is hungry must be fed.)

And then, maybe just for a moment, the outline of a dhaba appears—

lanterns glowing, tandoor alive, a man with kind eyes standing by the doorway, waiting.

If you are truly hungry—hungry of stomach or of soul—he will serve you.

But if you carry greed in your heart, you will never find that road.

Because *Seva da Dhaba* is not on any map.

It lives only in need, only in goodness.

It appears when hunger becomes prayer.

And every time it does, somewhere in the desert night,

Baba Seva Singh smiles, and the kitchen begins again.

Nyay Sarvo Pari

The fog came down like a living thing, swallowing the narrow road that twisted through the eastern hills. Inspector **Arjun Deka** lowered the car window, letting the chill air sting his face. Below, a valley yawned — vast and green, wreathed in coils of white mist. His driver muttered a quiet prayer, fingers brushing the talisman on the dashboard.

"Sir, are you sure about this place?" the man asked. "Locals say Khempur village is… cursed."

Arjun gave a dry chuckle. "They also say ghosts guard the tea fields. Don't believe every tale you hear."

But as the jeep crawled through the last turn, he saw it — **Khempur**, perched like a secret on the mountainside. Smoke drifted from chimneys. The roofs were slanted, carved from dark cedar. Prayer flags fluttered faintly, snapping in the wind. And somewhere beyond the dense line of forest, something stirred — unseen, yet heavy in the air.

They passed a small wooden arch with faded carvings of owls and eyes. A stone tablet below it read, *"Truth shall rise from the ashes."*

"Stop here," Arjun said.

The villagers had gathered ahead, a silent crowd of faces. Their eyes — some curious, most wary — followed the outsider. Elder **Lhamo**, small and stooped, stepped forward with a lantern. Her silver hair was tied in a knot, and her voice, though thin, carried weight.

"You're late, Inspector Deka. The forest waits."

Arjun frowned. "I'm here to investigate the deaths. Four men in three months, correct?"

Lhamo nodded slowly. "They were guilty. The forest only punishes the guilty."

Her words were matter-of-fact, not boastful. Behind her, the villagers muttered prayers, clutching amulets.

Arjun looked toward the treeline. The forest beyond Khempur was ancient — trees rising like black pillars, their roots gnarled and deep. Somewhere within, he knew, stood the cabin. The so-called *House of Judgement*.

He had read the reports. Each victim — accused of crimes like theft, assault, even murder — had been sent there as part of an age-old custom. By dawn, their bodies were found mutilated, eyes wide in terror. No sign of struggle. No footprints. No explanation.

Superstition, Arjun thought. The human mind invents what it cannot explain.

That evening, in the village guest hut, he sat by a crackling fire with Elder Lhamo. The shadows on her face seemed to move like living things.

"Tell me about this tribal leader," Arjun said, flipping open his notebook. "Tenzing Khrowa."

Her eyes flickered with something that was not quite fear. "Tenzing was our chief. Wise, righteous, but harsh. He believed justice was sacred — that lies poisoned the soul. When he died, the rains didn't stop for seven days. His cabin still stands where he breathed his last. Since then, his spirit judges the wicked."

Arjun smirked faintly. "And you believe this?"

"I don't need to believe," she said, leaning closer. "I have seen."

She uncurled her hand, showing a strip of faded cloth — torn, bloodstained. "From the last man who confessed before dawn. He said Tenzing asked him questions no one else could know. About the night of his crime. Then he screamed for forgiveness until his heart burst."

The fire cracked sharply, throwing sparks into the air.

Later, as Arjun stepped outside, he heard distant chanting. A group of villagers carried torches toward the forest. In their midst was a young man — **Pema** — bound at the wrists. His face was pale, eyes darting like a trapped animal's.

"What's happening?" Arjun demanded.

Lhamo appeared beside him. "The ritual begins. Pema stole from the temple fund. Tonight, he will prove his innocence."

"You can't just—"

But his words drowned beneath the droning chants. The villagers moved as one, torches flaring against the blackness. The sound of drums rolled through the valley, deep and ominous.

Arjun followed, against better judgment, into the woods. The path narrowed, swallowed by trees. Strange symbols marked the trunks — circles, eyes, blades. The air grew cold, dense with pine and something else… something metallic, like the smell of old blood.

At last, the forest opened into a small clearing. There it stood — the **Cabin of Tenzing Khrowa**.

It was smaller than Arjun expected — a squat wooden structure with a sagging roof and boarded windows. Moss crept up the sides like rot. Wind sighed through its cracks, making it moan softly.

"This is it," whispered Lhamo. "The place of judgement."

They pushed Pema forward. He was trembling violently. "Please… I didn't take the coins! I swear!"

"The forest will know," Lhamo said.

Arjun stepped between them. "Enough of this! This is madness!"

But the villagers were unyielding. Two men opened the cabin door. The darkness inside was absolute — a thick, swallowing void. Pema was shoved inside, the door slammed shut, and a wooden beam dropped across it from the outside.

Arjun banged on it. "You can't lock him in!"

"It is not we who judge," Lhamo said quietly. "It is the spirit who decides."

The drums stopped. The forest fell silent. Only the whisper of wind remained, winding through the trees like a voice half-heard.

Somewhere far off, a wolf howled.

And from within the cabin came a low, shuddering sound — not quite a scream, not quite a sob.

Arjun's breath misted in the cold. His skepticism flickered. For the first time, he felt it — the invisible presence pressing around them, thick as fog.

Something was awake in the woods.

Something that had been waiting

The moon was a thin, crooked smile above the forest that night. Pale light spilled between the pines, painting the path in silver and shadow. The villagers had gone — their chants fading like a distant memory — leaving only Inspector Arjun Deka, Elder Lhamo, and the echo of their drums hanging in the mist.

The cabin loomed ahead, silent and watchful. Arjun paced near the door, anger gnawing at his nerves. "He's just a boy," he muttered. "You can't lock him in there like a goat for slaughter."

Elder Lhamo stood unmoving, her eyes fixed on the forest. "The spirit sees what our eyes cannot," she said. "If Pema's heart is clean, he will walk out when the dawn comes."

"And if not?" Arjun asked.

She didn't answer.

The wind hissed through the cedar leaves, carrying a whisper that sounded almost like a voice. Arjun turned sharply, hand on his holster, but there was only darkness.

He decided to stay.

He ordered his driver to return to the village with the jeep. He would keep watch by the cabin until morning, both to protect the boy — and to prove the legend wrong.

The night deepened. A heavy mist rolled in, thick enough to muffle sound. The forest seemed to breathe. Each exhale came as a cold gust that rattled the branches and made the door shiver on its hinges.

Inside, Pema sat huddled in a corner. His breath came in short gasps; his eyes fixed on the single window — a small

square of blackness. The silence was unnatural, pressing against his eardrums until he could hear his own pulse.

He whispered a prayer his mother had taught him. "O spirits of the hills, keep me safe…"

Something creaked.

The boards above him groaned, slow and deliberate. He looked up, his heart hammering. The sound came again — a dragging noise, like feet shuffling across the roof.

Then silence.

He waited. One minute. Two.

A faint tapping started at the window — one, two, three knocks. He froze. The knocks came again, harder this time.

Pema forced himself to speak. "Who's there?"

No answer.

He crawled toward the door. "Inspector?" he called. "Is that you?"

Outside, Arjun stiffened. He had heard it too — the dull thuds echoing from within the cabin walls. He raised his flashlight, sweeping the trees. Nothing moved.

"Pema?" he shouted. "It's all right, I'm here."

"Sir…" came the boy's trembling voice. "Someone's outside the window."

Arjun walked around the cabin, the flashlight beam cutting through the mist. The glass was opaque with grime, but behind it, he could see movement — a shadow, tall and still.

He froze. "Who's there?" he barked.

The figure turned — and vanished.

A chill swept through him. He pressed closer, scanning the ground. No footprints in the mud. No sign of anyone at all.

The forest, however, had changed. The air had grown dense, heavy with a faint scent of burning wood — like old incense and smoke. The sound of bells drifted faintly through the trees, though he saw none.

When he returned to the front, Elder Lhamo was gone.

Inside the cabin, Pema began to weep. He pressed his palms together and rocked gently. "Please," he whispered. "I didn't steal anything. I didn't…"

The candle beside him flickered violently. The flame bent sideways as if blown by an unseen breath.

Then it went out.

Darkness swallowed the room.

A low voice came from somewhere in the shadows.

"Are you certain?"

Pema stopped breathing. The voice was deep — calm but resonant, like the rumble of thunder far away. It carried the weight of authority.

"Wh-who… who's there?" he stammered.

A shape began to form in the darkness — not seen, but felt. It moved closer, bringing with it the smell of rain-soaked earth and blood. A faint blue glow began to pulse at the far end of the cabin. From within it, a figure emerged — tall, broad-shouldered, wearing the tattered remains of tribal robes.

The spirit's face was obscured by shadow, but its eyes… its eyes burned faintly like coals in the night.

"I am Tenzing Khrowa," the voice said. "Chief of Khempur. Keeper of truth. You stand before my house, boy. Why do you lie to me?"

Pema dropped to his knees, shaking violently. "I'm not lying! I didn't take the coins! I swear!"

The spirit tilted its head slightly. "Then why do your hands tremble? Why does your heart race when you speak of it?"

Pema began to sob. "I only touched the box! I didn't take anything! I just wanted to see—"

The ghost's voice thundered. "You *desired* what was not yours. And in desire begins the root of theft."

The walls of the cabin groaned. The air seemed to press inward, as if the forest itself was closing in. A thousand whispers filled the room — accusing, angry, mournful.

"No! Please! I didn't—" Pema screamed.

The spirit loomed over him, reaching out a translucent hand. Its touch was cold fire — burning without flame. Pema's vision blurred as images flooded his mind: the temple, the open chest, his hand hovering over the silver coins. He had hesitated… but had he taken them?

He couldn't remember anymore. The memory twisted, warped by terror.

"Confess," the voice commanded. "Confess, and I may grant you mercy."

Outside, Arjun heard the scream. He rushed to the door, slamming against it with his shoulder. "Pema! Open up!"

The beam held firm. He drew his revolver and fired at the lock. The bullet tore through the wood, splintering it, but the

door did not move. The air inside seemed to thrum, like something alive was resisting him.

"Damn it!" he shouted. "Hold on!"

From within came another sound — low, guttural chanting. Not the boy's voice. Something older. The forest echoed with it.

Arjun stumbled back, clutching his head. The chant wasn't in any language he knew, yet the meaning cut through him: *Truth, blood, and balance.*

The temperature plummeted. His breath came out in white bursts. From the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a man standing between the trees — tall, wrapped in furs, holding a staff carved with skulls. When he turned, the figure was gone.

The mist thickened, swirling like smoke. Shapes moved within it — faces, eyes, half-formed bodies whispering in the dark.

Then, silence.

The door creaked open.

Arjun raised his gun, heart pounding. The boy stood in the doorway, pale as bone. His eyes were wide, staring but unseeing.

"Pema?" Arjun called softly.

The boy blinked once. His lips trembled. "He knows," he whispered. "He knows everything."

Then he collapsed.

Arjun caught him before he hit the ground. The boy's body was freezing cold, like he'd been submerged in ice. On his

wrist, burned into the skin, was a mark — a circular symbol with an eye in the center.

A faint voice seemed to drift from the trees:

"The first truth is never the last."

Arjun looked around wildly, but there was no one.

Behind him, the cabin door swung shut on its own.

And from within, he heard it — the deep, rhythmic sound of someone breathing. Someone still inside.

Dawn came to Khempur with slow reluctance. The mist hung thick and low, as if the night had refused to leave. A pale sun bled faintly through the clouds, painting the hills in shades of ash and gold.

Inspector Arjun Deka hadn't slept. He sat outside the cabin, back against a fallen log, staring at the boy who lay unconscious on a makeshift cot. Pema's skin was clammy, his lips bloodless. The strange *burned mark* on his wrist seemed to shimmer faintly in the morning light — an eye enclosed in a perfect circle, its lines carved deep like ritual branding.

The forest around them was silent — too silent. Even the birds had stopped singing.

Elder Lhamo appeared at sunrise, walking down the narrow trail with two villagers in tow. When she saw the boy, she closed her eyes and whispered a prayer.

"Is he dead?" she asked quietly.

"No," Arjun said, rubbing his temples. "But he's not awake either. Just… trapped. Like his mind isn't here."

Lhamo crouched beside Pema and traced the burned symbol with trembling fingers. Her expression hardened. "He has been *marked*. The spirit has spoken."

"I don't care about your spirit," Arjun snapped. "Someone did this to him. Maybe gas, maybe poison— something in that cabin. I'll find it."

Lhamo looked up, her eyes sharp as glass. "Inspector, that cabin has no fire, no light, no warmth. It has stood untouched for forty years. The mark is not man-made."

Arjun ignored her and pushed open the cabin door. The interior looked different in daylight — smaller, almost pitiful. Dust floated in shafts of light. The air was thick with a smell that shouldn't have been there — incense and charred wood.

He scanned the walls. Strange carvings ran along the beams — geometric lines, symbols that looked almost like eyes or suns. Some were smeared, as if scratched out. In the corner lay a small wooden stool, tipped over, and beside it, faint footprints — bare, adult-sized, trailing toward the back wall… and then stopping abruptly.

Arjun knelt and touched the ground. The wood there was cold — unnaturally so. Beneath it, he heard something faint, like a slow heartbeat pulsing through the earth.

"What the hell…" he muttered.

Outside, a gust of wind rushed through the trees, slamming the door shut behind him.

He spun around, pistol raised. The air grew dense, heavy, almost liquid. Dust stirred in lazy spirals, illuminated by thin spears of sunlight. And then, faintly — almost imperceptibly — he heard it.

Breathing.

Not his own.

It came from all around him — low, rhythmic, slow. As if the cabin itself inhaled and exhaled.

"Who's there?" Arjun demanded.

No reply.

He backed toward the door and yanked it open. The forest beyond seemed to waver, like a mirage. For a moment, he could have sworn the trees leaned closer — their trunks bent at unnatural angles, as though listening.

When he stepped out, Elder Lhamo was waiting.

"You shouldn't go in without asking permission," she said.

Arjun exhaled sharply. "Permission from whom?"

"From the forest," she replied simply.

He stared at her. "You people have lived too long in fear."

She smiled faintly. "And yet, fear keeps us alive."

That afternoon, Pema awoke — screaming.

Arjun and Lhamo rushed to his side. The boy thrashed wildly, eyes unfocused. His hands clawed at his throat as if something invisible were choking him.

"Pema!" Arjun held him down. "You're safe! You're out of the cabin!"

Pema's gaze flicked toward him, wild and terrified. "He… he asked me questions," he gasped. "Things no one knew. About the coins. About my father. About the night I—" He stopped, choking on the words.

"What night?" Arjun pressed. "Tell me what you saw."

Pema shook his head violently. "He said if I lie, he'll come back."

The boy's pulse raced under Arjun's grip. His eyes darted to the trees beyond the clearing, as though expecting something — or someone — to emerge.

Then he whispered, voice trembling. "He wasn't alone."

Lhamo leaned closer. "What do you mean?"

Pema's eyes filled with tears. "There were *voices* with him. Many. Like the dead were whispering from the walls."

He shuddered violently and fell back, unconscious once more.

That evening, Arjun sat outside the village meeting hall, staring at the dying light. Smoke from cooking fires rose in pale ribbons against the mountains. He felt tired — not just from lack of sleep, but from the growing sense that something ancient and unexplainable was closing in.

Lhamo joined him, holding a small earthen pot of tea. "You think this is superstition," she said softly, handing him a cup.

"I think someone is using fear to control this village," Arjun replied. "And if I find out who, they'll face real justice."

She studied him for a long moment. "You remind me of Tenzing when he was young. Proud. Certain that truth was a blade he alone could wield."

Arjun looked at her sharply. "You knew him?"

Her eyes clouded. "Everyone knew him. He ruled Khempur with wisdom… and with cruelty. His justice was absolute. But there was one sin he could never forgive — *betrayal*."

She looked toward the forest. “They say he was betrayed by his own kin. And that on the night he died, he swore his soul would not rest until every liar faced his judgement.”

“Ghost stories,” Arjun said, though his voice lacked conviction.

Lhamo turned to him. “Then explain this, Inspector — why did every guilty man who entered that cabin die, and every innocent one live? Is that coincidence?”

Arjun opened his mouth, but no words came. Because deep down, even logic had begun to falter.

That night, rain came — sudden and relentless. The wind howled through the pines like something alive. The power flickered and died, plunging the village into darkness.

Arjun lit a lantern and sat by the window of his hut. In the distance, lightning split the sky, illuminating the forest. For a split second, he saw the silhouette of the cabin — and something standing in front of it. A tall figure with a staff, unmoving, facing the village.

The lantern flame flickered violently. The windowpane rattled.

Then came the whisper.

Low, indistinct, but right beside his ear.

“Why do you seek what you do not understand?”

Arjun spun around, gun raised — no one there.

Rain lashed the roof. The shadows danced madly.

He backed toward the wall, heart pounding. His reflection in the glass wavered — but it wasn’t his reflection anymore.

The face looking back was older, scarred, eyes burning faintly with blue fire.

The lamp went out.

The voice came again, this time from everywhere at once.

"The forest breathes. And those who lie — feed it."

A gust of icy wind blew the window open. Papers scattered. The lantern crashed to the floor and shattered.

Arjun fumbled for his flashlight and pointed it toward the door.

There — muddy footprints. Leading *inside.*

He aimed the beam higher. The wet prints ended just before his table. And standing above them was a man — soaked, barefoot, his chest marked with tribal tattoos. His face was pale, water dripping from his hair.

"Tenzing Khrowa," Arjun breathed.

The figure's mouth moved, but no sound came. Instead, a deep vibration rolled through the hut — a single word echoing from nowhere and everywhere.

"Confess."

And then, the figure vanished — as if swallowed by the rain.

Outside, the forest shifted. The wind carried whispers again — hundreds of them. Some cried, some laughed, some murmured in languages long forgotten.

Arjun stumbled to the door and stared out. The mist had returned, thicker than before. And from its depths, faint lights flickered — like dozens of lanterns swaying between the trees.

But there were no villagers. Only the forest. Only the breath of something ancient and awake.

For the first time, Arjun Deka — a man of law, reason, and order — felt the unmistakable taste of fear.

And deep in the woods, the cabin door creaked open on its own.

Something had called.

And something had answered.

By morning, the storm had passed, leaving Khempur cloaked in mist thick enough to hide the sun. The village was hushed, its people reluctant to step outside. Even the dogs, usually restless, lay silent under the eaves.

Inspector Arjun Deka walked through the muddy lanes, his boots squelching with every step. He hadn't slept. Every time he'd closed his eyes, he'd seen that face again — scarred, wet, and ancient.

When he reached the square, Elder Lhamo was waiting near the shrine, arranging marigolds before a stone idol of a faceless deity.

"You saw him," she said quietly, not looking up.

Arjun stiffened. "I saw… something. Maybe a trick of the storm."

"The storm does not make footprints," she said. "The forest came to you. It calls when it wants to be heard."

Arjun knelt beside her. "What does it want?"

"Truth," she whispered. "Always truth. That is what Tenzing demanded in life — and in death, he demands it still."

He glanced toward the forest. “Then maybe it’s time I ask him myself.”

Lhamo’s hand shot out, gripping his wrist with surprising strength. “Don’t speak so easily of meeting the dead. They listen when you call.”

But Arjun had already made up his mind.

By dusk, he stood once again at the edge of the woods. The path to the Judgement Cabin was narrower than he remembered, as though the trees had crept closer overnight. Mist coiled around their roots like pale serpents.

He carried only a lantern, a small camera, and his revolver. The air was sharp, metallic — laced with the faint scent of incense and decay.

Each step deeper into the forest felt heavier, as though the ground itself resisted him. The forest made strange sounds — not of birds or insects, but sighs, whispers, breaths that seemed to rise from the soil.

The cabin appeared ahead, hunched like a crouching beast. Its windows were black hollows. A single strip of prayer cloth fluttered on the roof beam, its color drained by years.

Arjun hesitated at the threshold. The wood was slick with dew. A faint warmth pulsed from within — slow, rhythmic, almost like a heartbeat.

He pushed the door open.

The air inside was colder than the rain-soaked forest. The lantern flame trembled. The smell of earth and old blood was stronger here, layered with rot and smoke.

He turned in a slow circle. The carvings on the walls — eyes, circles, symbols — seemed to shimmer faintly in the dim light.

He took out his camera and snapped a photo. The flash went off, blinding him for a second. When his vision cleared, the room looked… different.

There was a figure sitting on the stool by the corner.

A man.

Tall, broad, draped in furs and beads. His skin was ashen. His hair hung in thick braids, streaked with grey.

His eyes were open.

And they were staring directly at Arjun.

"Who are you?" Arjun demanded, voice low, weapon raised.

The figure did not move, but a whisper filled the air — a voice not from the body but from the walls, the floor, the very air around him.

"You came seeking truth," it said. "Then speak it."

Arjun's grip tightened on the gun. "Tenzing Khrowa?"

A pause. Then: "Names are for the living. I am what remains when names are forgotten."

Arjun swallowed hard. "You're no ghost. Someone's using these legends to scare people — to kill them. Who's behind this?"

The silence that followed was immense. Then, without warning, the cabin door slammed shut, plunging the room into total darkness.

The lantern went out.

The voice grew deeper, closer.

"You believe justice belongs to you, man of law. You who wear iron and speak of proof. Tell me — have you never lied?"

Arjun spun, light from his flashlight cutting through the dark. The beam caught movement — dozens of faces forming in the air, transparent, pale, eyes wide and unblinking. They pressed against the walls like trapped souls.

Each one whispered in a different voice — pleading, sobbing, accusing.

"You called them criminals."

"You took their truth."

"You thought your law could cleanse their blood."

Arjun's flashlight flickered wildly. His knees trembled. "Stop this!" he shouted.

The spirit's voice boomed, filling the cabin. "You judge the living. I judge the soul."

Then came a sound like tearing cloth — deep, wet, resonant. The floorboards beneath Arjun split open, revealing darkness beneath, pulsing like flesh. From it rose a column of cold blue light.

And within it, Tenzing Khrowa's face — clear, terrible, illuminated by the glow. His eyes were pits of white flame.

"You seek the truth of others," the spirit thundered. "But what of your own?"

The light engulfed Arjun. Images flashed in his mind — his wife's face, the courtroom in Guwahati, the day he'd buried

evidence to protect a fellow officer. He gasped, clutching his head.

"No!"

"You lied to save a friend. You silenced a witness. You called it mercy. Was that justice, Arjun Deka?"

He fell to his knees, shaking violently. The air was alive — vibrating with whispers.

"I did what I had to!" he screamed. "He wasn't guilty! The system would've destroyed him—"

"The system is not truth," the spirit hissed. "And you are not its keeper."

The blue light dimmed, flickering like a dying flame. The ghost's shape began to shift, becoming less human, more monstrous — its ribs visible through translucent skin, its jaw unhinging unnaturally.

"Confess," it roared, voice shaking the walls. "Confess and be freed."

Arjun stared into those burning eyes. And then, something inside him broke.

"I lied," he whispered. "I tampered with evidence. I let a murderer walk free."

The whispering stopped. The cabin grew utterly still.

Then, softly — almost tenderly — the ghost spoke:

"Truth, at last."

Arjun gasped for air. The weight pressing on his chest lifted. The light faded.

When he looked up, the cabin was empty again.

Only the carvings on the wall seemed different now — the central symbol, once faint, now burned bright and new: the *eye within the circle*.

Arjun staggered outside, gulping the night air. His lantern sputtered back to life. The mist was thicker than ever. But the forest was no longer silent — it *breathed*.

Every gust of wind felt like an exhale. The trees swayed gently, whispering. Somewhere far off, a drum began to beat — slow, rhythmic, steady.

And then, a voice — not from the woods this time, but from within him.

"The forest does not punish," it said. "It remembers."

He turned back toward the cabin. For a brief moment, he thought he saw Tenzing's figure standing at the doorway again — not menacing, but solemn, almost mournful.

Then the mist swallowed it whole.

When Arjun stumbled back into the village, drenched and shaking, Elder Lhamo was waiting. She took one look at him and knew.

"You have seen him," she said.

He nodded weakly. "He… he made me see things. Made me confess."

She handed him a cup of steaming tea. "The forest never lies, Inspector. But it never forgets, either."

He looked down at his hand — and froze.

A new mark had appeared on his wrist. The same as Pema's. The eye within the circle.

But his glowed faintly red.

Lhamo's face turned pale. "You were judged."

Arjun's voice broke. "And?"

She met his gaze, her voice barely above a whisper.

"The red mark means guilt."

Outside, thunder rumbled again in the distance. The forest sighed, as if in satisfaction.

And somewhere in the darkness, the cabin door creaked open once more — ready for its next trial.

The mark on Arjun's wrist would not fade.

By the third dawn it had darkened, the skin around it swollen and hot, as if the forest had branded him from within.

Every heartbeat throbbed against the circle-and-eye, a steady reminder: **You were judged.**

He wrapped the wrist in cloth and tried to busy himself with investigation. Anything to bury the memory of the cabin, the whispers, the confession torn out of him by something that was not alive.

But the villagers had begun to change.

Wherever he walked, doors closed. Mothers pulled children aside. The very air of Khempur seemed to hum with quiet awe — and dread.

"He has the mark," they murmured. "The forest found him wanting."

Only **Elder Lhamo** would still meet his gaze.

She came to his hut that evening, bringing a small bundle wrapped in goatskin.

"This belonged to Tenzing," she said. "You wanted truth — now you must see all of it."

Inside were relics: a tarnished pendant, a fragment of parchment, and a small wooden carving of an owl with human eyes.

Arjun turned the parchment over carefully. It was brittle, smeared with old blood. The script was tribal, looping and jagged.

"What does it say?" he asked.

Lhamo stared at the words for a long time before answering. "It is his last decree — the one he wrote before he died."

She read aloud, voice quavering:

'Let the land itself bear witness. Let the guilty feed the soil, and the innocent walk free. I bind my soul to this forest until deceit is gone from it.'

Arjun felt the hairs rise on his arms. "He cursed himself?"

"Not a curse," Lhamo said. "A vow. But vows have hunger. They must be fed."

He stared at her. "How did he die, Lhamo? Tell me the truth."

She hesitated, then gestured for him to follow.

They walked at dusk, past the prayer flags and the silent shrines, down into a ravine where the earth smelled of iron.

The path wound between black stones scarred by ancient fire.

Lhamo's lantern cast trembling light over a mound half-hidden by ferns.

"This is where he fell," she said. "Tenzing was betrayed by his own council. They accused him of murder — the death of a young herder. He swore innocence, but the council feared him. They locked him in his cabin, the same as the guilty. By morning, he was gone."

"Gone?" Arjun echoed.

"No body. Only his staff — and that symbol burned into the floor."

She touched the pendant in Arjun's hand. "They thought the forest devoured him. But the next night, the herder's true killer was found dead on this very spot, face turned toward the mountain, eyes burned white. Since then, every liar who enters that house meets the same fate."

Arjun stared at the mound, rain beginning to patter around them. "So the ghost was born from injustice."

Lhamo nodded. "Justice twisted into vengeance. The forest learned from him. It judges now in his name — but the forest cannot know mercy."

He looked up sharply. "Then Pema—?"

"Alive, because his sin was small," she said. "Desire, not theft. But you…" Her eyes dropped to his bandaged wrist. "…the forest tasted real guilt in you. It will not stop."

Thunder rolled through the ravine. The air thickened, charged, as if the earth itself listened.

"What do you mean, *not stop*?" Arjun asked.

"The vow seeks balance," Lhamo whispered. "Every unpunished sin draws the spirit closer. Unless the truth of Tenzing's own death is faced — his vow will keep claiming the guilty forever, even those beyond these hills."

Arjun felt a cold certainty settle in his stomach.

If the curse had begun with betrayal, then ending it meant exposing the betrayers.

That night he broke into the council storehouse — a squat building at the edge of the village, its doors sealed with wax and bone charms. Inside, the air was dry and thick with dust. Scrolls and relics lined the walls, offerings to gods long forgotten.

He found the record box easily enough. The lid creaked open. Within lay documents — council rulings, execution orders, and at the bottom, a leather journal. *Tenzing Khrowa* embossed on its cover.

He opened it by lantern-light.

The early pages were filled with neat handwriting — accounts of harvests, tribal disputes, judgments rendered. But toward the end, the script grew erratic.

"They conspire. Dorje and the others. They say I killed the boy. They will lock me away. But the forest knows truth. The forest will judge us all."

Arjun flipped another page — and froze.

There was a name written several times, scrawled over and over until the ink tore through the paper: **LHAMO**.

He read the final entry aloud under his breath:

"She swore loyalty. She lied. She wanted my seat. The forest shall remember her face."

A gust of wind slammed the shutters open. The lantern flared. For a heartbeat, the air shimmered — and in its reflection on the wall he saw Tenzing's silhouette standing behind him, motionless.

"Truth," the voice whispered. "Truth buried is truth reborn."

The pages burst into flame.

Arjun stumbled back as the fire devoured the journal. The heat was unnatural — blue and cold. The whisper followed him out the door, curling through the smoke:

"Bring her to me."

He ran through the sleeping village, the rain turning to needles against his skin. Lhamo's hut stood at the top of the hill, its window glowing faintly. He burst inside.

She sat before a small altar, hands folded, as though expecting him.

"You read it," she said calmly.

"Tell me it's a lie."

Her expression didn't change. "I was young. Ambitious. The council wanted him gone. He would have ruled forever. We feared he'd become a tyrant."

"You framed him."

"I saved the village," she snapped. "His justice had turned to cruelty. He punished thought, not deed. He needed to end."

Arjun's voice shook. "And so you fed his spirit to the forest — and it has fed on guilt ever since."

She looked past him toward the rain-blurred woods. "A small price for peace."

A deep rumble rolled through the ground beneath them. The oil lamps flickered. The smell of wet soil flooded the hut.

Arjun stepped back. "You hear that?"

Lhamo's lips parted. "He's listening."

The floorboards splintered. Roots burst through the earth, snaking around her ankles, twisting upward. She screamed, clawing at them, but the vines tightened, dragging her toward the door.

"Forgive me!" she shrieked. "Tenzing, forgive me!"

The wind howled, carrying her voice into the forest. The door blew open — and she was gone.

Arjun stared into the darkness beyond, heart hammering.

The forest breathed again, louder this time. Each exhale seemed to whisper a single word.

"Balance."

Rain hissed, steam rising from the ground where she'd stood. In the silence that followed, Arjun knew the truth. The forest's justice wasn't vengeance — it was hunger.

And now that hunger had marked *him*.

When he looked down, the red symbol on his wrist was pulsing like a heartbeat.

Somewhere far below, deep in the valley, a drum began to beat — slow, steady, and patient.

The forest had begun its final trial.

The rain did not stop for three days.

The valley drowned in mist; the hills melted into pale ghosts against a bruised sky.

Arjun Deka had not slept. He sat in his hut beside the extinguished fire, feeling the pulse of the mark on his wrist echo through his veins.

Every throb whispered one command: **Come back.**

By the fourth night he gave in.

He slung his rifle across his shoulder—not out of faith, but habit—and followed the old trail to the forest.

The path that once felt alive with sound now pulsed with silence. Even the cicadas had fled.

Somewhere above him the ridge flickered with sheet-lightning, each flash briefly painting the trees in bone-white light.

When the cabin appeared through the fog, it looked smaller than he remembered—half swallowed by moss and vines, the wood dark with age and rain.

The door stood open, creaking on its hinges, waiting.

He stepped inside.

The smell hit first: damp earth, old smoke, the faint metallic sting of dried blood.

The circle he had seen before still marked the floor, though now the lines pulsed faintly red—as if breathing.

Arjun placed the rifle against the wall. "I came back," he said into the emptiness.

His voice was hoarse, almost lost in the sound of rain on the roof.

"You were right," he continued. "She betrayed you. But your vow—it's killing more than the guilty now."

The shadows thickened near the far corner. Then came the sound of a slow footstep, heavy, deliberate.

A tall figure emerged from the dark.

Tenzing Khrowa's spirit looked almost human—broad-shouldered, with skin the color of ash and eyes like fire caught in water. His tribal necklace of bone and amber glowed faintly around his throat.

"Inspector Deka," the voice rumbled, neither kind nor cruel. "You return of your own will. Do you seek mercy or judgment?"

Arjun swallowed. "Neither. I seek release. For you—and for them."

The spirit regarded him silently. Rain drummed harder on the roof, each drop a hammer-blow.

"You wear the mark," Tenzing said at last. "You are already part of the vow."

"Then end it with me," Arjun said. "Let the forest rest."

A sound like wind through a thousand leaves rose around them. "Rest comes only with truth."

"Then listen," Arjun said, stepping into the circle. "The truth is that justice became your prison. You vowed to punish deceit, but in doing so, you became its tool. The forest feeds because you keep feeding it."

For a long moment, nothing moved. Then the spirit's face twisted, half in anger, half in sorrow.

"You speak as though the dead can choose their hunger."

"Maybe they can't," Arjun said quietly. "But I can."

He reached into his coat and drew out the burned remnant of Tenzing's journal—the one page that had not turned to ash. On it, faint but legible, was a single line:

'If I ever forget compassion, may the forest forget me.'

Tenzing's eyes widened. The red glow in the circle faltered.

"Compassion," Arjun whispered. "You wrote this. Before anger. Before the curse."

The ghost staggered back, gripping his chest as though something inside him tore.

Outside, the forest groaned—a deep, pained sound. Trees bent inward, branches snapping like bones.

Arjun felt the floor shake beneath him. The mark on his wrist burned white.

"Release them," he shouted over the roar. "Release yourself!"

The spirit's voice broke. "And what of the guilty?"

"Let the living judge the living!"

For the first time, the great figure bowed his head.

A wind howled through the cabin, sucking the air from the room. The walls split, roots recoiling into the ground. Light burst from the circle, blinding, pure—then faded to gray.

When Arjun opened his eyes, the cabin was gone.

He stood in the middle of an empty clearing. Only the pendant remained in the grass, gleaming faintly.

He woke three days later in the village.

The villagers had found him lying near the river, unconscious but alive.

The mark on his wrist had vanished, leaving only a faint scar like a healed burn.

Lhamo's hut was empty. Her name, her history—gone. Even her shrine had turned to dust. It was as though the forest had rewritten its own memory.

That night, the rain stopped for the first time in weeks. The sky cleared, revealing a silver moon over the mountains.

Arjun climbed the ridge above Khempur and looked down at the valley. The forest below shimmered softly, leaves glinting like scales. For the first time since his arrival, it looked… peaceful.

He placed the pendant on a rock and whispered, "Rest now, Tenzing."

A single owl called from the distance—the same eerie note he had heard that first night. But this time it sounded almost like a sigh of relief.

Months passed.

Khempur slowly returned to its rhythm of planting, herding, prayer.

The villagers began to talk less of curses and more of harvests.

Arjun filed his final report, sealing it with the words:

"Case closed. The guilty judged. The innocent spared. Justice, like the forest, breathes."

He left the hills soon after, heading back toward civilization. Yet sometimes, in the depth of night, when the city fell silent and the wind rustled the curtains, he would hear it again—the faint beat of a drum from far away, like a heart beneath the earth.

And in those moments, he would wonder whether justice had truly slept, or merely waited for another voice to call its name.

The Class Topper

The rain in Mumbai had its own rhythm—an unending percussion of droplets striking tin roofs, muddied courtyards, and impatient umbrellas. It came down in silver sheets that blurred the skyline and cloaked the city in a grey, melancholic hush.

On the edge of Dadar East, hidden behind an aging stone wall and an iron gate that screamed with rust, stood St. Augustine High School—a place once known for its discipline, now infamous for something else entirely: competition. Here, marks weren't just numbers; they were identity, worth, even reason to exist.

Among the sea of uniforms and anxious eyes was Aarav Joshi, Class 10-A's shining star. Aarav was everything a parent could dream of—disciplined, soft-spoken, and razor-sharp. Teachers adored him, classmates envied him, and for three consecutive years, he'd been Rank One. His notebook margins were neat, his handwriting calligraphic, and his punctuality legendary.

But behind that perfect exterior was a boy who carried the weight of expectations heavier than his schoolbag. Every morning, he left his one-room flat in Parel before dawn, walking past leaking gutters and half-asleep chai stalls. His widowed mother, Meera, stitched garments till midnight to afford his tuition fees. Aarav studied not for himself, but for her. His success was her salvation.

It began on a humid morning in August—report card day.

Class 10-A was abuzz with whispers and nervous laughter. The worn ceiling fans groaned overhead, slicing through thick air that smelled of chalk dust and adolescent sweat. On the blackboard, in perfect white cursive, their class teacher, Mrs. Fernandes, had written the word that made hearts stop:

RESULTS Today!

Aarav sat upright in the front row, his tie perfectly knotted, nails trimmed, hair slicked back with coconut oil. His fingers tapped the desk lightly, rehearsing calm. Around him, his classmates glanced over, already resigned to second place.

Except one.

Rohit Mehra, the son of a local politician, lounged in the back seat, grinning. His reputation was infamous—late to class, lazy, and somehow always managing to scrape by. He was everything Aarav wasn't.

When Mrs. Fernandes started reading the ranks aloud, the classroom hushed.

"Rank Two… Aarav Joshi."

The world stopped.

For a second, Aarav thought he'd misheard. A ripple of murmurs filled the room. Mrs. Fernandes cleared her throat, continuing, "…and Rank One—Rohit Mehra."

Aarav blinked. A slow, icy numbness crept through him. His throat tightened. Rohit shot him a smug smile, the corners of his lips twitching upward, his pencil spinning idly in his fingers.

Aarav rose from his bench, trembling. "Ma'am… there must be a mistake."

Mrs. Fernandes sighed, avoiding his gaze. "Aarav, the papers were moderated. Rohit performed exceptionally this term."

"But he—he didn't even attend half the classes!"

Rohit chuckled. "Guess I'm a fast learner, topper."

Aarav's voice faltered, desperate now. "Please check my marks again—there has to be—"

"Enough, Aarav," Mrs. Fernandes snapped, voice low but firm. "The results are final."

Laughter erupted softly behind him. The room spun. He sat down, dizzy, the world turning surreal. His pen slipped from his fingers and rolled under the bench. His perfect, predictable world—cracked.

That evening, he stayed back long after everyone had left. Rain lashed the windows, thunder groaned in the distance. He stood in the empty corridor, staring at the rank board where his name now stood below Rohit's. His heart thudded hollowly in his chest.

He knew the truth. Everyone did. Rohit had connections—his father's influence had greased palms. The "moderation" was nothing but corruption dressed as fairness.

For the first time in his sixteen years, Aarav felt something unfamiliar—rage.

Three days later, on a Monday morning, the janitor found him.

Aarav's body hung from the third-floor stairwell, the noose made from his own school tie. His shoes dangled loosely, one fallen below. His face was pale, eyes open, frozen in

disbelief. A single page from his notebook was pinned to his shirt with a safety pin. It read, in precise handwriting:

"I studied. He cheated. Yet he wins. What is left of truth in this world?"

The news spread through the school like wildfire. Reporters swarmed the gate. Parents demanded answers. Teachers wept. Rohit didn't show up for a week.

When he did return, something in his demeanor had changed. His grin was gone. His eyes darted at every shadow. He flinched at every creak of the classroom door.

Because the haunting had begun.

The first incident happened two weeks after Aarav's death.

It was after hours. The corridors were empty except for Rohit, who had stayed behind to finish detention. The power had gone out briefly—a monsoon short-circuit. The dim emergency light flickered, painting the hallway in ghostly hues.

As Rohit walked toward the exit, he heard it—a faint tapping, like a pencil against wood.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

It came from Classroom 10-A.

He froze.

The door stood slightly ajar, the faint smell of chalk wafting out. He pushed it open. Desks were aligned neatly, as always. On the blackboard, someone had written, in trembling white chalk:

"Did you earn it, Rohit?"

He dropped his bag, eyes wide. "Who's there?"

The room was silent except for the rain hammering against the windows. Then, the tap-tap-tap returned—this time from his own desk.

He turned. Aarav's seat—empty since the tragedy—had a pen lying across the open notebook. The pen lifted slowly, unnaturally, and began scribbling by itself.

CHEATER.

Rohit stumbled backward, crashing into a chair. The light flickered violently, and for a split second, he saw Aarav—face pale, eyes hollow, hanging in the air just above his desk, his tie swaying like a pendulum.

Rohit screamed.

The next morning, the janitor found the classroom in disarray—chalk scattered, desks overturned, and the word "CHEATER" scrawled across every wall.

Rohit changed. The confident swagger vanished. He stopped laughing. He avoided mirrors and shadows. His grades plummeted.

He told his friends about the apparition, but they mocked him. Until it spread.

It began with Sonal, the class prefect, known to "help" others during exams—for a price. One evening, while she was invigilating a practice test, her pen burst mid-sentence, splattering ink over her white uniform. She gasped. The ink began moving, coiling on her sleeve like serpents forming words.

"You copied."

Her scream echoed through the corridor.

Days later, Manav, another notorious cheater, complained that his textbooks whispered to him at night—Aarav's voice reciting lessons in a hollow monotone. He stopped coming to school.

Then came Mrs. Fernandes.

Late one night, she stayed back to finalize reports. The school was silent, corridors dimly lit by dying tube lights. She was marking papers when she heard footsteps. Slow. Rhythmic. Approaching from behind.

"Hello?" she called out, voice trembling.

No answer.

When she looked down again, her red pen was gone. In its place—Aarav's blue fountain pen. The one he'd always used. The one that had been missing since the day of his death.

Her hands shook as she picked it up. The nib scratched across the paper on its own, writing words she could barely comprehend:

"You knew. You stayed silent."

Her breath caught. A cold gust swept through the room. The pages of every answer sheet flipped wildly, stopping only when one—Rohit's—landed face up. It was blank. Every answer erased.

Mrs. Fernandes fainted.

By September, St. Augustine High had become a place of whispers. Students spoke of moving shadows, of cold

breaths on their necks during exams, of Aarav's reflection appearing in the windowpanes.

The principal tried to dismiss it as "collective hysteria." But when CCTV footage from the exam hall revealed something inexplicable, the faculty fell silent.

At precisely 10:07 a.m., during a mock test, Rohit's paper flew off his desk as though struck by invisible wind. The footage showed him looking up, eyes wide, lips mouthing something no one could hear—before he collapsed, convulsing.

When he woke in the infirmary, he muttered only one word, over and over: "Sorry."

The administration hushed it up. But word got out. Parents panicked. Some withdrew their children. Others demanded priests, exorcists, and "cleansing rituals."

The school called in Father Dominic, an old Jesuit priest from Bandra, known for his calm and logic. He arrived one evening with holy water and a weathered Bible, greeted by anxious faces and flickering hallway lights.

He met Mrs. Fernandes first. She confessed her guilt—she had known about Rohit's cheating. She'd been pressured by the board and Rohit's influential father to "adjust" Aarav's scores slightly.

Father Dominic listened silently. Then he said, "Truth denied becomes vengeance unbound."

He requested to spend the night in Class 10-A.

The rain was relentless that night. Thunder rattled the windowpanes. The priest sat alone at Aarav's desk, whispering prayers. Midnight approached.

The air turned icy.

He opened his Bible. The pages flipped on their own, stopping at *Psalm 23*. The flame of his candle stretched sideways, as if drawn by invisible breath.

Then—a voice.

Soft. Cracked. Childlike.

"Father… why did no one listen?"

The priest looked up. Aarav stood before him—translucent, glowing faintly blue, his tie still around his neck. His eyes were not angry; they were mournful.

"Aarav," the priest said gently, "you must move on. The living cannot find peace if you don't."

Aarav's gaze hardened. "They stole my truth. They made my death a rumor."

The desks around them began to shake. Papers fluttered like wings. The chalkboard wrote by itself:

"CONFESSION."

Suddenly, doors banged open. From the darkness stepped figures—the students who had cheated, teachers who had ignored it. They moved like puppets, eyes blank, drawn into the room as though compelled by unseen strings.

Father Dominic clutched his crucifix. "He calls for penance," he whispered.

The ghost of Aarav floated above them, his voice echoing, layered, heavy with sorrow.

"You built success on lies. You mocked effort. You killed honesty."

The walls began to bleed ink—black streams dripping down, forming words: TRUTH. HONOUR. JUSTICE.

One by one, the cheaters collapsed to their knees, crying, begging for forgiveness. Rohit, trembling uncontrollably, sobbed, "I'll confess! I'll tell everyone!"

Aarav's ghost lowered his head. For a moment, his expression softened. He looked at the priest. "Will they mean it?"

Father Dominic nodded. "They must."

And then, slowly, the apparition began to fade. The ink streams reversed, crawling back into the walls. The wind died. The silence returned.

All that remained was the faint scent of chalk and rain.

The next morning, the school awoke to chaos—but also clarity.

Rohit publicly admitted everything. He revealed how his father had bribed officials, how Mrs. Fernandes had been coerced, and how Aarav had been punished for honesty. The confession was recorded, circulated, and within days, the story became national news.

St. Augustine High suspended multiple staff members. A reform committee was set up. Exam protocols were overhauled. Every paper was now checked by three moderators. CCTV cameras were installed in every room.

But the most profound change wasn't administrative. It was moral.

Students whispered less about ghosts and more about integrity. No one dared cheat again. Aarav's bench was left untouched, a single garlanded photo above it. Every year, the school introduced a new award: The Aarav Joshi Memorial for Academic Honesty.

Rohit, haunted by guilt, left the city soon after. Some said he joined a monastery near Nashik. Others said he simply disappeared.

Mrs. Fernandes resigned, but not before writing a letter to Meera Joshi, Aarav's mother, enclosing his final test she had invigilated,honestly —marked 100%.

Ten years passed.

St. Augustine High regained its reputation—not as the most competitive school in Mumbai, but the most ethical. The corridors were brighter, walls freshly painted, and the classrooms equipped with digital boards.

Yet, on stormy nights, janitors still swore they heard faint scratching from Class 10-A—like chalk writing on a blackboard.

Once, during a late-night staff meeting, a teacher reported that the projector in Room 10-A had turned on by itself, displaying a single line on the screen:

"Keep it honest."

And then it turned off.

They say ghosts linger where promises are broken—but Aarav's spirit didn't linger for vengeance anymore. He lingered for remembrance, for truth.

Outside the school gate, beneath the sprawling rain tree, a new plaque had been installed.

It read:

IN MEMORY OF AARAV JOSHI (2008–2024)

"He taught us that grades fade, but integrity endures."

On some evenings, when the monsoon clouds rolled in and thunder rumbled over the city, students waiting for their school buses would see a faint figure in the top-floor window—a boy in uniform, head bent over his desk, studying diligently under the flickering tube light.

And every time the results came out, the air in St. Augustine High felt lighter, almost peaceful, as if someone unseen was watching—approving.

Because since that fateful night, no one had ever cheated again**!**

Dad

The rains had come early to Dehradun that year — not the playful kind that kissed the hillsides and left behind the scent of wet pine, but a darker rain, heavy and relentless, as if the clouds themselves were mourning something. The skies above the valley had been gray for days, and the usual hum of the city seemed muted beneath the constant hiss of water and the growl of thunder.

On Rajpur Road, at the edge of town, stood a small house with a red-tiled roof. It had once been filled with laughter, music, and the scent of freshly brewed tea — when **Meera Khanna** was alive. But for the last two years, that laughter had belonged only to **Arvind** and his two daughters — eight-year-old twins, **Aashi** and **Ira**.

Ever since Meera's death, Arvind had learned to carry the world on his shoulders with quiet grace. He woke early, cooked breakfast, packed lunch, dropped the girls at daycare, and went to his job at the accounts office — all before most of Dehradun had opened its eyes. His colleagues often wondered how he managed to smile so easily. They never saw him late at night, standing by the window after his daughters had fallen asleep, staring into the rain-drenched dark as if searching for the voice he had lost.

The girls were his reason to breathe. Every evening, the house came alive when he returned — the girls racing down the veranda barefoot, their laughter bouncing off the walls.

He would lift them both together, one on each arm, pretending to stagger under their weight as they squealed.

Their home was small but warm — drawings taped to the refrigerator, fairy lights around Meera's old photograph, and the faint fragrance of sandalwood from the incense he lit every morning. Life wasn't perfect, but it was theirs — stitched together with love, routine, and memory.

That evening, the storm began like a whisper — a drizzle that deepened into a roar. By five o'clock, dark clouds sat heavy on the hills, and thunder rolled through the valley like an ancient growl. Arvind looked out from his office window, worry clouding his brow. The radio warned of a **cloudburst** near Mussoorie; the rivers were swelling, roads were flooding.

He called the daycare, his voice tense. "I'm on my way. Please keep the girls safe until I get there."

But the teacher, anxious about the weather, had already decided to send the children home early with the school driver. "Don't worry, Mr. Khanna," she had said. "They'll be home before you are."

Outside, lightning split the sky. Arvind shut down his computer, grabbed his raincoat, and ran.

Meanwhile, the twins reached home just as the wind began to howl. The driver honked, waved them goodbye, and drove off through sheets of rain. The girls fumbled with the keys, giggling nervously as they stepped inside. The familiar scent of their home — damp walls, detergent, and Meera's lingering perfume — welcomed them.

They switched on the lights. Nothing happened.

The power had gone.

"Papa will be home soon," Aashi said, though her voice trembled. She lit a candle like he had taught them — steady hands, careful flame — and set it on the table.

They waited.

Minutes became hours. The wind moaned through the cracks, and the rain battered the windows like a thousand fingers. Outside, trees bent and swayed, their shadows flickering against the walls. The clock had stopped ticking. The room seemed to breathe with them, slow and uncertain.

Then — a sound.

The door latch turned.

Both girls froze. The candle flame wavered, throwing shapes across the room.

The door creaked open, and a figure stepped in — drenched, his shirt clinging to his body, hair plastered to his forehead.

"Papa!" they cried in unison, rushing toward him.

Arvind smiled — tired but warm. "Hey, my angels," he said, his voice low, soft, oddly distant. "You didn't sleep?"

"You took so long!" Ira pouted.

"The roads… were bad," he said, setting down his old tiffin carrier. "But I thought you might be hungry."

When he opened it, steam rose into the air — **fresh hot food**. The girls' eyes widened.

He fed them himself, breaking rotis, blowing on them before putting a piece in each mouth. His hands felt **cold** — colder than rainwater should have made them. But his eyes were the same — gentle, loving, endlessly patient.

“Papa,” Aashi whispered between bites, “you smell different.”

He smiled faintly. “Rain does that.”

Outside, thunder cracked again. The girls shivered and pressed close to him. He drew them both into his arms, wrapped in his damp shirt, humming under his breath — Meera’s old lullaby. A tune that carried the warmth of her memory and the sadness of her absence.

The candle flickered until it burned itself out. And in the dark, the house seemed to sigh as all three drifted into sleep, cocooned in his embrace.

When morning came, the rain had stopped. The valley shimmered under a pale mist. Arvind woke first. He sat quietly for a long time, watching his daughters sleep. Then, slowly, he kissed each on the forehead, packed their school bags, and asked them to get ready.

“Where are we going?” Ira mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

“To Dadu and Dadi’s,” he said. His tone was calm but strange — like a man who had made peace with something. “Just for a few days. I’ve got some work to finish.”

He helped them into their raincoats, fixed their braids, and led them out. The roads were slick with mud, trees uprooted, power lines drooping dangerously. But he walked as if none of it mattered.

At their grandparents’ home in Clement Town, he hugged them long and hard.

“Papa, you’ll come tomorrow, right?” Aashi asked, her eyes wide.

"Of course," he said, smiling that same tired smile. "Always."

He turned before they could see the tears gathering in his eyes.

By evening, when he didn't return, the panic began. His office confirmed he had left early the previous evening. His scooter had been found by the Bindal River, crushed under a fallen tree. Police followed the trail — and found his body at dawn.

He had died sometime between **6 and 7 p.m.** the previous evening— electrocuted when a live wire fell across the road. His watch had stopped at 6:27.

The world fell apart.

But there was one impossible truth that no one could explain — because Aashi and Ira swore that their father had been with them that night. They described everything in detail: the food, his voice, the way his arms felt around them. Even the lullaby he had hummed.

Their grandparents wept but assumed shock. Yet when they went to collect clothes from the Rajpur Road house, the truth hit them like a cold wind.

The dining table still had three plates. Half-eaten rotis lay there, still soft. The food in the tiffin was warm — **fresh**, as though cooked just minutes ago.

And in the bedroom, the bed showed the imprint of three bodies.

Even the faint scent of Meera's jasmine perfume hung in the air — though no one had opened her old cupboard in months.

Neighbours had seen faint light inside the Khanna house during the blackout, and one elderly woman claimed she'd

heard a man's voice humming through the rain. "It was the same tune he used to sing to those girls," she said, crossing herself.

The police called it superstition. The grandparents tried to forget. But the girls couldn't.

At night, Aashi began waking suddenly, whispering, "Papa is here."

Ira, too, started talking in her sleep — murmuring conversations, giggling softly at something no one else could see. When asked, she said, "He sits by the window when it rains. He doesn't talk much, but he smiles. He says he came back because we were scared."

Their drawings began to change. The crayon figures of family picnics and butterflies turned into darker shapes — rainclouds, a house, two little girls holding hands beside a tall, shadowy man. Always the same man. Always in the rain.

The grandparents grew frightened. A priest was called to bless the house, but when he stepped in, he paused. The air was cold — unnaturally so. The priest whispered a prayer under his breath, sprinkling holy water in every corner.

That night, thunder rolled again over the valley. The lights flickered in the grandparents' home, and both girls woke up crying at the same moment.

"What happened?" their grandmother asked, rushing in.

Aashi pointed to the window. "He was there. He said goodbye this time."

When they opened the window, only rain entered — soft, steady, endless. But on the sill lay a handkerchief —

Arvind's old one, the one with **A.K.** stitched in blue thread. It was **warm** to the touch, though the night was freezing.

After that night, the girls stopped talking about him. But every monsoon, they would grow quiet. Aashi would stare out the window, tracing raindrops on the glass. Ira would hum that same lullaby under her breath.

Years passed. The house on Rajpur Road remained locked, its paint peeling, vines crawling up the walls. Locals said strange things happened there during storms — lights flickering, shadows moving, the faint sound of a man's voice whispering lullabies to invisible children.

A new family tried to move in once. They lasted a week. The father claimed he would hear footsteps in the hall, the gentle patter of two small feet running, giggles echoing through the empty rooms. And sometimes, when the rain hit hardest, he swore he saw a silhouette at the door — a man standing in the downpour, watching the house.

No one lived there after that.

But some nights, when thunder shakes the valley and rain blinds the streets, drivers passing Rajpur Road say they see a faint glow inside that house — three shadows moving together in a dance only they understand.

And if you stand still long enough, beneath the whisper of the rain, you might hear it too — a low, soothing voice, humming an old lullaby.

A father's promise, echoing through the storm.

Because sometimes, love is stronger than death.

And sometimes, it refuses to let go.

Bond From Beyond

The monsoon clouds hung low over the highway as Gayatri's car wound its way past paddy fields and banana groves that glistened under a reluctant sun. The world beyond her windshield seemed heavy with memory — the kind that clings to you, like the damp air inside her lungs. The smell of wet earth, diesel, and jasmine from the garland hanging on her rearview mirror filled the silence. On the seat beside her, in a copper urn wrapped in white cloth, rested her father's ashes.

He had spoken of this place often — a village called Aathikudi, tucked somewhere in the heart of Tamil Nadu. She'd grown up hearing about it in fragments: of sprawling ancestral houses, of a temple by the river, of a banyan tree so large that entire weddings had once been held beneath it. But to her, raised in Bangalore's glass towers and traffic din, Aathikudi had always been more myth than memory.

Now, after his death, she was returning to a home she had never known.

The road narrowed as she approached the village, the tarmac breaking into patches of mud and gravel. Children ran barefoot beside the fields, herding goats. Old women with silver hair sat on verandas chewing betel leaf, their eyes following her car. A temple bell tolled somewhere in the distance, its rhythm solemn and ancient. She slowed down at the entrance arch that read "Welcome to Aathikudi" in

fading Tamil letters. The script felt like a whisper from another life.

She stopped near the old family house — a weathered structure of red tiles, peeling plaster, and moss-covered walls. The front door creaked open with a sound that seemed to echo through decades. Inside, the air was thick, still smelling faintly of camphor and turmeric. On the walls, portraits of ancestors stared down at her — stern faces with resolute eyes, garlanded with dried flowers.

She placed the urn before her grandfather's portrait.

"Appa, we're home," she murmured, her voice trembling.

That night, rain lashed against the tiled roof. Gayatri lay awake on the old cot, the hum of cicadas merging with the rhythmic dripping of water from a corner leak. The power had gone hours ago, and the house was lit only by a flickering kerosene lamp. She should have been tired after the long drive, but her mind refused to rest.

In the dance of shadows on the cracked walls, she thought she saw movement — a figure at the corner of her vision, standing still in the courtyard beyond the half-open door. When she turned her head, there was nothing. Only the sound of rain.

At some point, sleep found her. And with it, the first dream.

She stood on the banks of a river, the moon reflected on the rippling surface. A man stood across from her — tall, his face half-shrouded in darkness. His eyes glowed faintly, like embers dying in ash. He raised his hand as if to reach out, but before he could speak, the water between them began to churn, turning red, thick as blood. She woke with a gasp, her throat dry, the air in the room cold despite the heavy air. The

lamp had gone out, but the faint scent of wet soil lingered. She could have sworn she heard footsteps outside.

In the morning, the village came alive with temple bells and roosters. Gayatri stepped out, her sari sticking to her skin in the humidity. She went to meet Lakshmi Mami, an old caretaker who still tended to the ancestral house.

"Ah, Gayatri kutti," the woman greeted, her voice soft but her eyes tired. "You look just like your appa when he was young. You've come for the immersion, yes?"

Gayatri nodded. "Appa wanted his ashes immersed in the river here. He said it was his last wish."

Mami's expression dimmed. "It is good you have come. This river knows your family. Your thatha was a great man here — helped half the village during the droughts, fought for the poor. People still remember him."

As they talked, Gayatri felt a strange weight in the air — as though unseen eyes were watching from every corner. Every time she turned toward the banyan tree by the temple, she felt the same chill she'd felt in her dream.

That night, the dream returned.

This time the man spoke. His voice was low, coarse, almost broken — like dry leaves scraping stone. "They buried me," he said. "They buried me where no light reaches. Help me, Gayatri."

She woke in tears, her heart pounding. When she switched on her phone's flashlight, she froze. On the dusty floor near the cot, there were wet footprints — large, muddy ones leading from the door to where she lay.

The next day, she went to the temple priest, an elderly man named Swaminatha Iyer, whose white beard looked as ancient as the granite walls. She described the dream. The priest listened quietly, his eyes narrowing.

"Child," he said finally, "the dead speak only when they are denied peace. There is an old story in this village. Perhaps it is time you know it."

He told her of a man named Kumaraswamy, who had lived here decades ago — during her grandfather's youth. Kumaraswamy was a poor man, a labourer with a kind heart but no family. He had been mocked, cheated, beaten by the villagers for his simplicity. Only Gayatri's grandfather had shown him kindness, offering food and work when others shunned him.

But one night, a fight broke out. A group of men accused Kumaraswamy of theft — of stealing grain from the landlord's storehouse. They dragged him out, beat him mercilessly, and in their drunken rage, killed him. Out of fear, they buried his body secretly near the old banyan grove. No police, no priest, no rites.

Since then, villagers whispered of strange happenings — of shadows moving near the banyan after midnight, of whispers in the wind, of cattle dying mysteriously. "They say his spirit has never rested," the priest finished, his voice a tremor. "But why he calls to you, only fate can answer."

That evening, Gayatri drove to the riverbank with the urn. The water shimmered under the setting sun, golden and calm. She immersed her father's ashes, tears mingling with the cool spray. "Go home, Appa," she whispered. "Find peace."

But as she rose, she felt it again — that presence. She turned slowly. Beneath the banyan, a figure stood — tall, shoulders hunched, face pale in the fading light. His eyes met hers. They were the same glowing embers from her dream. When she blinked, he was gone.

Over the next few days, the haunting deepened. She'd hear knocks at her door at midnight, though no one stood outside. The mirrors fogged up, revealing handprints when she wiped them. The sound of distant crying echoed from the courtyard. One morning, she woke to find a mud-stained handprint on her pillow.

Fear gnawed at her, but curiosity too. Who was he, truly? What did he want?

She went through her grandfather's old trunk — yellowed letters, fading photographs, dusty diaries. In one, dated 1963, she found a line that made her heart stop:

"If only I had reached Kumaraswamy sooner that night… his eyes still haunt my sleep."

The words were smeared as though by tears.

Determined, she sought help from the local authorities. The sub-inspector, Ravi, was skeptical but curious. "We've heard these ghost tales before," he said, lighting a cigarette. "But if you say there's a body buried near the banyan, we can check."

The next morning, a small team arrived with shovels. The banyan loomed over them, its roots coiling like serpents. As they dug, the air thickened. The smell of wet earth turned metallic. Crows gathered on the branches, silent.

Then, the shovel struck something hard.

They unearthed a skull — brittle, caked in soil. Bones, fragments of cloth, a rusted bracelet. The earth seemed to sigh, releasing a century's grief. Gayatri fell to her knees, trembling. A cold breeze brushed her cheek, almost like a hand — not cruel, but grateful.

The priest performed the rites that evening. The pyre burned by the riverbank, smoke curling into the reddened sky. Gayatri stood barefoot in the mud, tears streaking her face. The flames flickered and hissed, and for a moment she saw him — Kumaraswamy — standing on the opposite bank, whole, calm, his face no longer twisted by pain. He smiled faintly, nodded once, and walked into the light of the setting sun.

The wind carried the scent of jasmine.

That night, for the first time since she arrived, the house felt warm. No whispers, no shadows, no knocks. Only silence — the kind that holds peace.

She dreamed again — but this time, she stood by the river alone. The water shimmered clear, the moon bright. A voice — soft, serene — whispered, "Thank you."

When she awoke, dawn had broken. The banyan outside swayed gently in the breeze, and somewhere in the distance, a cuckoo sang.

Gayatri smiled faintly. The dead, she thought, were never truly gone. They waited — for kindness, for remembrance, for release.

For the first time in years, Aathikudi slept without fear.

In the weeks that followed, people in Aathikudi began to whisper that the air around the banyan had changed.

The shadows that once lingered there at dusk were gone. The old temple bell that used to tremble by itself in the wind now stood still. Even the stray dogs, who had once howled through the night, slept soundly near the steps of the temple.

The priest told Gayatri that during the final rites, the river's current had shifted briefly — an omen that the soul had crossed over. "Kumaraswamy has found his path," he said. "And perhaps, through you, your grandfather's promise has been fulfilled at last."

Gayatri stayed one more night in the ancestral house. She lit a small lamp before her grandfather's portrait, placed a handful of flowers at its base, and whispered, "He's free now, Thatha. You can rest too."

Outside, a soft rain began to fall — not the relentless downpour of her first night, but a gentle, cleansing drizzle that made the earth smell new again. She walked barefoot into the courtyard, letting the rain soak her hair and sari, feeling its cool weight like a benediction. She could hear the village's sounds clearly — crickets, a baby crying somewhere, the rhythmic beat of someone pounding grain, the soft laughter of girls returning from the temple. The world was alive again.

But as she stood there, something caught her eye — a faint shimmer of movement near the banyan tree at the far end of the field. She stared for a long moment. A shape stood there, almost invisible in the mist. It didn't move closer; it didn't frighten her. It merely watched, still and calm, like an old friend keeping vigil.

When she blinked, it was gone. Only the banyan remained, its roots drinking the rain.

Later that night, she sat on the veranda with a cup of hot filter coffee that Mami had brewed, the aroma mingling with the smell of damp soil. “You’ve done what no one could, child,” the old woman said softly. “This village will remember you for that. Sometimes it takes the blood of the past to wash the sins of the living.”

Gayatri smiled faintly. “Maybe it was never about ghosts, Mami. Maybe it was about remembering what kindness means.”

Before dawn, she packed her car. As she closed the trunk, she looked around at the old house one last time — the red tiles, the carved pillars, the veranda where her father must have played as a boy. The first rays of morning sunlight brushed across the walls, and the house seemed to breathe again. The smell of jasmine drifted from the backyard.

She started the car, the engine coughing to life. As she drove past the temple, she noticed an old man sweeping the steps. He looked up and smiled. His face was unfamiliar, but something about his eyes — calm, luminous — made her pause. She thought of asking his name, but when she glanced back in the mirror a few seconds later, the steps were empty.

The road out of Aathikudi was lined with banyans and tamarinds, their shadows long and dappled in the morning light. For miles, she didn’t meet another soul. It was as if the land itself was watching her go, silent and content.

When the village finally disappeared behind the curve of the hill, she felt a weight lift from her chest — not of fear, but of completion. Somewhere deep within, a voice whispered like wind through dry leaves: “You brought me home.”

In the months that followed, Gayatri returned to her life in Bangalore. The city swallowed her once again — traffic lights, meetings, deadlines. But sometimes, when the rain began to fall just so, carrying the scent of wet earth and distant thunder, she'd close her eyes and hear the river.

One evening, she visited a bookstore on Church Street. She was reaching for a new novel when a small, old volume fell from the top shelf. It was a book of Tamil folk tales — worn, its pages yellowing. She picked it up curiously and flipped through it. Inside, pressed between two pages, was a dry peepal leaf, perfectly preserved. Someone had written in faint pencil beneath it:

"The earth remembers kindness."

She bought the book without thinking, though the cashier insisted it wasn't for sale.

That night, she placed the leaf inside her father's framed photograph. As she did, a sudden breeze stirred through the apartment — gentle, like someone opening a door. The jasmine in her hair fluttered against her cheek. For a brief moment, she thought she heard the faint toll of a temple bell and the murmuring of a river flowing far, far away.

She smiled.

The living, she thought, move on. The dead, too, deserve the same grace.

Vinaashpati

The late September wind carried a strange coolness over Chandigarh that evening, as if it had travelled down from the higher ridges of Himachal and picked up whispers along the way. The streets shimmered under the soft orange lamps; traffic hummed like a subdued mechanical lullaby. In Sector 9, behind the crowded gym where he spent most of his waking hours, Gagan Singh Sodhi wiped sweat from his brow and stared at himself in the mirror.

The reflection was proud — broad shoulders, veins like vines under skin, jaw sharp enough to cut the stale air of the locker room. But in his eyes, behind the effort and the gleam, lay an absence — a quiet, gnawing need. He was chasing perfection, sculpting himself into something beyond human.

"Bro, you'll break yourself one day," his friend Ajay had laughed earlier that day. "Even your cheat days have protein in them."

Gagan had only smiled. "You'll see, Ajay. I'll get there. No pain, no limit."

He meant it. He lived for that rush — the ache that followed a good lift, the burn that told him he was progressing. But he was also aware of the plateau. His gains had stalled. He tried every supplement, every diet tweak, every recovery method. Still, the body's stubborn laws refused to bend further.

It was around this time he planned a short solo hiking trip — a three-day escape into the hills near Manali. "Change of

air," he told his mother over dinner. She was used to his impulses and said little, though her eyes betrayed worry. Chandigarh mothers always did.

The road to Himachal wound through forests like a ribbon of silver asphalt cutting the green. As Gagan rode his Royal Enfield through the twisting valley roads, clouds hung low enough to kiss. It was monsoon's final breath — misty, quiet, damp.

By evening, he stopped at a roadside tea stall near a turn that overlooked a gorge, somewhere before Kullu. The stall was a fragile shack — smoke curling from a kettle, a transistor humming an old Himachali song, the smell of wet earth and tea leaves steeping in brass.

There were only two others there: the old man serving chai and another figure sitting by the wooden bench. The man looked up briefly when Gagan arrived.

He was strange.

Tall, yes, nearly Gagan's height — but thin to the bone. His skin was pale, almost translucent under the cloudy sky. His eyes were deep-set, pupils so dark they looked endless. His beard was patchy, streaked with grey though he couldn't have been older than forty. His nails were yellowed, his lips slightly cracked.

Yet, when he raised his cup, Gagan noticed his wrists — thick with veins, muscles taut like rope. It was the body of a man who had once been powerful but was now decaying from within.

"Long ride?" the man asked in a voice both soft and rasped, like gravel underfoot.

"Yeah," Gagan said. "Chandigarh to Manali. Needed a break from the gym grind."

The man chuckled, low and oddly cold. "Gym. Yes. The temple of vanity."

Gagan smirked, half-defensive. "You work out?"

"Once," the man said, eyes drifting toward the fog. "Once, I did. I thought I could master the body, own it. But the body always owns you in the end."

Gagan frowned. "That's one way to look at it. You seem like you know what you're talking about, though."

The man turned to him then — really turned, fixing him with a gaze that made the forest's murmur quieten. "You want strength, don't you? True strength. The kind that doesn't fade."

Gagan blinked. "Who doesn't?"

The man smiled faintly and reached into his weathered backpack. From it, he took out a small clay pot — cracked, covered with a thin cloth tied by jute. He placed it on the bench between them. Inside it was a sapling — just a small green shoot, its leaves unnaturally dark, almost purple at the edges.

"This," the man said softly, "is from the high ridges near Kheerganga. Not many know where to find it. Locals call it *Pishaach-Valli* — the Demon's Vine. But ignore the name. They fear what they don't understand. For those who know how to use it… it gives the body what it desires."

Gagan raised an eyebrow. "What, steroids from nature?"

The man didn't laugh. "Something beyond that. You won't need diets, or rest days, or powders. It will sync with you,

make you perfect. You'll heal faster, grow stronger, sharper. A gift of the mountains."

"And what's the catch?" Gagan asked, half-grinning.

The man's lips twitched. "Every gift has a price. You'll find out what yours is."

Before Gagan could reply, the man stood, lifted his hood, and walked into the trees beyond the stall — disappearing so quietly it was as if the mist itself had swallowed him.

When Gagan looked back down at the bench, the sapling was still there, its leaves glistening faintly as if damp with dew.

Back home in Chandigarh, he planted the sapling in a small pot in his backyard. The soil was fertile; his mother often grew tulsi and hibiscus there. "Another plant?" she asked, amused. "You're turning this house into a nursery."

"Something I found in Himachal," he said lightly. "Let's see what it becomes."

Days passed. Then weeks.

The sapling grew fast — unnaturally fast. Its leaves were now dark green with veins that shimmered faintly under light, like capillaries. It gave off a scent, faint but addictive — earthy, metallic, like wet iron mixed with jasmine.

Gagan started brewing tea from one leaf each morning, just as the man had instructed before leaving.

The results were staggering.

Within a week, his endurance had doubled. His muscles felt denser, fuller. The soreness after workouts vanished

overnight. His appetite became ferocious, yet he never gained fat. His skin glowed, and his eyes seemed brighter.

People noticed.

Ajay stared at him one evening at the gym. "Bro, what the hell are you on? You look like a beast."

Gagan laughed it off, though somewhere inside, he felt a flicker of pride — and fear. Because it wasn't just strength. His senses were sharper. He could hear footsteps from far away, smell rain before clouds formed, feel people's heartbeats when they stood close.

He started dreaming — vivid, wild dreams of forests and chanting voices. Sometimes he saw the man from the tea stall, standing among tall black vines that moved like serpents.

Still, he couldn't stop. He drank the tea every morning.

By the end of the second month, things changed.

He began waking up at odd hours — 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. — drenched in sweat, the air thick with the smell of damp soil though his windows were closed. His mother said she heard whispers in his room. "Maybe the TV?" she had asked timidly one morning.

He shrugged. "Must be in your head."

The plant had now grown large enough to touch the window grill. Its tendrils curled as if reaching toward him when he passed by. He sometimes thought he saw the leaves *pulse* faintly, like breathing.

One night, after an intense workout, Gagan stood before the mirror again — shirtless, glistening, perfect. And then he saw it.

Something moved under his skin.

Just beneath the right shoulder — a ripple, like something crawling inside. He froze. The motion stopped. He convinced himself it was fatigue. But the next morning, the mark was there — a faint greenish hue where his veins ran thicker.

The plant outside seemed to bloom that day — a flower with blood-red petals opened at dawn.

Within weeks, his strength peaked — and then began to fade.

At first, he ignored it. Then it grew undeniable. His lifts weakened. He felt drained, his appetite dulled. His skin lost its glow. Dark circles formed under his eyes.

And the plant — the Pishaach-Valli — now towered waist-high, its stem thick, roots breaking through the pot. It seemed alive in ways that defied nature. When he trimmed it once, a dark fluid oozed out, thick as blood, smelling like iron and decay.

He felt sick that night. Feverish, trembling. He dreamt of voices whispering in some unknown tongue — *give and take, give and take…*

He began to suspect.

He researched the herb online — nothing. He even asked local herbalists in Chandigarh. One old pahadi vendor, on hearing the name "Pishaach-Valli," had simply crossed himself and refused to speak.

That night, Gagan caught his reflection in the mirror — his muscles smaller, skin pale, lips dry. The plant behind him, through the window, looked almost luminous under the

moonlight, as though thriving on something he could not name.

He knew then.

The strength hadn't come from the herb. It had *come through* it — siphoning from him.

And now, it was taking back.

By mid-December, the weather turned cold. Gagan could barely climb stairs without panting. His mother pleaded for him to see a doctor. He refused. There was shame in his silence — and fear.

Finally, one night, desperate and shaking, he packed his bag and rode out again — to the same Himachal road, to the same tea stall, hoping to find the man.

The journey was torturous. His body ached. His hands trembled on the throttle. Mist rolled thick along the mountain roads. By the time he reached the spot, it was nearly dusk.

The stall was still there. The same old vendor.

And there — sitting on the same bench — was the man.

Only this time, he looked different.

Healthy. Radiant. His skin clear, eyes sharp, posture strong. The frailty had vanished. He looked like a man reborn.

Gagan approached, shaking. "You," he rasped. "You gave me that plant. What the hell is it?"

The man smiled faintly, sipping tea. "Ah. You found the truth."

"It's killing me," Gagan hissed. "I want to end it. Tell me how."

The man studied him quietly, then sighed. "I was like you once. Eager. Hungry. It consumed me too. Until I learned the balance."

"Balance?"

"The herb feeds," he said. "It must. It draws strength from whoever nurtures it. But it does not die — it only passes on. The only way to free yourself is simple: *find another to take it.* Once someone else begins to consume its essence, its bond with you breaks. Then it becomes theirs."

Gagan stared at him, horror dawning. "You mean… I have to curse someone else?"

The man's expression didn't change. "Call it what you want. I call it survival."

He stood, finishing his tea, then walked into the forest again — the same vanishing act. Only this time, Gagan felt the full weight of the truth.

He had been the next link in the chain.

That night he stayed in a lodge near Kullu, unable to sleep. The rain outside thudded against the tin roof. The mirror reflected a ghost — hollow eyes, sunken cheeks. He realized he might not have weeks left.

He thought of giving the herb to someone — anyone. He thought of the men in his gym who would've killed for his old body. But the thought made his stomach churn. He couldn't damn someone else to this.

He rode back to Chandigarh the next morning, weak but determined.

Ajay was the first to notice his state. “Bro, what’s wrong with you? You look like death.”

Gagan smiled faintly. “Need a doctor,” he said, finally giving in. “But not a regular one. I need your help.”

Ajay was a general physician, practical and skeptical by nature. He’d treated everything from gym injuries to dengue cases but never something like this. When Gagan told him about the herb — the strange man, the miraculous gains, the decay — he listened in silence for a long time.

“Gagan,” he finally said, folding his hands. “You sound like you’re describing a metabolic parasite, not a plant.”

“I don’t care what you call it,” Gagan said hoarsely. “I just want it gone.”

“Bring me a sample of the leaf.”

The next morning, Gagan cut a small piece from the plant. Dark liquid oozed again, sticking to his fingers with a faint hiss. When he handed it to Ajay, the doctor flinched at the smell — metallic and faintly sweet.

“I’ll run some tests,” he said. “Meanwhile, stop consuming it.”

“I already did.”

That was a lie. Gagan had tried stopping before. Each time, within a day, he’d feel crushing pain — like withdrawal. His muscles would spasm, his vision blur, his chest tighten. The plant outside his window would shudder violently in the windless night, as if angry. It was a bond now, invisible and cruel.

By the third day, Ajay called him. His voice was trembling.

"Gagan… whatever that plant is, it's not like anything I've seen. The leaf sample died within hours. But before that, when I placed it under the microscope, it — it moved. The cells looked like human muscle fibers. It was… feeding on the glucose in the medium, like an organism."

Gagan felt the blood drain from his face. "It's alive."

"It's alive, yes. And it's tied to you somehow. Look — I have a thought, but it's dangerous."

"Tell me."

"You said the only way to break it is to pass it on. What if — instead of a healthy person — we give it to someone whose body is already failing? Someone terminal, someone near the end. The herb will take in all that decaying biology, maybe poison itself."

Gagan stared at the phone. "You want to kill the plant with sickness?"

"Essentially, yes. If it feeds on the body's strength, then feeding it rot might kill it. There's a patient I know in PGI — end-stage cancer, barely holding on. He's consented to experimental herbal treatments before. If we say it's a Himalayan extract, he might accept it. We don't tell him the rest."

Gagan hesitated, moral knots tightening inside him. "That's still using someone."

Ajay's voice softened. "Or saving dozens after him. If this thing spreads, if someone else finds it… it could destroy lives. You've seen what it does."

The silence that followed was heavy. Finally, Gagan whispered, "Do it."

That evening, the sky over Chandigarh was bruised purple. Gagan stood in his backyard, staring at the monstrous vine that had once been a sapling. Its roots had burst through the concrete, its leaves shimmered in the streetlight like scales. He could feel it breathing — each movement of the tendrils seemed to echo in his pulse.

"I'm ending this," he murmured.

He plucked three leaves. The plant shuddered. For the first time, he thought he heard it *groan*.

Ajay met him outside PGI the next morning. The air smelled faintly of antiseptic and eucalyptus. The patient's name was **Amar Nath**, a fifty-year-old retired schoolteacher with skin like parchment and eyes clouded with morphine. He had stage-four lung cancer. The doctors had given him weeks.

When Ajay explained that it was an herbal therapy used by hill tribes to improve immunity, Amar just smiled faintly. "At this point, beta, I'll drink poison if it helps."

The irony made Gagan's stomach twist.

They brewed the leaf into a weak decoction, diluted it with water, and gave it to him under hospital observation. Gagan stood by the window the entire time, watching the man sip.

That night, back home, something strange happened.

The plant began to wilt.

Its leaves turned pale, edges blackened. The thick vines lost their sheen. A foul odor — like burning flesh — filled the air. Gagan doubled over, clutching his chest as if some invisible rope loosened around him. For the first time in months, he slept peacefully.

Days passed.

Ajay called with cautious excitement. “Gagan, you won’t believe this — Amar’s vitals are improving. His tumours are shrinking. It’s like his immune system rebooted.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Maybe too good. The herb’s doing something we don’t understand. I’ll keep monitoring.”

At home, the plant continued to decay. It shrivelled into a husk, its once blood-red flower turning black and brittle. Gagan buried it in the soil, relief washing through him like sunlight after a storm.

His strength slowly returned. His skin regained colour. He smiled again, laughed with his mother, returned to the gym.

For a while, it was as if nothing had ever happened.

Two weeks later, Ajay called again — his voice trembling.

“Gagan… Amar’s condition changed.”

“What do you mean?”

“The cancer’s gone. Completely gone. He’s… healthy. But his body — it’s transforming. His veins are dark, his skin looks unnatural. I saw his reflection in the window — his pupils… they’re not normal.”

A chill ran down Gagan’s spine. “The herb didn’t die.”

Ajay whispered, “It adapted.”

That night, Gagan couldn’t sleep. Rain lashed against the windows. He stood by the garden, staring at the small mound of soil where the dead vine lay buried. He swore he saw the earth tremble. Just a flicker — a small shiver.

And then he heard it — faint, beneath the sound of thunder.

A heartbeat.

Coming from the ground.

He stumbled back, breath shallow. The wind howled through the narrow lanes of Sector 9, carrying a smell he recognized instantly — metallic, floral, intoxicating.

The scent of the herb.

He realized the truth too late — the plant had absorbed the illness, not died from it. It had gone dormant, mutated. And now, it was awakening.

He rushed to Ajay's apartment, drenched and pale. "We have to stop him. Amar. He's the new host."

Ajay nodded grimly. "He was discharged this morning. Said he felt reborn. He left for his village near Rupnagar."

Without another word, they jumped into Ajay's car. The rain blurred the roads, lightning flashing across the foothills. By the time they reached the outskirts of Rupnagar, dawn was bleeding into the horizon.

They found Amar's house — a small cottage with smoke curling from the chimney. The door was open. Inside, the air was humid, thick, wrong. The walls were crawling with vines — dark green, pulsing faintly.

And in the center of the room stood Amar Nath.

He was no longer frail. His frame was broad, youthful, but his skin glistened like wet bark. The veins under it glowed faintly, a dark green hue. When he turned, his eyes were black pits with faint crimson rings.

"Doctor sahib," he said softly, voice like wind through hollow wood. "You brought me life."

Ajay froze. Gagan stepped forward. “You have to stop. That plant — it’s using you.”

Amar smiled. “It is me now. The sickness is gone. I am the cure.”

He raised his hand — roots burst from the floorboards, writhing like serpents. One struck the wall beside Gagan, splintering wood. Ajay screamed, pulling him back. They stumbled out into the rain, gasping.

Behind them, the cottage shuddered. Vines burst through the roof, reaching toward the grey sky like hands.

Gagan shouted over the storm, “We have to burn it!”

Ajay nodded. They found a can of kerosene near a shed and doused the walls. The roots tried to grab their ankles; one coiled around Gagan’s leg, burning cold against his skin. He slashed it free with a broken glass shard, igniting the fluid.

Flames roared. The vines writhed, shrieking in a sound no human throat could make. Amar’s silhouette appeared briefly in the inferno — smiling — before the roof collapsed.

They stood there till the fire died. The dawn light broke through the smoke, painting everything gold. Gagan’s chest heaved. The smell of charred leaves clung to him.

“Is it over?” Ajay whispered.

Gagan looked at the ashes. A faint breeze stirred them — and in that whisper of wind, he thought he heard it again. *Give and take…*

He said nothing.

They left the place before locals arrived, vowing never to speak of it.

Weeks turned to months. Life in Chandigarh resumed its rhythm — traffic, laughter, festivals. Gagan returned to training, though something inside him had shifted permanently. He avoided the mirror now, fearing what he might see behind his own reflection.

Sometimes, he thought he caught a faint scent in the air — the same metallic sweetness — near gardens, parks, gym lawns. But he told himself it was his imagination.

Until one morning in early spring.

Ajay called again. His voice was barely a whisper. "Gagan… you need to come to the hospital."

When Gagan arrived, he saw a group of nurses gathered around a window in the oncology ward. Outside, in the flowerbed, something green was sprouting — a vine, small but vigorous, leaves dark and veined with red.

A gardener stood nearby, puzzled. "Strange plant, sir. Came up overnight. Looks… beautiful, no?"

Gagan felt his throat tighten.

He turned to Ajay. "What did you do with the soil samples from Amar's treatment?"

Ajay swallowed. "I had them sent to the lab for disposal. They must have dumped them in the garden."

The two men stared in silence as the sun rose higher. The vine seemed to shimmer faintly in the light, swaying though there was no wind.

A bee landed on its leaf, probing the surface — and in an instant, the bee fell, twitching. The vine pulsed once, as if pleased.

That night, Gagan returned home and sat by his window, looking at the moonlit streets of Chandigarh. The air smelled clean, peaceful. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked, then went silent.

He opened his journal — something he'd started after the ordeal. His handwriting was shaky but determined.

"If anyone ever finds this," he wrote, *"know that strength without restraint is a curse. The mountains hold beauty, but not all beauty is meant to be consumed. If you ever find a vine with dark leaves and a scent like rain on metal — burn it. Don't touch it. Don't feed it."*

He paused, pen trembling, and looked outside one last time.

In the corner of the garden, where the old pot had once stood, something tiny had emerged — a single green shoot, swaying in the still air.

Gagan smiled faintly, almost sadly. "You never really die, do you?"

He walked outside, barefoot, and knelt before it. The moonlight touched his face, pale and serene. He reached for the little vine — not to pluck it, but to bury it again.

As his fingers pressed into the soil, the shoot curled around them, gentle, almost affectionate.

For a moment, it was quiet. Peaceful. The wind rustled the tulsi leaves nearby.

Then the vine pulsed once — and a faint warmth seeped into his palm, familiar and haunting.

He closed his eyes.

Somewhere deep in the ground, something stirred — not hungry, not malicious this time, just *alive*.

And as dawn crept over Chandigarh, painting the sky in shades of gold, the small vine unfurled its first true leaf — green, tender, glistening with dew.

The Unholy Matrimony

The rain had returned to Bangalore that evening, the kind that began as a whisper against the glass and grew into a grey curtain swallowing the skyline. Whitefield, usually alive with the hum of cafés and traffic, had retreated indoors. Street-lamps trembled in puddles like half-forgotten dreams. In one of the newer apartment towers near ECC Road, the Malhotras' flat glowed a muted amber—a small pocket of warmth suspended in the dark.

Vivek Malhotra stood by the balcony door, a glass of whisky heavy in his hand. The reflection in the glass wavered—the city lights, the rain, and his own face blurred by guilt and fatigue. Behind him, Vamika moved quietly about the living room, switching off lamps one by one. She was always soft with light, careful with silence. Years ago, when they were just two reckless students at Christ University, she'd told him that silence was sacred, that it held the soul of love. But these days, her silences unnerved him.

"Vivek," she said, not looking at him. "You didn't eat dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

"You said that yesterday."

He turned from the glass. Her hair, still damp from her shower, clung to her temples. The faint smell of jasmine shampoo filled the room. For a moment, something like

tenderness flickered in him—an echo of a feeling long buried—but it vanished as quickly as it came.

"I had a late lunch at work," he lied. "Kam—" he stopped himself, pulse spiking.

"Kam…?" Vamika's eyes met his, wide and uncertain.

"I said 'Kamal,'" he lied again, swallowing the word like poison. "From finance."

She studied him, and he saw her noticing the tremor in his hand, the way he avoided her gaze. But she said nothing. She simply turned and walked to their bedroom.

Later that night, when the house had fallen silent except for the drone of rain, Vivek's phone buzzed on the coffee table. He snatched it before the screen could light too bright. A single message glowed there:

Kamya: *Can't stop thinking about you. Wish you were here.*

Vivek stared at it for a long time, a tight smile curling at his lips. Then he typed: *Tomorrow. After work. The usual place.*

He pressed send, and somewhere beyond the rain and the fog of the city, something unseen stirred.

The affair had begun, as such things often do, with laughter over coffee. Kamya Sengupta was new to the company—a communications manager with quick wit and a perfume that lingered long after she'd left a room. In the sterile corridors of their IT firm in Indiranagar, she was colour incarnate. Vivek, a senior project lead nearing thirty-seven, felt something in him reawaken whenever she spoke. They started with casual lunches, then unspoken touches during late-night brainstorming sessions, and finally, hotel rooms that smelled of betrayal and rain.

Each time he returned home to Vamika, guilt clung to him like damp clothes. But it was also intoxicating—the duality, the secret. He told himself he deserved happiness, that love could rot and yet something new could bloom atop its grave.

But Vamika sensed it. She didn't need proof. It was in the way his voice softened at odd hours, the sudden smiles while checking messages, the smell of unfamiliar perfume on his shirts.

She began to crumble quietly. Mornings found her sitting on the balcony, staring at the rain-soaked palms beyond their complex. Her art—once her refuge—lay abandoned. The canvases gathered dust; the brushes dried like forgotten bones.

At night she dreamt of shadows. The apartment, newly built and sterile, seemed to breathe with her sadness. Sometimes she'd wake to soft footsteps in the hallway, only to find Vivek asleep. Other times, she thought she heard whispering from the mirror—the faintest murmur, as if the walls themselves pitied her.

One evening she found a strand of long brown hair on Vivek's shirt. Kamya's hair, she knew instantly. She held it for a long time between trembling fingers before flushing it down the sink. The act brought no relief. Only the echo of water spiralling into darkness.

The final fracture came one Sunday morning. Vivek had told her he was meeting a client in Koramangala. She believed him until she accidentally saw his Uber app open on the tablet. The destination glowed cruelly: The Taj, MG Road—their old anniversary haunt.

She followed him.

From the café across the street, she watched as he walked into the hotel lobby. Moments later Kamya appeared, radiant in a maroon dress, laughter spilling from her like a secret melody. They embraced openly, unashamed. For Vamika, the world narrowed to that single sight—his hand on another woman's back, the tenderness that once was hers alone.

When she returned home, the rain had begun again, heavy and endless. She moved through the flat as if underwater, numb, weightless. She opened their wedding album—those sunlit days at Cubbon Park, the shy smiles, the garlands—and felt something snap quietly inside her.

That night she wrote a short note. No accusations, no drama—just a few trembling lines:

Vivek, I hope she makes you happy. I'll stop being the shadow between you and your peace. Don't look for me.

She signed it with love, as habit demanded, then placed it on his pillow.

In the morning, neighbours heard the sirens.

The police ruled it suicide. Sleeping pills and wine. The flat filled with mourners, relatives, whispers. Vivek wept—at least publicly. He said all the right things, wore all the right expressions. Inside, he felt only exhaustion, a dull relief that the inevitable had ended.

For a while he tried to convince himself he grieved her. But nights told the truth. In the silence after midnight, he felt lighter, freer. Kamya's arms replaced the void with warmth and perfume and new beginnings. Within three months, they were married.

The ceremony was small, tasteful—held at a boutique hall near Ulsoor Lake. Vivek insisted on selling the old flat and moving into a new villa in Whitefield, far from memories. Kamya agreed, thrilled at the prospect of designing their "forever home." They named it *Ananda Villa.*

The irony went unnoticed.

For the first few weeks, everything seemed idyllic. The new neighbourhood was quiet, the nights cooler. Kamya filled the house with music and scented candles; Vivek filled it with expensive furniture and denial. But sometimes, when the light faded, small disturbances began.

It started with the mirror in their bedroom. Kamya would swear she'd seen someone behind her—a fleeting reflection, a movement not her own. Once, she felt cold fingers brush her neck as she applied lipstick. She blamed the AC vent until it happened again, when the power was out.

Vivek dismissed it as imagination. "New house, new sounds," he said. "You'll get used to it."

But he too began to notice things. The faint scent of jasmine in empty rooms. The slow creak of the balcony door even when locked. One night he awoke to the sound of humming—a tune so familiar it rooted him in terror. It was the lullaby Vamika used to hum when she painted.

He rose, heart hammering, and followed the sound into the living room. The humming ceased. The darkness felt thick, textured. The painting Kamya had hung above the couch—a bright abstract—was now smeared with faint grey streaks that hadn't been there before, like a shadow had brushed across it.

The next morning, he told himself it was a dream.

Days became brittle. Kamya grew distant, her laughter forced. She'd wake screaming some nights, claiming someone had whispered her name from inside the wardrobe. "It sounded like a woman," she said. Vivek held her, murmuring reassurances, but his eyes kept darting toward the door, expecting to see movement in the dim hall.

He began drinking more. Whisky dulled the unease. Yet the more he drank, the clearer she became. Vamika. Not a ghost he saw, but one he felt—inside walls, beneath the hum of the refrigerator, behind the mirrors. Sometimes he caught the faintest reflection of her silhouette in a window pane—head tilted, hair loose, eyes full of quiet accusation. When he blinked, she was gone.

Kamya suggested bringing a priest. Vivek forbade it. "We'll not turn this into superstition," he snapped, more out of fear than reason. He knew Vamika wouldn't be placated by incense or chants. She wanted him to remember.

That night, while Kamya slept, he dreamt vividly: Vamika stood in their old balcony, rain pouring behind her. She looked alive—almost tender—until she smiled. Her lips were blue, her eyes bottomless.

Did you miss me, Vivek?

He woke to find the bedsheet damp beneath him, smelling faintly of wet soil and jasmine.

From then on, the boundaries between dream and waking blurred. At office meetings, he'd hear her name whispered in static during conference calls. On his phone, messages appeared and vanished—fragments of her handwriting, impossible, intimate: *You forgot me too soon.*

Kamya, meanwhile, grew pale and restless. The house seemed to drain her vitality. Once, while watering plants, she screamed. Vivek rushed out to find her staring at the bougainvillea pot—its leaves wilted overnight, its roots coiled around something white. He knelt and brushed away the soil. Beneath the twisted roots lay a fragment of porcelain. A piece of a woman's face from an old decorative doll—one that Vamika had owned.

Vivek buried it quickly, his hands shaking. Kamya sobbed uncontrollably that night, refusing to sleep in the same room.

For the first time, he felt true fear—not of ghosts, but of the consequence of love unburied.

He began hearing Vamika's voice more clearly. It wasn't angry; it was sorrowful, intimate, persuasive. *You promised forever.*

At first, he tried to shut her out with alcohol, music, work. But the voice found cracks in his sanity. In the boardroom, amid colleagues, he'd catch faint murmurs of her laugh. Once, during a presentation, he saw her reflection in the glass wall behind his boss—watching him with quiet amusement. He froze mid-sentence, trembling. No one else saw her.

When he returned home that evening, Kamya confronted him—her eyes red, her patience gone. "You're slipping, Vivek. You don't talk, you barely eat. What's happening to us?"

He wanted to tell her everything, to confess his torment, but fear bound his tongue. How could he explain that his dead wife had followed them here? That love could fester even beyond death?

Instead, he muttered, "I just need rest."

But rest never came.

That night, he felt her sitting at the foot of the bed. He didn't see her—he didn't dare open his eyes—but he smelled her jasmine and heard the faint creak of the mattress. When he finally looked, the bedsheet bore the imprint of a hand—small, familiar, cold.

In early September, Kamya insisted on leaving the villa. "This house isn't ours," she cried. "Something hates me here!"

They fought viciously. Vivek, desperate, slapped her. The sound echoed through the hollow rooms. Immediately after, he felt a cold wind sweep through the hall, rattling windows. The chandelier trembled though no breeze entered. Kamya backed away in terror.

"You felt that too?" she whispered.

Vivek didn't answer. He knew the house was alive with her presence now—Vamika's grief had thickened into something sentient, something waiting.

That evening, while Kamya packed a suitcase, Vivek wandered to the balcony. Dusk had painted Whitefield in bruised hues. The city buzzed distantly; the world seemed to exist elsewhere. On the railing, someone had etched faint letters into the paint. He leaned closer.

VIVEK + VAMIKA = FOREVER

He hadn't written it.

The scratch marks were fresh.

Behind him, Kamya screamed.

He rushed in to find her standing before the mirror, pointing with shaking hands. On the glass, fogged as though by unseen breath, words formed slowly—one letter at a time:

HE IS MINE.

The lights flickered. The air grew heavy with the scent of jasmine. Kamya stumbled back, crying, "Make it stop!" Vivek grabbed her shoulders, but the mirror cracked—hairline fractures spreading like veins. Through them, for the briefest second, he saw Vamika's reflection smiling.

Then darkness swallowed everything.

When the power returned, the villa was silent again. The mirror lay splintered, its shards glinting like scattered tears. Kamya crouched on the floor, trembling, while Vivek stared at the fractured surface. In each shard he thought he saw a fragment of her face — Vamika's — multiplied, watching, waiting.

That night Kamya refused to sleep in their bedroom. She locked herself in the guest room, clutching her phone and muttering prayers she barely remembered. Vivek sat alone in the living room with all the lights on. The hum of the refrigerator, the tick of the clock — every sound felt amplified. At 2 a.m. the lights flickered once more, and a faint whisper curled out of the darkness behind him.

She doesn't belong here, Vivek.

He turned sharply. Nothing. Only the long shadow of the staircase stretched across the marble floor like a dark vein. He shut his eyes, but the voice came again — closer now, inside his head.

You promised forever.

He clutched his temples. “Leave me alone,” he hissed.

I never left.

A sudden gust rattled the balcony doors. One swung open, though they’d been locked. The rain had begun again, thin silver needles against the glass. Through the open door, a figure seemed to shimmer in the rainlight — pale, indistinct, hair streaming like smoke. For a moment he thought he saw her eyes.

“Vamika?”

But the rain swallowed the name.

The next morning Kamya found him on the balcony floor, drenched, staring blankly into the dawn. He didn’t remember going outside. His phone lay beside him, screen cracked. The timestamp of his last call chilled her: 2:47 a.m., dialed to Vamika Malhotra. The number had been deactivated months ago.

Kamya decided to leave that very day. She called her sister in Kolkata, packed two suitcases, and told Vivek she’d return once he’d agreed to move out. He didn’t answer. He only stared at the rain-streaked window as though waiting for something to appear.

By evening, she was gone.

For the first time in months, silence filled the house again. It was not peace. It was anticipation.

Vivek’s days became shapeless. He stopped going to work. Food lost its taste. The house seemed to shift subtly when he wasn’t looking — doors left open, water taps running, paintings crooked. Once he found the old wedding album lying open on the kitchen counter, its pages damp. Vamika’s

smiling face stared up at him, the photograph warped by moisture.

Each night she came closer. In dreams she walked through corridors that melted into mist, her footsteps soft but relentless. *You killed me,* she would say. Not in accusation, but in certainty. *And now you live with her laughter.*

He'd wake gasping, drenched in sweat, whispering apologies to an empty room.

One evening, weeks after Kamya's departure, he heard knocking — slow, deliberate, coming from inside the walls. He traced it to the study. The sound seemed to move with him, a dull heartbeat behind the plaster. Desperate, he began tearing at the wallpaper. Beneath layers of paint, he uncovered faint markings — scratches forming words.

I'M STILL HERE.

He backed away, stumbling, until his heel struck something. The floor rug had shifted to reveal a dark stain on the marble, almost circular. It hadn't been there before. The stain looked damp, like water — or wine. Or blood.

He fled the room and drank until the shapes of words blurred.

A week later, Kamya returned, unwilling but concerned. "You've lost weight," she said quietly. The house smelled stale; curtains drawn, dust thick on the surfaces. Vivek's eyes were bloodshot.

"I can't sleep," he whispered. "She's everywhere."

Kamya swallowed. "Don't say that."

"I see her in mirrors, in the rain, in my dreams. She wants something, Kamya. She won't go."

Kamya reached for him. "Let's leave this house. Please."

But he shook his head. "She'll follow. She always does."

Something in his voice frightened her — a calmness, an acceptance of madness.

That night, as they lay side by side in uneasy truce, Kamya dreamed of water filling the room, cold and endless. When she woke, she found the bedsheet damp again, and the faint scent of jasmine around her throat. Vivek slept soundly, a faint smile on his lips.

The next days blurred. He began speaking to someone unseen. Kamya would hear murmurs from the study — fragments of conversation. Once she caught the words *"I never meant to hurt you."* When she entered, he would fall silent, eyes unfocused.

She feared him now. His temper flared unpredictably. He accused her of mocking him, of inviting Vamika's anger. "You took what wasn't yours," he said one night, his voice shaking.

"I didn't take anything!" she cried.

He slammed his hand on the table. "You took *me!*"

The lights flickered again. The glass on the table shattered, exploding outward though no one had touched it. Kamya screamed. Vivek stood frozen, blood running down his wrist from a cut. But his face had changed — his expression no longer his own. His eyes seemed to darken, his mouth twisting into a faint, unfamiliar smile.

Mine, a voice whispered — not from his lips, but through them.

Kamya backed away. "Vivek, please—"

He blinked, confusion flickering. “Kamya? What… what’s happening?”

But she was already running.

She locked herself in the guest room again, sobbing into her hands. Outside, the wind howled through the balcony gaps. Footsteps moved across the corridor — slow, steady. A shadow passed under the door, pausing just beyond.

“Vivek?” she whispered.

The shadow didn’t move.

Then, softly, a woman’s voice from the other side: *He’s mine.*

Kamya screamed.

When Vivek broke open the door minutes later, she was crouched in the corner, hysterical. “It was her,” she sobbed. “She spoke to me.”

He tried to hold her, but she flinched from his touch. “You brought her here,” she said. “She’ll kill us both.”

He wanted to deny it, but deep down he knew — she was right. Vamika’s sorrow had turned to hunger. Love had curdled into vengeance.

That night, when Kamya finally fell asleep from exhaustion, Vivek sat awake in the darkness, whispering to the air. “What do you want from me?”

The reply came like a breath against his ear. *Justice.*

The next morning, neighbours heard screams.

When the police arrived, they found Kamya’s body in the kitchen. The scene was grotesquely calm — no forced entry,

no sign of struggle beyond a shattered vase. Vivek sat beside her, covered in blood, murmuring, "I didn't mean to."

He was arrested without resistance.

During interrogation, he spoke little. What little he did say chilled the officers. "She wanted me to do it," he told them. "She made me see what I'd done to her."

They asked who.

"My wife," he said simply. "Vamika."

But Vamika had been dead for nearly a year.

The trial was swift. The evidence overwhelming. Kamya's blood on his hands, his fingerprints on the knife. The defence attempted insanity; the court ruled life imprisonment. The newspapers turned it into a tragic scandal: *Corporate Executive Murders Second Wife, Haunted by Past.*

Vivek was transferred to the central prison near Parappana Agrahara. The cell was small, damp, its single window facing the wall of another block. Nights there were long — the kind that swallowed thought.

He found brief peace in the monotony, until the dreams returned.

The first time she came to him in prison, he thought it was memory. He lay on his cot, staring at the faint orange glow from the corridor, when a whisper slithered through the silence.

You understand now, don't you?

He sat up. The cell door remained locked. But in the corner, where the light didn't reach, the air seemed to thicken. A

shape formed — mist, faint but human. Her outline. Her face.

"Vamika," he breathed.

She stepped closer, her features shifting like candle flame. She looked neither angry nor kind — only certain. "I loved you more than life," she said softly. "You turned that love into ashes."

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"You weren't sorry when you buried me in your memory."

"I— I didn't kill you."

Her eyes darkened. "You did. Piece by piece, with lies and neglect. I only gave you what you gave me."

Tears streamed down his face. "Let me go."

"I already have," she said. "I just came to watch you rot."

Her form began to fade, the cell growing colder. Before she vanished completely, she added, almost gently, "This is justice served, my love."

When the guard checked on him at dawn, Vivek sat motionless, staring at the wall. His hair had turned streaks of grey overnight.

Days merged into years. No one visited. Sometimes the guards whispered that they heard him talking at night, as if conversing with someone unseen. Others claimed the air around his cell smelled faintly of jasmine.

Once, during a routine inspection, a priest accompanying the warden paused outside his door and murmured, "There's unrest here."

The warden scoffed. “It’s just guilt.”

But the priest only looked at the wall — where, faintly, scratches spelled a single line, etched by unknown hands:

REVENGE IS LOVE..ONLY MORE SATISFYING!

Outside, Bangalore moved on. The Whitefield villa was sold, renovated, renamed. Families came and went. Yet neighbours often spoke of strange things — lights flickering in empty rooms, the sound of soft humming on rainy nights. Some claimed they saw a woman in white on the balcony; her gaze fixed on the horizon.

And when the wind blew from the east, carrying the scent of wet earth and jasmine, those who listened carefully swore they could hear a whisper beneath the rain — a woman’s voice, calm and resolute:

Forever means forever.

Meter Rates Apply

The rains had come late that year, and Pune was choking on its own dust. Every streetlight threw out a halo of amber haze, and the air smelled of burnt fuel and monsoon that refused to fall. From JM Road to the far edges of Katraj, rumours had begun to cling to the city like mildew — stories whispered in tea stalls, retold by cabbies at midnight signals, murmured by constables leaning on their Enfields.

Someone — or something — was killing people who argued with auto drivers. The police reports said "robbery-related homicides." The newspapers called it "fare-rage." But everyone else knew better. Every week another mutilated body turned up near the city's fringes — by the half-built metro pillars of Hinjewadi, under the bridge near Warje, sometimes dumped on the silent service roads of Viman Nagar. All of them the same: eyes wide open, mouths frozen in terror, throats carved by something that wasn't a knife, as if the air itself had chewed them.

They said the killer was an **auto driver with no head**.

No one remembered when the story began. Maybe it started as a joke, a driver's tall tale to spook passengers into paying up. But then came the first viral video — blurry CCTV footage from FC Road, showing a black-and-yellow auto gliding through the rain without a visible driver. The headlights flared white in the drizzle, the number plate unreadable. For a few seconds, the frame froze on an empty seat behind the steering bar. Then the video cut to static.

The police dismissed it as a prank. But Pune believed.

It was past one a.m. when **Raghav** landed at Pune Airport. He'd come from Chennai — new job in a tech firm at Baner, rented a flat in Kothrud. He was thirty, single, quiet, the kind of man who preferred late-night flights and empty terminals. His phone battery blinked red. Ola and Uber both showed "No cabs available."

Outside, a line of autos waited. Most were empty. The drivers sat in groups, smoking, half-asleep. Raghav approached one — the driver quoted a fare nearly double what the app had shown earlier. Raghav sighed, muttered a tired "No thanks," and kept walking.

That was when he saw **it**.

An auto stood apart from the others near the edge of the parking lot, away from the sodium light. The hood was half-pulled, its yellow paint dulled by grime. On the back, the words *"Meter Rates Apply"* were scrawled in hand-painted white, letters uneven and cracked.

The driver sat slouched, face hidden under a grey hoodie. Something about the stillness of his body — too still — made Raghav hesitate. Then the driver slowly raised a hand and gestured, palm up, the way autos do when asking "where to?"

"Baner," Raghav said.

No response. Only the faint rattle of the auto's engine starting by itself.

The headlights flickered on. The driver's head stayed low, chin buried in the hood.

Raghav told himself he was overthinking. He was tired, needed to reach his flat, charge his phone, sleep. He stepped in.

The seat was damp, smelled faintly metallic, like rust and something else — coppery, unpleasant.

The meter blinked erratically, digits rolling too fast before stopping on a number that didn't make sense.

They pulled out of the airport lane, merging onto the empty road toward Viman Nagar. The city lights faded behind them.

Rain began to fall, thin needles slicing through the air. The windshield wiper moved sluggishly, squeaking in protest. The driver didn't speak, didn't look back. His hoodie dripped water in a steady rhythm.

Raghav tried small talk. "Late night, huh?"

No answer.

He leaned slightly forward. "You've been driving long?"

The driver's shoulders moved — a twitch, maybe a nod.

The air inside the auto felt wrong — colder than outside. Raghav rubbed his arms, realizing he could see his own breath. The tiny LED light above the driver's seat flickered, showing glimpses of the man's neck — or what should have been a neck.

In the momentary flashes, Raghav thought he saw darkness beneath the hood — not shadow, but emptiness.

He told himself it was the lighting, the motion. He looked away, out at the rain-blurred city.

They crossed the Yerwada Bridge. The river below shimmered like liquid tar. A billboard for a real-estate project loomed above — *"Your dream home in Baner starts here."*

Raghav checked his phone — dead. No network. No battery.

A jolt ran through the auto. The engine sputtered, growled, steadied again. The driver's hands gripped the handle tighter, veins — or cords — showing pale against the darkness.

The meter jumped again — 320… 640… 980.

Raghav frowned. "Hey, your meter's running wrong."

The driver said nothing. The auto kept going faster.

Something inside stopped Raghav from pressing any further on the meter readings. "Its too late and lonely to find another ride at this time, will deal with him when I reach my destination." Raghav thought to himself.

Few minutes passed. Raghav was growing impatient due to the silence and empty roads, Only the hum of the engine and the scrape of tyres on wet asphalt could be heard. A sudden break from the driver sent Raghav leaning forward over the driver's shoulder. It felt cold, hard — not skin. The driver turned slightly.

The hood slipped.

Raghav froze.

There was **nothing** under it.

Where a head should have been, there was only a jagged stump, blackened and wet, dripping onto the seat. Steam rose faintly from the torn flesh. From within the cavity, a

faint whispering sound emerged, like air escaping a slit throat.

Raghav stumbled back against the seat, gasping. The auto didn't slow down.

The whisper became a gurgle, words forming from wet air:

"**Meter… rates… apply.**"

The auto veered sharply onto a smaller road — a narrow, tree-lined stretch leading toward Aundh. Raghav clutched the frame to steady himself.

He wanted to jump out, but the rain outside looked like a wall. The auto's headlights cut through the mist in thin blades, illuminating fragments of signboards: *Nilgiri Apartments*, *Silent Hill Society*, *No Thru Road*.

Suddenly the autorickshaw hit a bump-most likely an ill made rumbler often made by locals in this part of the city to control speeding vehicles. The driver's body convulsed once, violently, Blood spattered onto the windshield from the empty neck. The auto screeched to a halt.

Raghav tumbled out, falling onto the wet road.

When he looked up, the driver was gone.

Only the hood lay on the driver's seat, soaked, still dripping.

Raghav scrambled to his feet, heart pounding. The rain hissed around him. He turned in every direction — deserted lanes, closed gates, distant thunder. Then, slowly, the auto's engine started again **by itself**.

It rolled toward him.

Raghav ran.

His shoes splashed through puddles, lungs burning. Behind him, the auto's headlights followed, twin orbs cutting through the rain. The sound of the motor grew louder, closer, relentless.

He turned into a side lane — *Apte Road* — where the city's sleeping heart still glimmered through shuttered cafes and half-lit ATM booths. The auto screeched after him, bouncing off potholes, its horn wailing like laughter.

Raghav darted through a gate into an under-construction building. Concrete pillars rose around him like tombstones. He hid behind a stack of bricks, chest heaving.

The sound of the auto idling filled the open space, echoing against the walls.

Then came the footsteps — wet, heavy, dragging.

Raghav peeked around the corner. The driver was standing at the entrance now. The hoodie still clung to the headless torso. In his hands — or rather, clenched between what looked like skeletal fingers — he held a **machete** streaked with rust and rain.

Raghav's mind reeled — he had to be dreaming, hallucinating, something.

The thing moved closer, machete scraping the ground.

Raghav bolted up the stairs, slipping, hitting his shin, not caring. He reached the second floor, ducked into a half-built room, crouched low. His breath sounded deafening in his own ears.

Below, the auto's headlights flashed once, twice — like a signal. Then went out.

Silence.

He waited. Minutes, maybe hours. Then, faintly, he heard it again:

"**Meter… rates… apply.**"

The whisper came from right behind him.

Raghav turned — nothing there. Just dripping rebar, the smell of concrete and ozone.

When he looked down, he saw muddy footprints forming — one by one — leading toward him.

He didn't wait. He jumped from the second floor into a mound of sand below, rolled, staggered up, ran until his legs gave out.

Morning light broke over Deccan. Commuters filled the streets again, washing away the night's terrors with the smell of chai and exhaust.

At seven a.m., a traffic constable found Raghav stumbling barefoot near a signal, drenched and shaking. He couldn't speak at first, only point behind him, muttering, "Auto… hoodie… no head…"

They took him to Sassoon Hospital. The doctors said shock. The police filed a routine report — "unidentified assailant, possible robbery attempt."

But the constable who'd brought him in swore he'd seen something strange. When he went back to the spot Raghav had come from, there were tyre tracks on the wet road — but no footprints beside them.

And parked by a garbage bin on the corner of Apte Road, there sat an abandoned auto.

Number plate smeared, windshield cracked. On the back, half-washed away by rain, the words were still visible:

Meter Rates Apply.

The news broke two days later.

Local papers ran it on the back pages — *"Tech Employee Found Unconscious; Claims 'Headless Auto Driver' Attack."* Most readers dismissed it. Pune was full of headlines like that lately: *Stray Crime, Robbery Gone Wrong, Mental Breakdown.* The city preferred its horror as gossip, not truth.

But in the dim, chaotic control room of the Pune Police headquarters, Inspector **Suhas More** didn't laugh.

He'd seen this before.

The past six months, he'd worked five cases — all alike. Male victims, all night commuters, all killed or attacked near flyovers or industrial backroads. Always involving an **auto driver dispute**. Always ending in something grotesque.

In two cases, dashcam footage from passing cars had captured a shadow — an auto without a driver, moving with impossible precision, as if guided by memory.

Suhas lit a cigarette, staring at the pinboard of photos and maps. The routes formed a circle. Every scene was within a five-kilometre radius of **Yerwada Bridge**.

The center of that circle was a single red pin — **Shastri Nagar Auto Stand**.

Five years ago, the stand had been the busiest in east Pune. One of the regulars was **Ramesh Pawar**, a thirty-two-year-old driver from Hadapsar. Hardworking, quiet, a man who played old Kishore Kumar tracks on a cracked speaker and always wore the same grey hoodie.

Ramesh was known for being honest with fares — maybe too honest. In a city where most drivers haggled, he stubbornly stuck to his meter. *Meter rates apply,* he'd tell every passenger with a grin, even when others overcharged.

Until one night, he picked up the wrong customer.

It was the summer of 2020 — the pandemic year, when curfews blurred and tempers boiled. Ramesh had taken a group of drunk college boys from Koregaon Park to Kothrud. When they reached, the meter showed ₹420. The boys laughed, refused to pay, said it should be ₹250 at most.

An argument turned to shoving. Someone pulled a knife. Someone else shouted. By the time neighbours ran out, the fight was over.

Ramesh lay on the road — throat slit, head severed, blood mixing with petrol. The boys disappeared before dawn.

No arrests. No CCTV. Just another unsolved killing.

The next week, the stand shut down. No driver wanted to take that route anymore. And slowly, stories began to surface — of an auto that stopped for stranded passengers at night, with a driver in a grey hoodie whose head never turned.

The few who saw him up close never lived to tell the tale.

Until Raghav.

Inspector Suhas drove to Apte Road at dusk. The city looked deceptively peaceful — vendors calling out, bikes weaving through traffic, students laughing over roadside momos. But as the sun dipped, shadows stretched long between the flyovers.

He parked near the same garbage bin where the abandoned auto had been found. It was gone now, impounded. But Suhas could still feel the wrongness in the air, a heaviness that clung like humidity.

He walked toward the construction site Raghav had mentioned. Half-built, now sealed by police tape. Inside, the ground was packed with footprints hardened in dried mud — some human, some not quite.

His phone buzzed. A junior officer, Patel.

"Sir, you'll want to see this," Patel said. "The garage report on that auto… it's registered to a dead man. Ramesh Pawar. Killed in 2020."

Suhas's stomach turned cold. "How's it still running?"

Patel hesitated. "Sir, the ignition system's fused. Engine starts without a key. And the blood traces on the seat… match Pawar's old case file."

Suhas stubbed out his cigarette on the wet cement floor, jaw tightening. "Get that Raghav kid to the station. I want him to describe everything again."

Raghav sat across from him, pale, hands trembling around a cup of tea that had gone cold. His eyes were hollow, ringed with sleeplessness.

"I know what it sounds like," he said. "But I swear… he had no head. I saw—"

"I believe you," Suhas said quietly.

Raghav looked up, startled.

"I've seen what's left of the others," Suhas continued. "Tell me. Did he say anything?"

Raghav swallowed. “Only one thing. ‘Meter… rates… apply.’ Over and over.”

Suhas nodded. He’d heard the phrase too many times in witness notes — muttered by people before they died, recorded faintly on phone audios, sometimes scratched into asphalt with fingernails.

Raghav gripped the edge of the chair. “Why me? Why did he let me live?”

Suhas studied him. “Did you argue about the fare?”

“No.”

“Then that’s why.”

By midnight, Suhas was driving alone down the same route Raghav had taken — from the airport through Viman Nagar to Aundh. The city had emptied, the streets glistening with leftover rain.

He reached the Yerwada Bridge, headlights bouncing off the black water below. A single auto waited on the other side, engine idling, facing him.

Its meter flickered.

Suhas slowed. The driver’s silhouette sat motionless, hood pulled low.

His radio crackled with static. The voice on the other end broke through, barely audible:

“Sir… are you still on channel? We’re getting interference near your signal… sir?”

The auto’s lights blinked once. Then the driver raised a hand — that familiar, crooked beckon.

Suhas stepped out of his car, hand on his service revolver. The night hummed. A dog barked somewhere, then went silent mid-howl.

He approached slowly, boots splashing in shallow puddles.

"Ramesh Pawar," he said into the darkness. "It's over. You got your revenge. Let the city rest."

The figure didn't move.

Suhas reached the driver's side. The seat was empty. The hood hung limp.

Then, behind him, the auto door creaked open on its own.

The engine roared to life.

Suhas stumbled back as the vehicle lunged forward without a driver, tyres spinning, headlights blinding. He fired twice — bullets cracking through glass — but the auto kept coming, unstoppable, metal shrieking.

He dived aside as it hurtled past and smashed into a lamppost, flames bursting through the rain.

When he looked up, he saw something crawl out of the wreck — a **headless shape**, burning yet intact, trudging through the fire like it couldn't die.

It stopped by the bridge railing, turned towards him.

From the severed neck came the faintest hiss, like words carried on smoke:

"**Meter… rates… apply.**"

Then it leapt. Straight into the river.

The flames went out. The rain swallowed everything.

For weeks, the city buzzed with theories. Some said the police had caught the murderer. Some said it was an underworld hitman. Others swore it was a ghost, cursed to collect fares forever.

The killings stopped for a while. Raghav quit his job and moved to Mumbai. Pune tried to breathe again.

But legends don't fade that easily.

One year later, a man leaving a late shift from an IT park in Hinjewadi hailed an auto. The driver wore a grey hoodie. The ride was smooth, silent, almost too quiet. he noticed the fare climbing faster than it should, but he didn't argue. When he reached home, he handed the cash, murmured, "Keep the change."

He nodded once without looking at her.

When she turned back after unlocking her gate, the auto was gone — not driven away, just vanished into the rain.

The next morning, her neighbour found muddy tyre tracks leading up to her doorstep — and fading boot prints that stopped midway, as if the man had dissolved into air.

It's easy to forget how alive Pune feels at night — the hum of FC Road, laughter spilling from cafes, the smoky tang of roasted corn near JM Road, bikes weaving through the drizzle. But every city hides its shadow lanes.

Ask the night guards at Viman Nagar. The truckers by Warje. The food stall vendors outside Deccan Gymkhana. They'll all tell you the same warning:

If you ever find yourself stranded after midnight, and a lone auto pulls up — dull yellow, worn out, number plate half-

erased — and the driver wears a grey hoodie that hides his face…

Don't haggle. Don't question the fare.

Just pay whatever he asks.

Because when the meter blinks faster than it should, it's not charging for distance — it's charging for life.

Monsoon returned, as it always did. The city's drains overflowed, the sky turned bruised purple, and the roads glistened with oil rainbows.

On one such night, at 2:37 a.m., a traffic camera at the Baner flyover captured a single frame before going dead.

An auto, black and yellow, moving against traffic. No driver visible. No registration number.

The back of the auto bore a fresh coat of paint, white letters standing out against the grime:

"METER RATES APPLY"

One Man Army

The wind over the Pir Panjal range carried a chill that sliced through layers of olive-green wool. Snow dusted the rocks like ash. At the farthest finger of India's northern reach, where the Line of Control blurred into a smear of ridge and silence, a lonely post stood guard — an outpost the maps called Randhawa Post, though none of the men who had ever been stationed there used the name lightly.

It was a fragment of the frontier: one bunker, one wireless shack, a flag that cracked in the wind, and one soldier — a lone sipahi assigned by rotation every six months. Officially, it was a "listening post." Unofficially, it was a shrine, a curse, a rumor that refused to die.

Every regiment knew the story. The old-timers told it in canteens after two pegs of rum: how Major Arjun Singh Randhawa of the Sikh Regiment had held this same rocky outcrop in December 1971, when Pakistani regulars tried to break through the ridge under the cover of blizzard and night. The Major had refused to retreat. When communication was cut, he kept firing until his ammunition was gone. When his men lay dead around him, he had fixed his bayonet and fought till dawn. They found his body two days later — half-buried in snow, still clutching his rifle, surrounded by twelve Pakistani corpses frozen in poses of retreat.

After that, strange things happened. The post changed hands, then went silent. Every attempt to occupy it fully had

failed — either men vanished, or attackers did. Hence command decided it should remain manned by only one soldier at a time. Enough to claim it. Enough to respect it. Enough to avoid angering what might still linger there.

Tonight, it was Sipahi Harpreet Singh from the 9 Sikh Regiment on duty. Twenty-four years old, Ludhiana-born, with four winters in the Valley behind him. He had heard the stories, laughed them off like every fresh posting did. But by the third night, laughter froze faster than breath.

He kept his LMG ready, its barrel black against the white gloom. The radio hissed in and out — crackling with static more than words. Command Base—"Tango-Zero calling Randhawa Post, report status, over." He pressed the transmitter, his gloved thumb stiff with cold.

"Randhawa Post, all normal. Visibility low. No movement, over."

"Copy that. Stay alert. Snow warning issued."

He clicked twice to acknowledge. The line went dead again.

Harpreet shifted inside the sandbag bunker, the lantern light bouncing off the frost-slicked walls. Outside, the wind screamed like an angry child. He poured some rum into a steel mug, his hand trembling. Not from fear, he told himself. Just the cold.

From the wall above his bed, a faded photograph stared back at him — laminated, edges cracked. A young officer in turban and thick moustache, rifle slung across his chest, eyes hard and alive. *Major Arjun Singh Randhawa*. Someone had nailed the photo there decades ago. Every batch of sipahis who came to guard the post left it untouched. They didn't dare.

Harpreet stared at it for a long minute. “Major saab,” he muttered softly, half in respect, half in habit. “Keep watching, haan? I’m just one man here.”

Outside, the snow thickened. The post disappeared into its own blizzard.

That same ridge, fifty-four years ago.

The winter of 1971 was white hell. Operation Meghdoot was still years away; this was another fight — raw, desperate, unrecorded. The ceasefire lines shifted by the hour. Artillery rolled thunder across the valleys. And at this lonely protrusion of rock and ice, Major Arjun Singh Randhawa stood at the parapet of his trench, binoculars fogged, scanning the ridge opposite.

“Enemy movement, 400 meters east,” he barked. “They’re regrouping after that last shelling. Beta, load the mortars.”

“Yes, sir!” Lance Naik Baljit scrambled to obey, hands numb. The young soldiers of his platoon moved like shadows in the snow — half-awake, half-starved. They had held the post for six days without resupply. Radio contact was patchy. Ammunition was running low. But their Major showed no sign of quitting.

Randhawa’s men called him “Sher-e-Ridge” — the Lion of the Ridge. Not because he roared, but because he never bowed. When one of his men was hit by shrapnel and begged for morphine, Randhawa had ripped open his own field pouch and injected the last dose without hesitation. “You’ll see sunrise, puttar,” he’d said. “I’ll make sure of it.”

But at dusk on December 15th, the ridge erupted in fire.

Pakistani artillery found their coordinates. The first shell hit the northern wall, sending snow and bodies flying. The

second landed near the ammo crate — a thunderclap that turned night into a wave of orange. The Major's ears rang; his men screamed through the ringing. "Cover! Cover! Fire back, dammit!"

He grabbed the Bren gun from a fallen jawan and let loose a burst into the advancing figures below — black shapes crawling up through snow like beetles. The gun jammed, he cleared it by instinct. Blood ran into his eyes. A piece of shrapnel had grazed his temple. He spat iron.

"Baljit!" he shouted. No answer. Only wind. He looked down and saw Baljit's face half-buried, unmoving.

Then came the second wave.

Dozens of enemy soldiers surged from the treeline, rifles flashing. Randhawa tossed a grenade, then another, ducking into the crater left by the mortar. Shrapnel tore his sleeve. He could smell cordite, blood, and diesel. He shouted the regimental war cry — *Bole So Nihal!* — and the valley answered with echoes that outlived sound.

For hours, he fought alone. When his ammunition ran out, he bayoneted a man at arm's length. When his bayonet bent, he used the rifle stock. When that broke, he used his hands. Snow turned red around him, steaming in the cold.

By dawn, the firing had stopped. Only wind moaned across the ridge.

When reinforcements finally reached the post two days later, they found him sitting upright against the parapet, frozen stiff, eyes open toward the enemy slope. Around him lay twelve bodies of Pakistani soldiers — their throats cut clean, as if by a blade drawn slow. His right hand still gripped his rifle, finger on the trigger.

They buried him where he sat. The spot was marked by a cairn of stones and a steel helmet. No priest. No bugle. Just silence and frost.

In 2025, silence still ruled Randhawa Post.

Harpreet Singh woke with a start at the sound of metal clanging. It was 0215 hours. The lantern had gone out. Darkness had weight here — a physical, suffocating thing. He reached for his rifle, heart thudding. The radio was dead. Static hissed like a snake.

Another sound — faint, rhythmic. *Clang… clang… clang.* Like boots on steel steps, coming from outside the bunker.

He swallowed hard. "Who's there?" he shouted. No answer. He clicked on his flashlight. The beam cut through the dark, catching snowflakes that looked like falling embers. The sound stopped. Only the wind whispered.

He stepped outside, the cold punching his lungs. The flag flapped violently against its pole. He scanned the perimeter — nothing. No footprints, no movement. Then, from the far corner of the trench, came a faint hum. A tune. A man's voice, distant and hoarse, singing an old regimental march.

Harpreet froze.

It was "*Jatta da Muqabla*", a song his grandfather used to hum. No radio signal could carry that melody up here. The voice grew clearer for a second — deep, resonant, commanding. Then it was gone.

He stood there, breath steaming, rifle trembling slightly. The hum was replaced by another sound — a faint metallic slide, like a bolt being drawn. Then silence.

Harpreet backed into the bunker, shut the door, and bolted it. He sat down, pulse hammering, staring at the photograph on the wall. Major Randhawa's eyes seemed different in the flicker of the lantern — sharper, almost alive.

"Major saab…" he whispered. "Is that you?"

The flame flickered once, twice, then steadied.

He didn't sleep that night.

By dawn, the storm had eased. Sunlight glared off the snow, blinding and empty. The radio crackled back to life.

"Tango-Zero to Randhawa Post, copy, over."

Harpreet grabbed the handset. "Randhawa Post here. All normal, sir."

"You sure? Satellite picked some heat signatures near your coordinates last night. Possible infiltration attempt."

Harpreet's blood ran cold. "Negative contact, sir. Maybe just wildlife."

"Roger that. Keep observation. We'll send a patrol tomorrow."

"Copy, over and out."

He set the radio down, staring out at the ridge line. The night's sounds haunted his mind, but daylight made them seem ridiculous. Maybe it was just stress. Or the echo of wind through the hollow metal posts.

Still, when he poured his tea, he placed the second cup near the photograph on the shelf. A small gesture. Just in case.

The next night, the storm returned — thicker, wilder. Snow fell sideways, erasing sky and earth. Harpreet huddled near

the stove, reading the logbook left by his predecessor. Most entries were mundane: *Temperature -15. Visibility 30m. Supplies low.* But one line, from five months ago, made his hand freeze:

"Heard boots outside again. Smell of cordite in the air. Saw footprints that ended mid-trail."

He closed the book slowly.

Then, from the slope below, came the unmistakable staccato of automatic fire — a short burst, three seconds long, then silence.

Harpreet lunged for the radio. "Tango-Zero, this is Randhawa Post! I heard firing from enemy side, possibly near grid seven-bravo, over!"

Static.

He tried again. "Tango-Zero, confirm transmission!"

Nothing. The radio hissed, then died again.

The firing didn't resume. Only the wind howled louder, like mockery.

He peered through the periscope. The ridge beyond was a white wall. Then — movement. Five, maybe six dark figures, advancing in staggered formation. Too coordinated to be smugglers. Too silent to be soldiers moving openly.

Harpreet's mouth went dry. "Terrorists," he muttered.

He loaded his LMG, checked the bipod, and aimed. Through the scope, he could see them more clearly now — camouflaged parkas, AKs slung forward, faces wrapped in black scarves. They were making for the blind spot near the eastern approach.

He radioed again. Still nothing. He was alone.

He adjusted his aim, waiting until the first figure reached the snow trench below the flagpole. The man stopped, raised a hand — a signal. Others spread out, flanking the post. Harpreet took a deep breath. Then squeezed the trigger.

The LMG spat fire. The first burst cut down two instantly. The rest dove behind rocks. Tracers tore through the blizzard. He shifted position, short controlled bursts. "Come on, you bastards," he hissed. "Let's see your guts."

Then, his gun jammed.

He smacked the side, trying to clear it. When he looked up again, the ridge was empty. They had vanished into the whiteout.

He scanned frantically. Nothing. The silence was wrong — too deep, too sudden. Then he heard it: the crunch of boots behind him.

He spun around, rifle raised. No one there. Only the photograph of Major Randhawa had fallen off the wall, glass cracked, lying face-down on the floor.

And from outside, came a voice. Calm. Punjabi accent, firm, unmistakable.

"Puttar, stay down. Leave them to me."

Harpreet's breath caught in his throat. He knew that voice. He had heard it in stories, in regimental songs, in whispers by the campfire.

"Major saab…?"

But the door burst open before he could finish.

A gust of snow swept in — and with it, the echo of gunfire.

The blast of cold air that tore through the bunker carried the smell of cordite and something else — something raw and metallic, like fresh blood on steel. Harpreet's hand tightened around his rifle. He stepped back as the storm howled through the doorway, the snow curling in spirals like living smoke. Somewhere beyond the white haze, there were voices — muffled, urgent, foreign.

He ducked behind the sandbags, heart pounding. He could make out at least three — no, four men moving up the slope. The enemy had reached the perimeter.

One of them shouted in Pashto, his words carried half by the wind, half by rage: "Post le lo! Koi zinda na bache!"

Harpreet steadied his aim, finger on the trigger. But then another sound cut through — a low, rumbling chant. Not from him. Not from the attackers. Something older, heavier. The words were indistinct but unmistakably Punjabi, rolling like thunder between mountains.

Jo bole so nihal… sat sri akal!

The phrase echoed, once, twice, thrice — but not from a living throat. It came from everywhere — from the wind, the walls, the stones themselves. The terrorists hesitated, their formation faltering.

Then it began.

A flare went off somewhere in the snow — a flash of red that bathed the ridge in a sick, violent hue. And in that light, Harpreet saw a figure standing atop the outer trench — tall, broad-shouldered, turban wrapped tight, rifle in hand. The form shimmered, half-solid, half-smoke, like heat rising off asphalt. The face was hidden in shadow, but the stance was unmistakable — soldier straight, defiant, proud.

“Major…” Harpreet whispered, eyes wide.

The figure didn’t turn. It just raised the rifle and fired. The crack was thunderous. One of the terrorists dropped instantly, his body flung backward like a rag doll. Another tried to run — the second shot took him clean through the neck. Blood sprayed across the snow like ink on paper.

The others screamed, panicking. They fired wildly into the storm, bullets ricocheting off rocks, sparks lighting the snow. But the figure didn’t flinch. Each step it took left no footprint.

Harpreet could barely move. His training screamed at him to return fire, to fight, but awe rooted him where he stood. The radio hissed alive for a split second — just enough for a burst of static and a single faint voice: “Hold your ground.”

He gritted his teeth, switched his rifle to burst mode, and joined in. The post erupted in gunfire. The echoes rolled across the valley, bouncing off ridges until they became a single, unbroken roar.

When the smoke cleared, only one terrorist was still moving — crawling through the snow, dragging a leg that was no longer whole. His comrades lay twisted around him, limbs bent in impossible angles. Harpreet aimed, but the man was already retreating — not toward Pakistan, but toward the lower trench, where the storm had thickened into a white wall.

Then the white turned red.

A shape burst from the haze — the same tall figure — grabbed the crawling man by the throat, and lifted him clear off the ground. The terrorist screamed, high and thin, arms flailing. Harpreet couldn’t see clearly through the snow, but what little he saw made his stomach turn. The man’s head

jerked once, twice — then fell limp. The body was tossed aside like waste.

The figure turned slowly toward the bunker. For a long, awful second, Harpreet thought it was looking at him. The storm went silent.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the figure was gone. The ridge was empty again.

By morning, command sent a patrol from the base — four men and a wireless operator. When they reached Randhawa Post, they found Harpreet sitting by the stove, rifle across his lap, eyes hollow.

"Singh! Oye, Harpreet! Report, yaar! What happened?"

He didn't answer. He just pointed toward the slope.

The patrol followed his gesture — and stopped dead in their tracks.

The snow below the post was churned into a grotesque battlefield. Seven bodies lay scattered, twisted like dolls. Not a single bullet wound was clean. Some had their throats slashed; others had faces torn open, eyes gone, expressions frozen in mid-scream. The snow around them was black with dried blood.

"What the fuck happened here?" murmured the corporal.

Harpreet just muttered, "They tried to come up the ridge. They didn't make it."

The officer in charge crouched beside one of the corpses, checking the wounds. "This wasn't small arms fire," he said quietly. "Some of these are… blade wounds. Deep ones. Who else was here with you?"

Harpreet looked at him, face pale. “Nobody, sir. Just me.”

“Then who killed them?”

Harpreet’s lips trembled. “Major Randhawa, sir.”

The officer froze. “What did you say?”

Harpreet didn’t answer. He simply pointed at the photograph still nailed to the wall — the glass cracked clean down the middle, the man in the photo staring straight ahead, eyes burning through the decades.

The officer swallowed hard, said nothing. He ordered the area sealed, the bodies evacuated. The report that went back to command mentioned only “elimination of seven hostile elements under heavy weather conditions.” Nothing more. Nothing less.

But the legend grew.

Two weeks later, across the border, a man limped through the snow into a remote bunker on the Pakistani side. His uniform was torn, his face frostbitten, eyes wide with something deeper than fear. His name was Shahid Farooq, and he was the only one left alive from the group that had gone to attack Randhawa Post.

The officers who found him thought he was delirious. They wrapped him in blankets, gave him water, and waited until he could speak. When he did, his voice was hoarse, trembling.

“There was no one there,” he whispered. “Just one Indian soldier. We saw him. Then the storm came.”

He paused, shaking. “Then we heard someone else.”

“Who?” the officer demanded.

"A voice," Shahid said. "Loud. In Punjabi. It said… *'Stay where you are, sons of cowards.'*"

The men exchanged glances. Shahid's eyes were wild now. "He came out of the snow. A tall man, turban on his head, rifle in his hands. We shot at him — bullets went through him. I swear to Allah, they passed through! Then he started shooting — no, not shooting, cutting. The others… they screamed, sir. He tore them apart like paper. Their heads… their heads…" He broke down, sobbing into his hands.

The officer frowned. "Enough of this nonsense. You're saying a ghost killed your men?"

Shahid nodded desperately. "It was him! The ghost of the Sikh Major! His face was… burned into the snow, glowing red. He said, *'No one crosses Randhawa Ridge.'*"

The officer stood abruptly, disgusted. "You're mad. You failed your mission, that's all. There's no ghost."

But when they checked the ridge through binoculars later that day, they saw something that made even the cynical officer fall silent.

At the edge of the Indian post, half-buried in snow, fluttered a torn Pakistani scarf — and beside it, a fresh set of footprints that stopped halfway down the slope, leading nowhere.

Back at Randhawa Post, Harpreet was relieved from duty and sent to base for debriefing. The new sipahi assigned to replace him — Naik Iqbal — arrived three days later.

"Bas, yaar," Harpreet told him as they shook hands. "Keep your eyes open at night. Don't leave the bunker after 0200. And if you hear someone calling your name from outside…"

Iqbal raised an eyebrow. "Then?"

Harpreet met his gaze. “Don’t answer.”

He turned and left, not once looking back.

That night, Iqbal unpacked his kit, lit the lantern, and settled into the bunker. He noticed the cracked photograph still hanging on the wall. He’d heard the stories, of course — everyone had. But he was a practical man. He’d fought militants, seen worse. Ghosts didn’t scare him.

Until, sometime past midnight, he heard boots outside. Heavy, deliberate steps, pacing the perimeter.

He grabbed his rifle, crept to the doorway, and waited. The steps stopped. Then came a knock — three sharp raps on the steel door.

He froze.

“Kaun hai?” he called.

No answer.

He opened the slit in the door, peered out — nothing. Only snow swirling in moonlight.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw movement near the flagpole — a tall figure standing perfectly still, facing the ridge. The figure saluted.

Iqbal blinked. When he looked again, it was gone.

Weeks passed. Patrols reported strange findings — blood trails appearing overnight near the post, but no bodies. Wireless logs crackled with interference every time someone mentioned “Randhawa.” One night, a surveillance drone captured faint heat signatures at the post — two figures, not one.

When command checked, there was only Iqbal. Alone.

The footage was quietly deleted.

But word spread through the units like wildfire. Among the men of the Sikh Regiment, it became ritual: before deployment, they raised their glasses and murmured, "To Major Randhawa — may he keep our flank safe."

Even officers stopped questioning it.

Because every time there was movement across that sector — every time militants tried to infiltrate through that cursed ridge — they never came back.

And always, after each skirmish, the same report came over the radio from the post: "All normal. Area secure."

The story that spread among the locals along the LoC grew with every retelling. Some said the Major still walked the ridge each night, bayonet in hand, his boots leaving no mark. Others swore they'd seen a faint orange glow atop the post at dawn — like a lamp burning for a fallen soldier.

The army, of course, said nothing. They didn't have to.

Because the men who served there, the ones who rotated through that post every six months, never spoke of what they saw — but they all left the same offering before they departed. A small steel mug of rum, placed beneath the cracked photograph.

The tradition began with Harpreet Singh. It continued with Iqbal. And with every new man posted to that desolate ridge, the story deepened — not as superstition, but as respect.

The post became a symbol, a line no enemy dared cross.

And when the wind howled across Randhawa Ridge, sometimes it carried a faint voice with it — rough, commanding, tinged with pride.

"Puttar… keep your watch."

Months later, back in Ludhiana, Harpreet Singh sat in a small gurdwara, his head bowed before the Guru Granth Sahib. He'd been given medical leave, but his nights were not peaceful. He still woke to the echo of gunfire, the smell of snow and blood, and that voice — low, steady, forever etched into his skull.

When the granthi noticed him lingering after prayers, he asked softly, "Tera mann nahi lagda, beta?"

Harpreet hesitated. "I saw something, Baba ji. Something no man should see."

The old priest looked at him kindly. "You were at that post, weren't you?"

Harpreet nodded.

The priest sighed. "Then you saw the protector. The ridge has been watched since the war. Those who die defending their duty don't always leave. Some stay."

Harpreet's throat tightened. "Then… he's still fighting?"

The priest smiled faintly. "Until his country no longer needs him."

Harpreet left the gurdwara without another word. Outside, the evening sun painted the snow-capped horizon gold. For a brief moment, he thought he saw a tall silhouette standing on a distant ridge — motionless, rifle in hand.

Then the wind shifted, and it was gone.

Across the border, Shahid Farooq never recovered. The doctors called it post-traumatic shock. He called it *haunting.* He was transferred to a psychiatric ward in Rawalpindi, where he spent his days muttering about snow and eyes that glowed red.

"Do you know what hell looks like?" he once told his nurse. "It looks like a man who never died."

She thought he was raving.

Until one morning, when she came in to deliver his medication, she found his bed empty — and the window open, snow blowing in through the bars. On the wall above the bed, written in frost, were words scrawled with a shaking hand:

"He's still there."

Back on the Indian side, a new winter came, and with it, another sipahi assigned to the post. This one was from Himachal, fresh-faced, eager. As the helicopter dropped him near the ridge, the pilot leaned back and said quietly, "Don't wander at night, brother. That place has its own guard already."

The young soldier laughed, thinking it a joke.

But when he reached the bunker and saw the old photograph on the wall — the same eyes staring straight through him — his laughter died.

He poured himself a cup of tea, then hesitated. He poured a second one and set it on the shelf beside the photo.

"Sir," he said softly, "permission to stand watch with you tonight."

The wind outside rose, and for a second, the lantern flame flickered — as if in reply.

The official file on Randhawa Post was marked *CLASSIFIED – INTERNAL REVIEW ONLY*. It sat in a grey folder at Northern Command Headquarters, Srinagar. Most officers didn't even know it existed. Those who did preferred not to touch it.

The file was thin — barely twenty pages — but what it contained had unnerved even the hardened men who ran the Valley. It began with a standard incident report from December 2025: "Unidentified hostile group attempted to breach Indian perimeter near coordinates 43°N, 74°E. Seven enemy KIA. No Indian casualties."

That part was simple. The next pages weren't.

Annexed was a field transcript of an interrogation — recorded at an undisclosed safehouse near Baramulla. The subject: Sipahi Harpreet Singh.

"Name?"

"Harpreet Singh."

"Unit?"

"Nine Sikh Regiment, sir."

"Describe what you saw at the post."

Long pause. A chair creaked.

"I saw men trying to climb up the ridge," Harpreet said quietly. "Six, maybe seven. I opened fire. Killed two. Then the storm came in."

"Then what happened?"

“I heard a voice. Someone shouting… in Punjabi. Gave orders like an officer.”

“Orders? What kind?”

“To stay down. To hold my ground.”

Another pause.

“And did you see anyone?”

“Yes.”

The voice of the interrogator sharpened. “Who?”

Harpreet’s tone was flat. “Major Arjun Singh Randhawa, sir.”

A scrape of pen on paper. “You’re saying you saw the Major? He died in ’71.”

“I know what I saw.”

“Describe him.”

“Tall. Turban. Rifle in hand. Same face as in the photo. But…” Harpreet hesitated. “He wasn’t… whole. Like he was there and not there. The snow went still around him.”

“You sure it wasn’t the enemy?”

“I’m sure, sir. He shot them before I could.”

The interrogator’s voice lowered. “And you expect us to believe this?”

“I don’t expect you to believe anything, sir,” Harpreet said quietly. “I’m just telling you what happened.”

The recording ended there.

Below it, someone had scrawled a note in red ink:

Psychological trauma. Recommend medical discharge and further evaluation. No operational mention of supernatural elements.

That was the end of the official version.

But there was another page, handwritten, unsigned, added later by an unknown officer. It read:

Footage from night of 15 Dec cross-checked. Thermal imaging shows two separate figures at the post. One stationary inside bunker. One mobile outside perimeter. Second figure emits no heat signature.

Below that:

Recommend no further investigation. Let the mountain keep its ghosts.

By January, the snow had sealed off the ridge completely. Randhawa Post was cut from supply lines for almost a month. Satellite shots showed nothing but white.

When the thaw came, a fresh rotation of soldiers was sent in to relieve Sipahi. But when they arrived, the bunker was empty.

Sipahi's rifle lay by the doorway, magazine full. The logbook was open on the table, pen still resting between the pages. His boots stood neatly beside his cot.

He was gone. No footprints leading out. No sign of struggle. Just one note, scribbled at the bottom of the log:

"He called for me."

Command launched a brief search. The official explanation said "avalanche." The troops didn't buy it.

Word spread again — quietly, through the canteens and tents, through the hush of night patrols. They said Iqbal had

joined the Major. That he'd answered the call that came with the snow.

One spring morning, Colonel Ajay Rawat, who had overseen the Randhawa sector for years, visited the ridge by helicopter. He'd read all the reports, ignored half the rumors, but curiosity pulled him there anyway.

The pilot circled low. The post looked deserted — just a flagpole jutting through the melting snow, the tattered tricolor clinging to it.

Rawat climbed out, boots sinking deep into slush. He stood in the bunker doorway, scanning the inside. The air smelled of rust, kerosene, and something faintly floral — like old incense.

On the wall hung the familiar photograph. Someone had cleaned the cracked glass. Below it, on a metal shelf, stood two steel mugs. One was full of fresh rum. The other was half empty.

The Colonel frowned. The place had been unoccupied for weeks. Supplies had been frozen since January. Yet the rum was fresh — still evaporating in the cold.

He looked around once more, then turned to leave.

As he stepped out into the daylight, a gust of wind rose up from the valley. It carried with it a low, rolling murmur — not quite words, more like a command shouted from a great distance.

Rawat stopped. For a second, it felt as though someone was standing just behind him.

He turned sharply — nothing.

Only a trail of faint boot prints in the snow leading toward the edge of the ridge… and ending halfway, where the slope dropped into mist.

He stared at them for a long while before murmuring, "Major… if you're still here… keep watching."

Then he saluted the empty air, climbed into the helicopter, and left.

From above, as the chopper banked south, he thought he saw movement — a solitary figure standing atop the bunker, flag fluttering beside him.

He blinked. The figure was gone.

The years rolled on. The valley kept its silence.

New units came and went. Each man posted to that ridge carried the same unease for the first few nights — the sense of being watched, guarded, judged. Some said they smelled gun oil when the wind shifted. Others swore they heard boots pacing above the bunker when no one was there.

But nothing ever threatened Randhawa Post again. Not a single infiltration attempt succeeded. The enemy stopped trying.

They called it cursed territory now — *the dead man's hill.*

On the Indian maps, it remained "active post." On the Pakistani ones, it was "no man's zone." And between the two, the snow covered the truth.

Kshetra Paal

The Konkan coast, in all its lush and deceptive beauty, has a way of hiding more than it reveals. Between its winding ghats, where the mountains collapse into the Arabian Sea, lie hundreds of villages that seem trapped between the living and the forgotten. Devraav was one such place—a small, untouched hamlet in the Raigad district, so remote that even the GPS signals hesitated before reaching it. The air there was thick with salt, monsoon dampness, and whispers of old gods.

Devraav was surrounded by dense mangroves and coconut groves, the kind that looked alive in the wind—swaying, breathing, almost watching. At its heart ran a narrow, red-mud road that led to the village square, lined with a few tiled-roof houses, an ancient banyan tree, and a single well that villagers swore had no bottom. Beyond the banyan, a narrow trail led up a small hill, and atop it stood the temple of the protector—Dev Baalraaya.

No one really knew where the story of Baalraaya began. Some said he was a demi-god born from the sea itself—a manifestation of the Konkan's rage and grace. Others believed he was once a warrior who died saving Devraav from invaders centuries ago, and whose spirit refused to leave. Whatever the truth, one thing was certain—Devraav had been spared from the curses that befell other villages. Epidemics, landslides, floods, even the cyclone that destroyed neighboring hamlets—none of it touched Devraav.

The villagers said it was because Baalraaya's eyes never closed.

And there was one rule every soul knew by heart:

No outsider enters Devraav without first paying respects to Baalraaya.

Those who disrespected the rule never left the village alive.

The temple itself was small—an unassuming structure built of laterite stone, half-covered in moss. A brass bell hung from the entrance, darkened by centuries of smoke and salt. Inside, in the sanctum, stood a carved wooden idol—half man, half beast. Its face was roughly human, with sharp, fanged teeth and wide, unblinking eyes made of polished conch shells. Its body was muscular, coated with vermillion and dried turmeric. Around its neck hung garlands of marigold and dried limes.

When the sea winds blew through the forest, the idol's eyes seemed to shimmer, as though it were breathing.

Each visitor—local or stranger—was expected to offer baali, an animal sacrifice, before entering the village. Usually a chicken or goat. They would state their purpose aloud, and if Baalraaya found their intentions pure, the coconut offered at the altar would split cleanly with a single strike. If not—the coconut remained whole. That meant permission denied.

No one ever questioned the ritual. Not after what had happened to the merchant from Chiplun decades ago.

The old men of Devraav still spoke about him—how he'd come with promises of trade and profit, refused to visit the temple, and scoffed at the villagers for their "superstition." That night, his body was found in the river—skin peeled, eyes gouged out, as though the mangroves themselves had

punished him. The villagers didn't speak of it after that, but every newcomer who arrived heard the story whispered before they slept.

In the summer of 2023, Devraav's peace was interrupted again—this time by a man named Rajeev Khanna.

A builder from Pune, Rajeev was known for his glittering projects—glass villas perched on cliffs, resorts that charged more per night than a villager earned in a year. He had the sharp confidence of a man who'd never been told "no." His eyes were cold, his smile measured, his clothes spotless even in the dustiest corners of the world. When he first saw the aerial images of Devraav, he called it "a paradise waiting to be monetized."

He wanted to build a seven-star luxury eco-resort there—a place where the wealthy could sip imported wine while watching the sun drown in the Arabian Sea. The plan was bold, obscene even. But to Rajeev, it was just another conquest.

He arrived in Devraav one humid morning in July, in a white SUV that looked absurd against the red mud road. His assistant, a nervous young man named Karan, followed him with files and maps. The villagers paused their chores to watch the newcomers—their eyes cautious, their mouths tight. A few old women muttered under their breath and turned away.

Rajeev smiled, thinking it was awe.

"Simple people," he said, adjusting his sunglasses. "They'll be easy to deal with."

Before he could head into the village, an old man stepped in front of the car. He was barefoot, wearing a torn white dhoti

and holding a brass trident. His skin was like burnt clay, his eyes clouded but steady.

"You cannot enter, saheb," the man said in Marathi. "Not before you visit Baalaacha Deul."

Rajeev frowned. "What nonsense is this?"

Karan leaned in. "Sir, I think he means the temple."

"Temple? We'll visit later. We're here to meet the landowners first."

The old man didn't move. "If you go now, you will not return."

There was something in his tone—calm, certain, chilling. Even Karan's throat went dry. But Rajeev only laughed.

"Don't worry, old man. Your god will understand business when he sees the money I bring."

He signaled the driver to move. The car lurched forward. The old man didn't flinch, but a sudden gust of wind burst from the forest, swirling dust into the air so thick they couldn't see the road. Coconut fronds rattled violently, and the sky darkened as if dusk had fallen instantly. The SUV's engine sputtered, the radio hissed, and somewhere in the distance, a bell began to ring—slow, rhythmic, mournful.

Rajeev froze. "What the hell—"

The bell stopped. The wind died as quickly as it had risen.

Karan's voice trembled. "Sir... maybe we should go to the temple first."

Rajeev exhaled sharply, forcing a laugh. "Fine. Let's humor them."

The Baalaacha Deul stood on a rise beyond the banyan grove. The air around it felt heavier, older. The caretaker, a woman named Vandana Tai, welcomed them with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity. Her voice was coarse, like the sea scraping rock.

"You've come to seek permission, saheb?"

Rajeev nodded impatiently. "Yes, yes. I'll do what's needed. Let's get on with it."

She gestured toward a small enclosure where a black rooster was tied. Its eyes were alert, as if it already knew its fate. Rajeev flinched slightly.

"You must offer baali," she said. "And break the coconut after you speak your purpose."

He sighed. "I'm not killing anything. My assistant will do it."

But Vandana shook her head. "Baali must come from the one who seeks entry. Baalraaya knows the difference."

Rajeev hesitated, then picked up the knife. The rooster struggled as he held it down. He felt ridiculous, angry at himself for giving in. Yet when he sliced, the bird's scream tore through the stillness like a human cry. Its blood pooled onto the mud, steaming faintly. Vandana collected some of it in a brass bowl, chanting under her breath.

Rajeev shuddered. "Now what?"

"Speak your purpose."

He straightened. "I, Rajeev Khanna, seek to build a resort here—to bring prosperity and jobs to the people of Devraav. I promise to protect the land, honor the locals, and build something that will make this village proud."

Vandana handed him a coconut, marked with red and yellow streaks. “Strike it on the stone.”

He lifted it high and slammed it down. The shell cracked cleanly into two halves, the water splashing across his shoes.

Karan let out a sigh of relief.

Vandana’s eyes glimmered. “Baalraaya has given you his blessing. Keep your word, saheb. His patience is deep, but not endless.”

Rajeev smiled thinly. “Don’t worry. I’m a man of my word.”

But even as he said it, a faint tremor ran through the ground beneath the temple. The rooster’s blood had spread across the threshold, forming a dark line that looked almost deliberate—as if the earth itself was drawing boundaries.

That night, the rain came down like punishment. Sheets of it, endless, hammering on tin roofs and flooding the narrow lanes. Rajeev stayed in the guest house on the edge of the village, unable to sleep. The sound of the sea was louder here—constant, breathing, like some giant animal pacing outside.

He dreamed restlessly.

In his dream, he stood again in the temple. But the idol was different—its eyes were open, glowing with wet, white light. The air smelled of salt and decay. Blood dripped from the walls, forming puddles that reflected strange shapes.

Then the idol spoke. Not in words, but in a guttural vibration that shook his chest.

“Keep your promise.”

Rajeev gasped awake, drenched in sweat. The storm outside had stopped. Yet he could still hear the faint echo of a bell somewhere in the distance—ringing, and ringing, as though the god himself was reminding him.

He did keep his promise—for a while.

Within months, work began on the resort. Bulldozers arrived, workers cleared the land, and the village suddenly buzzed with an unfamiliar rhythm. Rajeev employed several locals at first, paying fair wages. He spoke kindly, even smiled at the old men when they watched from the banyan shade.

But soon, greed crept in, quiet as rot.

The resort grew larger than planned. Rajeev began to demand more land—coastal plots that belonged to farmers for generations. When some refused to sell, he sent men to threaten them. Cattle were found dead, crops trampled overnight, and one old farmer's hut mysteriously caught fire.

Rajeev dismissed it all as coincidence. "Progress always upsets a few," he told Karan.

But whispers began again among the villagers. They said the protector was stirring. That the bell at Baalraaya's temple was ringing at odd hours. That the sea was angrier, darker.

Even Vandana Tai came to warn him.

"Saheb," she said one evening, "you promised prosperity. But Baalraaya smells deceit. He comes in the wind now. In your dreams. You must stop."

Rajeev laughed. "Your Baalraaya won't stop me. I've invested too much to turn back now."

Vandana's eyes softened with pity. "Then pray he shows mercy to your bloodline, not just to you."

The first "accident" happened two weeks later.

One of the bulldozers lost control on the slope, crashing into a pit. The driver was crushed instantly, his body found twisted, eyes bulging, mouth open in a silent scream. The next day, a worker fell from scaffolding—his skull split like a coconut on stone.

Then the engineers' cabin caught fire, though no one had lit a lamp or stove inside.

The villagers stopped going near the site. Even Karan began avoiding the upper slopes after dark. Rajeev, though shaken, remained defiant.

"Bad luck," he said through clenched teeth. "Nothing more."

But the dreams returned—worse now. He saw the idol again, its eyes bleeding light, its mouth moving. This time, it said something new.

"You lied."

The dreams began to spread beyond sleep. Rajeev started catching glimpses—shadows that didn't belong, reflections that lingered a moment too long in glass. The idol's unblinking eyes followed him everywhere—on the black marble floors of his Pune penthouse, in the tinted windows of his car, in the mirrored glass of the resort's half-built reception hall.

By the end of monsoon, Devraav had changed. The once-friendly village now seemed to repel him. Dogs howled when he passed. Crows gathered near the resort gates every dusk, their cries guttural and chaotic. The locals avoided his

eyes. Even the wind had a voice now—a low hum that rose through the palm trees and whispered words he couldn't understand, though sometimes he thought he heard his own name.

"Rajeev..."

"Shap... shapit..."

Cursed.

He brushed it off. "Superstition," he muttered. "Fear makes them hear things."

But Karan was not so sure. He'd stopped staying overnight at the site after the fire in the engineers' cabin. "Sir, we should maybe perform another puja. To calm the spirit."

Rajeev slammed his glass on the table. "I don't bow to idols, Karan. I make my own destiny. Now get the land papers ready."

By winter, the project had tripled in size. Concrete columns rose where the village forest once stood. The sound of drilling echoed through the hills, drowning the calls of birds. Rajeev had forced most villagers to sell—some by threat, some by deceit. Only a handful held out, among them Vandana Tai, who refused to leave the land where her ancestors had lived.

"You can take my house, saheb," she'd said quietly, "but not my god's ground."

He had laughed in her face. "Your god can keep his temple. I'm taking everything else."

But even as he said it, the wind around them had gone suddenly still.

The first to die from Rajeev's family was his elder son, Arjun.

Arjun had come down from Pune to inspect the construction work—a spoiled, arrogant man in designer clothes who sneered at the villagers. One afternoon, he went for a drive to the sea, ignoring the locals' warning that the coastal road near Devraav's cliff was cursed after sunset.

The next morning, fishermen found his car wrecked against the rocks. It had fallen over sixty feet. The body inside was barely recognizable—his face torn off by the shattered windshield, both arms missing. The police called it an accident. But the villagers said something different. They said the sea had claimed him.

When Rajeev arrived at the site of the crash, he noticed something the police hadn't—drawn on the cliff wall beside the car, faint but unmistakable, was a symbol smeared in red. Two concentric circles, one inside the other, with a trident through the center. The mark of Baalraaya.

He stared at it for a long time, his mind screaming for logic, but none came.

The death of his son broke something in Rajeev's wife, Neelam. She had always been deeply religious, the kind who lit lamps at dusk and whispered prayers to every passing shrine. After Arjun's funeral, she became obsessed with the idea that they had angered something ancient.

"It's the god of that village," she said one night, trembling. "He came in my dream. He said our blood will pay."

Rajeev shouted her down. "Enough! Don't fill this house with madness!"

But Neelam's eyes were glassy, distant. "He was in Arjun's body. He spoke in his voice, Rajeev. He said he was coming for the rest of us."

Rajeev stormed out, slamming the door. Yet that night, he couldn't sleep. The ceiling fan creaked above him, spinning slower and slower until it stopped altogether. Then came the sound—soft, rhythmic, like the ringing of a temple bell, echoing inside his house.

He got up, heart hammering. The sound was coming from downstairs.

When he reached the living room, he froze. On the marble floor lay a coconut—its shell rolling slowly, as if pushed by an invisible hand. Then, with a crack loud as thunder, it split cleanly into two.

Rajeev screamed.

The next morning, Neelam was found dead in her bed. No sign of injury, no poison. But her eyes were open wide, and her mouth twisted in horror, as though she had died mid-scream.

The doctors called it cardiac arrest.

The villagers called it Baalraaya's justice.

The younger son, Rohit, tried to leave the country two days after his mother's cremation. He'd seen enough—his brother mangled, his mother dead without cause, and his father mumbling to himself in fear.

But the night before his flight, he received a call. A voice on the other end—raspy, neither male nor female—whispered, *"Don't run, beta. You're next."*

Rohit thought it was a prank. He turned on every light in his apartment, poured himself a drink, and laughed shakily. But then he saw it—on the mirror across the room. Behind him.

A shape.

A tall figure, half-shadow, half-man, with eyes that glowed white like moonlit shells. It had horns—not goat horns, but thick, jagged ridges that looked grown from coral. And when it smiled, its mouth was full of teeth that didn't belong in anything human.

He screamed and threw the glass. The reflection shattered—but the figure was no longer in the mirror. It was standing behind him.

The next morning, the maid found his body hanging from the ceiling fan, the rope made not of nylon but twisted coconut fiber, slick with saltwater. On the wall, scrawled in blood, was a single word: "BAALI."

Back in Devraav, the villagers were terrified but not surprised. Vandana Tai had already warned Rajeev.

"He is patient but just," she said. "He waited for you to see. Now he wants you to repent."

But Rajeev was beyond reason. He sat in his resort office surrounded by empty liquor bottles, eyes hollow, muttering to himself. The resort was half-built and deserted now—workers had fled after hearing drums and chants from the forest at night. Equipment rusted in the rain. A foul smell hung in the air, of salt, iron, and rot.

He was losing his mind.

Every night, he heard footsteps on the gravel, though no one was there. Bells ringing faintly, like from underwater.

Sometimes, he saw shadows moving in the corners of his room—crawling on the walls, their limbs bending wrong.

And always, that voice in his sleep.

"Keep your promise."

"Your baali is due."

He began to dream of his family—of Neelam standing at the temple steps, her sari soaked in blood, holding a broken coconut. Of Arjun's mangled face whispering, "You lied." Of Rohit's hanging body swaying like a puppet.

He woke screaming every night, until he stopped sleeping altogether.

A few weeks later, Rohit's wife and Arjun's widow, who had stayed together in Pune, vanished. Their driver found the car on the expressway to Lonavala, doors open, headlights still on. Inside, only their handbags. No signs of struggle.

The police searched for days, but found nothing.

It was Vandana who told Rajeev where to look.

"Go to the river," she said. "The same place where the merchant died long ago."

Rajeev went. The villagers followed at a distance, afraid but drawn by curiosity. The air was thick with humidity, the smell of decay heavy near the mangroves.

When they reached the riverbank, the water was calm—too calm. Not a ripple moved. Rajeev stepped forward, trembling.

Then the surface broke.

Two bodies floated up, rising slow, pale as wax. Their faces were serene, eyes closed, mouths half-open as if still whispering prayers. But on their foreheads were symbols—two concentric circles carved into flesh, each pierced by a trident.

Rajeev fell to his knees and screamed until his voice broke.

The villagers turned away. Vandana only closed her eyes and murmured, "He is merciful still. He spares the innocent."

After that, Rajeev stopped eating. He stopped leaving his room. The resort crumbled—walls cracking, foundations sinking into the wet Konkan soil as though the earth itself rejected it. The locals began to return to their fields, cautiously. Nature reclaimed what it had lost; vines crawled over the concrete like veins.

Only Rajeev and his eight-year-old grandson, Aarav, were left to say of the Khanna Family.

The boy was too young to understand death, too innocent to fear. He would sit beside his grandfather, playing with toy cars, sometimes humming an old village tune he'd picked up from the house help. Rajeev found comfort in the child's presence—it was the only thing keeping him from collapsing completely.

But one night, even that peace was taken from him.

It was a moonless night, the kind that swallowed all light. Rajeev had dozed off on the couch, Aarav asleep beside him. Around midnight, the sound of bells woke him. Faint, distant, coming from the forest. Then came drums—low, steady beats, growing louder, closer.

He got up, heart pounding. The sound was coming from the direction of the temple.

He turned to wake Aarav—but the couch was empty.

"Aarav?" His voice cracked. "Beta?"

The front door was open.

He ran outside barefoot, the night air heavy with mist. He followed the sound of the drums, through the half-finished resort path, past the mangroves, to the rise where the temple stood.

And there, in the flicker of torches, he saw his grandson.

Aarav stood before the idol, eyes half-closed, as if in a trance. Vandana Tai was there too, kneeling, chanting something Rajeev couldn't understand.

"What are you doing?!" Rajeev shouted.

Vandana looked up, her face calm. "He is chosen, saheb. The innocent blood redeems the guilty."

Rajeev froze. "No. NO!"

He rushed forward, pushing her aside, grabbing Aarav. The boy blinked, confused, then began to cry.

The ground beneath the temple trembled. The torches flickered violently, and the idol's eyes glowed once again—bright, blinding, filled with wrath.

The air filled with the sound of waves, though the sea was miles away. Rajeev staggered back, clutching Aarav tightly as wind roared through the clearing.

Then, from the idol's carved mouth, came a voice.

"Your baali is not yet complete."

Rajeev fell to his knees, sobbing. “Please! Not him! Take me instead!”

For a moment, the storm seemed to pause. The idol’s eyes dimmed slightly, as if considering. Vandana’s chant stopped. The silence that followed was suffocating.

Then the voice came again, quieter this time.

“Return what you stole. Restore what you destroyed. Only then will your bloodline live.”

Rajeev looked up, tears cutting through the dust on his face. “I will. I swear it. I’ll give everything back. Please, forgive us.”

The wind ceased. The torches steadied. The glow faded from the idol’s eyes.

Aarav clung to his grandfather, sobbing softly.

For the first time in months, Rajeev felt the air lighten. He looked at Vandana, who nodded once. “He has heard you. But keep your word, saheb. This is your last chance.”

The dawn after that storm rose slow and heavy, as if the sky itself was reluctant to return light to Devraav. The air reeked of wet earth and salt, the mangroves dripping with the night’s residue. Rajeev sat before the temple, mud-caked, exhausted, clutching Aarav to his chest. Neither had slept. Vandana Tai had kept vigil beside them, murmuring prayers that felt older than the hills themselves.

When the sun finally broke through the mist, its first rays fell on Baalraaya’s idol, now dull and motionless again, its shell eyes reflecting gold. The storm’s wreckage lay scattered across the temple yard—branches broken, offerings

overturned, the ground carved with strange spirals like the footprints of invisible beasts.

Rajeev stared at it, hollow-eyed.

"Is it over?" he asked in a whisper.

Vandana looked toward the sea. "The god does not forget. But he forgives those who bow in truth. If you speak your repentance, if you return what you took, peace will come."

He nodded slowly, tears pooling in his tired eyes. "Then I will give everything back. Every inch. Every tree. I swear on my blood."

Vandana handed him a brass bowl filled with the rooster's dried blood—the same offering bowl from months ago. "Then carry this with you. Wherever you go, Baalraaya will hear your vow. But if you lie again, he will come himself to take what is owed."

Rajeev didn't answer. He didn't have to. The truth was already carved across his soul in terror.

When he returned to the resort site later that morning, he saw it for the first time not as progress but as blasphemy.

What had once been a vision of luxury now looked like a corpse. The half-built villas stood like skeletal ruins, rebar jutting through cracked concrete like exposed bone. Pools of green water had collected in the pits, breeding mosquitoes and rot. The signboard that once read *"Sukoon by Rajeev Khanna"* had snapped in half during the storm, hanging by a single chain.

The wind whistled through the hollow corridors, carrying faint echoes that almost sounded like whispers—low, mocking.

Rajeev stood at the edge of the site and raised the bowl toward the sky. "I return this land," he said hoarsely. "Every grain, every stone. I stole it in greed. Now I give it back."

For a moment, silence. Then, as though in answer, a single coconut tree near the boundary swayed violently, though no wind had touched it. One heavy nut fell and cracked open on the mud below—cleanly, perfectly split.

A sign.

Vandana, who had accompanied him there, smiled faintly. "He has heard you."

The process of returning the land took weeks. Rajeev went door to door, visiting every villager he had cheated or forced out. They were wary at first, unwilling to believe the man who had destroyed their peace could suddenly turn saint. But Rajeev's eyes told the truth—the wild look of a man haunted beyond redemption, crushed beneath guilt.

"I came to take," he told them, "but now I've come to give back. Every document you signed, I'll burn it myself."

And he did. He brought out the land deeds, hundreds of them, and in the courtyard of the old schoolhouse, he set them aflame. The papers curled and turned to ash, sparks rising like fireflies into the dusk. The villagers stood around him, silent, watching years of deceit turn to dust.

As the fire died, the air grew strangely still—peaceful, even. Somewhere in the forest, a peacock cried, and for the first time in months, it didn't sound like a warning.

But repentance does not erase horror overnight.

Even as Rajeev worked to undo his wrongs, Devraav remained restless. There were nights when drums echoed

faintly from the cliffs—no human sound, more like the pulse of the land itself. People said Baalraaya's spirit still circled the village, watching, testing whether Rajeev's remorse was true.

And sometimes, when the fog rolled in from the sea, villagers swore they saw shapes moving in it—tall, human-like figures with eyes like lamps. The elders would mutter, *"The guardians walk tonight."*

Rajeev kept to himself, living in a small thatched hut near the temple. He ate sparingly, spoke little, spent hours sitting before Baalraaya's idol with folded hands. His only comfort was Aarav, who had begun to adapt to the village life with innocent ease. The boy played by the river, chased hens, and sometimes brought flowers for the temple deity, saying softly, "For Baba's friend."

Vandana often watched him with a strange fondness. "Children feel what adults forget," she'd say. "He has the god's mercy in him."

Rajeev would nod silently, though he never quite believed he deserved mercy.

One night, weeks later, the villagers gathered near the banyan tree for a *puja of peace*. It was an old ritual, performed when calamities ended—a symbolic cleansing of the land. Torches were lit, conch shells blown, and the village air filled with the smell of burning camphor.

Rajeev was asked to attend. He hesitated, afraid that his presence might anger the deity again. But Vandana insisted.

"You must stand where you once sinned," she said. "Only then can the soil forget your footprints."

So he came.

The ceremony began with chants in the old Marathi tongue, the priest invoking the elements—earth, sea, sky, and fire. Villagers placed offerings of rice, coconuts, and flowers into the flames, each murmur of prayer rising like smoke into the dark.

When Rajeev's turn came, the priest handed him a bowl of turmeric and vermilion. "Speak what you seek."

He stepped forward, voice trembling. "Forgiveness. For myself, my blood, and my greed. Let Devraav heal."

He poured the mixture into the fire. It hissed, and for a second, the flames rose high—forming the brief outline of a face. Not human. Half-man, half-beast. The same visage carved in the temple's idol.

The villagers gasped. The fire flickered, then steadied, calm again.

Vandana's eyes gleamed with tears. "He accepts your repentance."

That night, Rajeev dreamed again.

He stood by the river where the two widows' bodies had floated up. But this time, the water was clear, glowing faintly in the moonlight. From the depth, figures emerged—not ghastly, but peaceful. Neelam, Arjun, Rohit—they were smiling. Not the grotesque, haunting smiles of the dead, but soft, forgiving.

"Come home, Rajeev," Neelam said. Her voice was the wind itself—gentle, wet, kind. "The curse has lifted."

Behind her, the water rippled, and a new figure rose—the idol's shape, vast, luminous, its coral horns glinting. But its

eyes no longer burned white; they glowed gold. The creature raised one hand, palm open.

In that moment, Rajeev understood. The god wasn't malevolent—it was balance. A guardian of the land, not a punisher of men, until provoked.

He fell to his knees in the dream, sobbing, whispering thank you again and again.

When he woke, dawn had already painted the village gold. The air was fresh, carrying the sweet scent of jackfruit and rain-soaked grass. He felt something he hadn't felt in months—peace.

Word spread through Devraav that the curse had ended. Fishermen returned to the sea, children played under the banyan again, and the temple bell rang on its own one evening—three times, clear and strong. The villagers took it as Baalraaya's sign of approval.

Even nature seemed to bloom anew. The monsoon that year brought abundance—crops sprouted lush and tall, the river ran clean, and the forests sang with birds again. The scars of greed were fading, slowly but surely.

As for Rajeev, he decided to leave Devraav for good. Not out of fear now, but respect.

He gathered Aarav one morning, packed only a small bag, and went to the temple to offer final prayers. Vandana Tai met him there.

"You are free to go," she said. "The god has no chains for those who bow in truth."

Rajeev looked around the sanctum, at the idol he had once mocked, now the center of his redemption. He placed a garland of fresh marigolds at its feet, then lit a lamp.

The flame burned steady. The smell of ghee filled the air.

He knelt. "Baalraaya," he whispered, "thank you for showing me the path. For sparing my grandson. For sparing me."

As he rose to leave, the brass bell above him chimed gently on its own. Just once.

Vandana smiled. "He blesses your journey."

Before departing, Rajeev signed one last document—an agreement declaring all of Devraav's forest and temple land as protected heritage, owned collectively by the villagers. He even set up a small fund for the upkeep of Baalraaya's shrine and for the school's restoration.

The villagers gathered to see him off. None spoke, but their eyes told what words couldn't—some still cautious, others quietly grateful.

Rajeev bowed to them all, then turned toward the road leading out of the village. Aarav held his hand, looking back at the banyan tree.

"Dada," the boy asked softly, "will we come back someday?"

Rajeev looked at the distant shimmer of the temple bell through the palms. "No, beta," he said gently. "We don't belong here. But remember this place. Remember the god who watches."

That night, as they drove through the ghats, the sky cleared to reveal a thousand stars. The air smelled of rain and salt. For the first time in many months, Rajeev's heart was light.

When they reached the last bend before the highway, Aarav turned to look back.

Through the rear window, far in the distance, he saw a faint glow—like firelight flickering from the direction of Devraav. Then, for just an instant, he thought he saw something move against the glow—a tall, dark silhouette, standing still beside the temple's bell tower.

It lifted its hand slowly, in a gesture that was neither farewell nor warning—simply acknowledgment.

Aarav smiled sleepily. "Goodbye, Baalraaya."

And the glow faded with the horizon.

Five years later.

The rains had returned to Devraav.

But this monsoon was unlike the others before it. The clouds rolled in like a blessing, not a curse. The river overflowed with life; fish darted silver beneath its rippling skin, and the forest hummed again with the old music of cicadas and unseen spirits.

The villagers said Baalraaya had finally smiled. The storms no longer tore roofs away. The lightning struck only the sea, never the land. The banyan tree, once blackened by fire, now stood mighty again—roots thick, its branches sheltering the entire village square.

And the temple—ah, the temple had become Devraav's heart once more. Its stone walls gleamed with fresh lime

wash, bells hung bright and new, and each dawn, Vandana Tai's voice could be heard chanting:

"Om Baalraaya namah, raksha kar re gaavacha."

Oh Baalraaya, protector of this village, keep our peace.

Rajeev Khanna was long gone. But his shadow lingered in whispers.

Some said he had moved to Pune, living quietly in an old apartment near Parvati Hill. He had donated the last of his wealth to build a small trust for the education of Devraav's children. Others said he was often seen at dawn, sitting by the Hanuman temple there, feeding stray dogs and staring into the rising sun with a stillness that only the truly changed carry.

He never built again. Not a resort. Not a house. Not even a shed.

When asked why, he would smile faintly and say,

"You can't own land that breathes. You can only borrow its patience."

Aarav grew up under his care—a quiet, bright child with the same sea-grey eyes as his mother. He would listen, wide-eyed, when Rajeev told him stories—not of ghosts, but of guardians.

"Baalraaya wasn't angry," Rajeev would explain, "he was hurt. The land cries before it bites."

And when the boy asked if they could ever visit Devraav again, Rajeev would shake his head softly.

"Some places are not for returning, beta. They remember us better when we stay away."

A decade later, Rajeev Khanna's ashes returned to the village.

He had passed peacefully in his sleep—old, frail, and at last, unburdened. Aarav, now a young man, brought the urn himself. He carried it through the same road that his grandfather had once driven with greed in his heart and guilt in his eyes.

But this time, the journey felt sacred. The sea wind was gentle, the hills lush, and the villagers who saw him recognized those eyes—the same grey that had once sought forgiveness.

They greeted him kindly.

Vandana, now too weak to walk, was carried to the temple porch to meet him.

"You've come home, beta," she whispered.

He bowed before her and said, "Dada wished to rest here. Beside the god he angered."

Tears glistened in her old eyes. "Then Baalraaya shall keep him close. He who breaks, and then bows, is never lost."

Together, they placed the urn beneath the banyan tree—the same place where the villagers had once performed the puja of peace. The priest chanted softly, bells rang, and the sea breeze carried the smell of sandalwood and salt.

As the ashes mixed with the soil, a strange calm fell over the land. The banyan leaves rustled gently, and a single marigold from the temple garland floated down, landing upon the urn's spot.

The villagers looked to the sky.

A flock of white egrets passed overhead, their wings gleaming gold in the dying sun.

That night, Aarav sat alone near the riverbank, listening to the water murmur against the stones. The moon hung low, silver and soft. He closed his eyes, feeling the pulse of the land beneath him—the heartbeat of Devraav, the whisper of waves, the breath of the mangroves.

And then, from across the water, a sound rose.

A low drumbeat.

Steady. Ancient.

He opened his eyes.

On the opposite bank stood a tall silhouette—horns faintly visible against the moonlight, body shimmering like mist. The figure didn't move. It simply stood there, watching.

Aarav didn't feel fear. Only reverence.

He bowed his head deeply. "Thank you," he murmured.

When he looked up again, the figure was gone. Only the rhythm of the waves remained.

Years passed.

Devraav thrived. Its name became synonymous with sacred ecology—tourists came not for resorts, but for silence. The villagers guided them through the mangroves, telling them of the guardian who once rose to protect his soil. No one spoke of curses anymore. Only of balance.

And in the evenings, as the crimson sun sank into the Arabian Sea, the bell of Baalraaya's temple would ring once—clear and melodic—echoing across the hills and into the forest.

It was said that the god himself struck it, reminding the living and the dead alike that peace was not absence of chaos, but harmony within it.

Wish Master

The town of Velvado was small, cradled between a restless stretch of sea and an overgrown forest where the trees leaned toward the shore as if trying to escape something that lived among them. Fishermen said the forest was cursed — no bird sang there, and at night the wind carried whispers that sounded like a dozen people praying in reverse. Yet the beaches were beautiful in the sunlight, and tourists came for the shacks, the drinks and the illusion that Goa was all about freedom and salt air. For the locals, Velvado was different — it was a place where the sea had memory and the dead did not always stay dead.

Roger Naik had returned to Velvado after nearly a decade in Mumbai. He had been a struggling writer there — countless rejection letters, sleepless nights, and a slowly dying sense of purpose. When his father passed away, leaving behind an old Portuguese-era villa at the edge of Velvado, he came back to sell it off, maybe stay a few months. But something about the house drew him in. It stood half hidden behind banyan roots and cracked stucco walls, its windows shaped like eyes watching the sea. The locals avoided even walking past it after sundown. They said it had once belonged to a priest who lost his faith and hung himself from the balcony. Roger dismissed it as local myth. He needed quiet. He needed to write.

The nights in Velvado were strangely alive. The sound of waves never stopped, but sometimes, beneath that rhythm, he heard faint chanting. At first he thought it was the

fishermen out late, but one night, around 2 a.m., he woke to a whisper that came from inside his own room. It was neither male nor female — just a voice soaked in static. "Do you wish it?" it asked. Roger sat up, frozen. The air smelled of damp soil and burnt incense. His laptop flickered, and the screen lit up with a line he hadn't typed: *What will you give for what you want?* Then, suddenly, everything went dark.

He convinced himself it was a dream, perhaps the residue of exhaustion and loneliness. But the following day, when he checked his emails, there was a message from an editor in Mumbai — one who had previously ignored his submissions. The man claimed to have accidentally opened Roger's old story and wanted to feature it in a digital magazine. It paid well. Roger smiled, thinking his luck was turning.

That night, the whisper returned. This time, in his dream, he stood on the beach under a red moon. The sea was black, and something huge was rising from it — not with form but with weight, as if the ocean itself had decided to stand upright. A figure stepped out, tall and lean, its body covered in wet sand and seaweed, its face smooth and featureless except for a wide slit where its mouth should be. When it spoke, the words crawled directly into his head. "I am the Wishmaster. I feed on offerings. Give, and I give in return." Roger felt the world tilt; he couldn't move. "You seek success. You crave to be remembered. The first wish costs nothing. After that, each moon will demand a trade — a life for a life."

He woke screaming, drenched in sweat. The clock said 3:15 a.m. He tried to shake it off, but the image of that faceless figure clung to his mind like oil. The next morning, he received another email — a publishing contract. Within a week, his short story went viral online. Reviewers praised it

for its "haunting realism." New offers followed. It was unreal — like all the doors that had refused to open before were suddenly unlocked.

At first, he laughed off the coincidence. But when he found a dead crow on his balcony one night, its beak torn open and eyes missing, something deep inside him trembled. The next day, the local postman, an old man named Remy, mentioned it casually. "You know, sir, there's talk about that house. People say it asks for things. I don't know how to explain… but every owner before your father — bad things happened to them. One of them went mad. Another drowned in his own well. The villagers say the house doesn't like to be empty." Roger smiled weakly, brushing it off. But that evening, as he walked to the beach, he saw small symbols carved into the sand — circles intersecting with triangles — like runes of an ancient language. And right at the center, a crab was impaled on a rusted nail.

The following full moon, the dream returned. This time, he was standing in the forest behind his villa. The trees twisted unnaturally, their trunks moving like breath. The Wishmaster emerged from the shadows — its skin glistening like black marble, its eyes now visible, red and bottomless. "A life for a life," it said. "The contract is written in your wish." Roger felt a searing pain on his left palm. When he looked down, a symbol was burned into his skin — the same one he had seen drawn in the sand. He woke up gasping.

The next day, he couldn't focus on anything. His mind kept replaying the words — *A life for a life*. By evening, a stray dog wandered into his courtyard, limping, bleeding from the leg. Roger knelt beside it, feeling pity. Then, as he looked into its eyes, a voice whispered inside his head: *Blood must be given. Begin small.* He stumbled back, shaking, horrified at the

thought forming in his mind. He tried to ignore it, but the longer he resisted, the louder the voice became — a pulse at the back of his skull. Finally, almost without knowing why, he picked up a piece of broken glass and slit the animal's throat. The world went silent. For a moment, he couldn't breathe. The dog's blood pooled near his feet, and when he blinked, he saw the dark figure standing behind it — nodding slowly before vanishing into the wind.

The next morning, his phone rang. A production house in Mumbai wanted to adapt his story into a short film. The money they offered was obscene. He cried that night, half in joy, half in guilt. But when he tried to pray, the words wouldn't come out. The crucifix above his bed fell off the wall with a sharp clang.

Days turned into weeks. Each time he killed — first the dog, then a chicken he bought from the market, then a small goat — something new came into his life: a new deal, a new recognition, another step toward fame. The world saw him as lucky. Inside, he was decaying. He barely slept. He avoided mirrors because sometimes, when he did, his reflection would smile before he did.

By the third month, he was invited to speak at a literary festival in Panaji. The applause felt hollow. He returned home late that night and drank until the room blurred. That's when he saw her — a woman standing at the end of his hallway, her skin pale and wet, her eyes leaking seawater. She spoke without moving her lips: "You cannot stop now."

He screamed and ran, locking himself in his room. But the whisper came from every wall — *The pact must feed.*

He realized then it wouldn't let him go. The Wishmaster didn't just take — it owned him. When the next full moon rose, he sat by the beach, trembling, waiting. And when the shadow rose from the sea again, it smiled that slit smile. "You have tasted what few mortals do. But hunger grows with power. The next offering must be human."

Roger's heart stopped. "No," he whispered, but his voice was lost in the crashing surf. The figure leaned closer, its breath cold as the deep ocean. "You were chosen because your soul had cracks. Through cracks, I crawl. You will not refuse. Or all I gave will crumble."

He woke on his bed, clutching his head, tears streaking his face. The air was thick with rot. Outside, the wind howled like laughter. He tried to reason it away, tell himself he was sick, hallucinating. But the mark on his palm glowed faintly in the dark, pulsing with his heartbeat.

When he stepped outside the next day, the sea looked red under the morning sun, like it had bled in the night. The town was quiet. Children stared at him as he passed, as if they knew. He tried to eat, to distract himself, but everything tasted like rust. That night, the wind brought voices again — hundreds of them, crying, whispering, begging. He covered his ears, but they came from inside his head. *Give or perish.*

The first human he killed was a tourist — a drunk man stumbling back from the beach shack near his villa. Roger told himself it was self-defense, that the man had tried to attack him, but deep down, he knew. He lured him into the forest path, hit him with a rock, and when the blood poured, the ground itself seemed to drink it. The mark on his palm burned white-hot, and for a moment, he felt the same rush

he used to feel when his stories went viral — the ecstasy of creation and destruction.

When dawn came, he found the man's body gone. Only the sand was disturbed, as if dragged into the earth. And in its place, a small black stone lay, smooth and cold. When he touched it, he saw flashes — visions of future success, book deals, wealth, his name flashing across headlines. He screamed, throwing the stone into the sea. But that night, he got a call from an international publisher. They wanted to sign him for a full-length novel.

He sat in silence for hours, the phone still in his hand, his reflection staring back from the dark window — smiling, even though he wasn't.

The nights grew longer after that. The air in Velvado seemed heavier, like the town itself was holding its breath. People whispered about strange tides — fish dying near the shore, the moon glowing crimson even when the calendar said it shouldn't. Roger barely noticed. His face had grown thinner, his eyes hollow. He kept writing, typing through the night, sometimes unaware of what his own hands were producing. The stories were darker, violent, filled with grotesque imagery that didn't feel like his own imagination. When he read them later, the words felt alien — as though the pages had been dictated by someone else through him.

He told himself he'd stop. That the murder on the beach had been the last. But on the next full moon, the whisper came again, crawling through his skull like a swarm of insects. "Feed, or fall." He fought it, clutching his rosary, but the beads snapped in his hand. The crucifix turned black, and the mark on his palm burned until he screamed. The next morning, he found himself kneeling near the well behind his

villa, his hands wet with something sticky. He looked down — a fisherman lay at the bottom, neck twisted, eyes wide open.

He didn't remember doing it. But the smell of blood and salt clung to his skin. He vomited until there was nothing left in him. And when he stumbled back into the villa, he found the words *THE DEBT IS PAID* scratched into the wall with something sharp. He ran, crashing into furniture, desperate to leave — but every door he tried led back into the same hallway. The house had become a maze, breathing in sync with his panic. Finally, he collapsed, crying, whispering apologies to no one.

When he woke the next morning, the wall was clean. The fisherman's death was reported as an accident — he'd fallen drunk into the well, they said. No one suspected Roger. But his mind had begun to splinter. He started seeing people's faces melt in mirrors. His reflection smiled when he didn't. Shadows lingered longer than they should. Even in daylight, he could feel it — something inside him watching through his eyes.

One evening, as the sky burned orange, an old woman came to his gate. Her name was Lourdes D'Costa, the town's local healer — half respected, half feared. Her eyes were milk-white, her hair like seaweed, and she carried the smell of camphor and salt. "You've called him," she said, before he could even speak. Roger froze. "You've woken the *Ichha-Daitya* — the Wishmaster. He's been here before. Long ago, before the Portuguese built their churches."

Roger shook his head violently. "I didn't call anyone. It came to me. In dreams."

She stared at him for a long moment. “Dreams are doors. You opened yours. Once he walks through, he never leaves.” She looked toward the sea, her voice dropping. “He gives what you ask, but the hunger grows. Each gift needs blood. Each success feeds his mouth.”

He felt the air tighten. “How do I stop him?”

Her cloudy eyes turned toward him. “You can’t stop what you’ve invited. But you can starve him. Refuse. Suffer. Die clean, maybe.” Then she leaned close, her whisper thick as smoke. “But if you feed him again, you won’t be alone anymore. You’ll be his mirror — a hollow that walks.”

She left as quietly as she came, her footsteps fading into the sea breeze.

That night, Roger locked every door, lit candles, and tried to pray. But as the flame trembled, a shape rose behind it — tall, dark, smiling with that same slit mouth. “You seek escape?” it said. “The only exit is through devotion. Feed, and I’ll make you eternal.” The voice filled the room, vibrating through the floorboards. “There are no gods here, only bargains.”

Roger screamed, throwing the candle, and the room plunged into darkness. The shadow didn’t vanish. It stood inches from his face. “The next moon is near. The next heart must be pure.”

For the next two weeks, he lived in terror. He barely ate, barely slept. Every creak in the house sounded like a whisper. Every shadow seemed alive. He began seeing the victims’ faces in his dreams — the tourist, the fisherman — each with their mouths stitched shut. “You brought him,” they said. “Now we are his choir.”

One evening, desperate, he drove to Panaji to meet a priest — Father Raymond, a man known for performing exorcisms quietly for those who didn't want attention. The priest listened in silence as Roger poured everything out — the dreams, the killings, the mark. When he was done, Raymond looked grave. "You've tied your soul to something ancient. This isn't possession. It's a pact — older than the Church, older than any god we name."

He gave Roger a vial of holy water and a small piece of blessed salt. "Sprinkle it at your doors. He cannot cross it easily. But understand this — he lives inside your wish. To break the bond, you must undo what birthed it."

Roger returned home shaken but hopeful. That night, he poured the salt across every threshold, every window sill, whispering prayers. The air lightened, if only slightly. For the first time in months, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

But dreams are cruel in Velvado. He found himself standing on the same black beach again, the sea boiling like tar. The Wishmaster waited, taller now, its limbs like dripping roots. "You sprinkle your dust and think I fade?" it hissed. "I live in your name now. Each time they speak it, each page they read, I grow."

Roger screamed at it, defiant. "I won't kill again!"

The demon tilted its head, almost curious. "Then you'll die. And everything you built will crumble into the mouth of the sea."

When he woke, the salt lines were disturbed. The windows were open. His manuscript pages fluttered across the floor like scattered feathers. The smell of the sea filled the house. And at the far end of the room, written on the wall in

dripping black letters, were the words: *Refuse me, and I'll take what you love.*

He had no family left, no friends close enough to threaten. But that week, he met Mira, a travel journalist from Mumbai who had come to interview him about his "haunting stories inspired by Goan folklore." She was bright, full of laughter, her curiosity disarming. For the first time in months, Roger felt something human again. They walked along the beach at night, talking about writing, about fear, about dreams. She told him she believed places could remember pain — that Velvado had layers of it buried beneath its beauty.

He wanted to tell her everything but couldn't. Instead, he smiled, letting her believe he was just another eccentric artist with a haunted house. That night, for the first time, the voices in his head were silent.

But silence is deceit. On the next full moon, as the waves crashed harder than usual and the wind moaned like a dying thing, the mark on his palm began to burn again. He woke up drenched in sweat, hearing footsteps outside his door. "Roger," Mira's voice called softly. "Are you awake?" He opened the door — she wasn't there. Only the echo of her voice drifting down the hallway. He followed it, half asleep, half terrified, until he reached the old well behind the house. The moonlight shimmered on the water's surface — but something dark floated there. A shape. A hand.

He fell to his knees, choking. Mira's eyes stared up from the water, lifeless, her mouth open in silent horror. His scream tore through the night. He didn't remember dragging her out or burying her near the banyan roots. All he remembered was the whisper that filled his skull as he collapsed beside her grave — *You didn't kill her. I took what you love.*

The next morning, the sea was calm again. Her body was gone. But the sand bore a perfect circle of dried blood, like a ritual mark. Roger didn't leave the house for days. He stopped answering calls, ignored the world. The headlines that once celebrated him now spoke of his mysterious disappearance from the public eye.

The villa began to change. The walls sweated. The mirrors bled condensation even when it wasn't humid. Sometimes, in the dead of night, he could hear footsteps upstairs though he lived alone. The air smelled of brine and rot. The villagers began avoiding his stretch of road altogether.

On the seventh month since his first dream, the whispers returned louder than ever. "You belong to me," the Wishmaster said. "But you fight. So I'll make you watch as your soul rots." That night, Roger's computer turned on by itself. His unfinished novel had completed itself — pages filled with words he didn't write. It was a story about a man who made a pact with a demon of the sea, who killed for fame, and who drowned in his own guilt. The final line read: *He became the story he wrote.*

He read those words over and over, trembling. Then he saw movement on the screen's reflection — a face behind his shoulder, smiling with that same slit grin. He turned — no one was there. The lights flickered. From the corner of his eye, he saw the wallpaper peeling itself off, revealing hundreds of faint symbols beneath, carved deep into the plaster — the same mark as the one on his palm, repeating endlessly like a curse written by centuries of hands before him.

He understood then that the house was never his father's. It was the demon's temple. Every owner had been a worshipper, knowingly or not. The sacrifices weren't to keep the demon fed — they were to keep it contained. His refusal had unsealed it.

Outside, thunder rolled. The sea roared louder than ever. He stumbled toward the balcony, looking out at Velvado. The whole town seemed to flicker like a dying flame. Somewhere below, dogs howled in unison. The smell of rot rose from the waves. And then he saw them — figures walking out of the sea, dozens of them, their eyes hollow, their bodies dripping water. Among them was Mira, her skin pale as the moon, whispering his name.

The waves crawled higher that night, licking the steps of the villa as though the sea itself was trying to reclaim its lost son. Roger stood frozen on the balcony, watching the procession of drowned figures moving out of the tide. The air was thick, metallic, alive with whispers that didn't need wind. The moon glowed red again — an omen the old fishermen of Velvado had always feared. They said when the moon bled, the *Ichha-Daitya* walked freely, choosing those who had called him once but forgotten to feed.

The drowned walked closer. Their feet left no prints on the sand. Water dripped from their mouths as they murmured in unison — his name, over and over, a chant without emotion. Mira's voice rose above them all, clearer, broken: "You brought us here, Roger. We are the payment."

He stumbled backward into the room, slamming the balcony doors shut, his breath coming in ragged bursts. "No, no, no…" he whispered. He could still hear them — the sound vibrating through the walls, through the floorboards. He

grabbed the bottle of holy water Father Raymond had given him, splashed it across the room, but the droplets turned black before they hit the ground. The mark on his palm pulsed violently, spreading veins of darkness across his arm like ink seeping through skin.

The lights flickered, then died. In the silence, he heard breathing — close, wet, uneven. From the darkness, a faint light bloomed, like phosphorescence on a corpse at sea. The Wishmaster emerged slowly, its form less human now, more fluid, its limbs bending wrong, its chest opening and closing as though the ocean itself breathed through it. The air smelled of seaweed and rot.

"You've broken the rhythm," it whispered. "The pact is balance. You take, you give. You stopped giving, so the sea will collect what is due."

Roger shook his head violently, backing away until he hit the wall. "Take me instead! Take it all! Just leave them!"

The demon tilted its head, amused. "You think this is about them? You were the offering. Each life you took was a tide rising toward your own drowning. It was never about fame. It was about feeding the mouth beneath the waves — and now, you are ripe."

The walls shuddered. Saltwater began seeping from the cracks, flowing down like tears. Roger screamed as the floorboards warped beneath his feet. The entire house seemed to sway, as though it floated on the sea. Outside, the drowned figures pressed their hands against the windows, their eyes glowing faintly.

Desperate, he ran toward the basement — a place he'd never dared to explore since moving in. The air there was thick,

damp, and smelled of rust and decay. He stumbled down the steps with a candle, its flame shaking. The walls were covered with carvings — symbols like the one on his hand, some newer, others centuries old. At the far end stood a stone altar, slick with moss and dried blood. Rusted hooks hung above it, and bones lay scattered like offerings.

He realized then that every owner before him had performed the same ritual here — feeding the Wishmaster, keeping it asleep. And now, with his hesitation, it had awoken fully.

He fell to his knees, sobbing, the candle shaking in his hand. "Tell me how to end it!" he screamed into the darkness. His voice echoed back, warped, as if the walls themselves were mocking him.

The whisper came again, deep and resonant, vibrating through the floor. "Endings are gifts of gods. I am older than gods. You can only silence me by drowning the voice that called me — yours."

He looked at the rusted blade lying beside the altar. His reflection shimmered faintly in its surface — eyes bloodshot, mouth trembling. For a moment, he thought of his father, of the life he'd wanted, of the innocent pride that had turned to greed. Then another memory — Mira's laugh, the way she'd said places remember pain.

He picked up the blade. "If this ends it, then let it end with me."

The Wishmaster's voice rippled through the air, almost tender. "Your death will not stop the sea, only feed it. But bleed willingly, and perhaps the hunger will sleep for another age."

Roger pressed the blade to his wrist, his heartbeat loud in his ears. He hesitated, tears blurring his vision. The house groaned, the sea roared, and through the open window came the sound of chanting — voices of the drowned, growing louder, pleading, begging. He screamed and brought the blade down.

But instead of pain, he felt cold — deep, biting cold. He looked down. His blood didn't flow; it crystallized into black salt. The room darkened, and the sea's roar filled everything. The candle blew out.

When light returned, he was standing again — or something that looked like him was. The blade was gone. The mark on his palm glowed faintly, then sank beneath the skin, leaving nothing but pale scars. The whisper came one last time: "Now you are hollow. Now you carry me."

He walked out of the basement like a man sleepwalking. Outside, dawn broke, pink and gold. The sea was calm, the air clean. The drowned figures were gone. For the first time in months, the town of Velvado was silent.

In the following days, the villagers noticed changes. The villa no longer looked abandoned — its walls repainted, its windows open. Roger Naik began to appear again in the village square, smiling, greeting people politely. His eyes were brighter, his voice softer. He even visited the church once, offering donations. People said he had found peace.

His next book, *The Sea Remembers*, released a few months later and became an instant bestseller. Critics called it "eerily transcendent, written with the wisdom of the damned." He gave interviews, spoke about redemption, and the tragedy of guilt. No one noticed that his reflection in the TV interviews never blinked when he did.

But the old healer, Lourdes, knew. She saw him walking past her hut one night, the sea mist following in his wake. "You didn't end it," she whispered. "You became it." He turned, smiled faintly, and his eyes glowed for a second — not red, but the color of deep water.

That night, the fishermen of Velvado saw something strange far out at sea — a flicker of light beneath the waves, as if an entire city lay glowing below. And when they pulled their nets in, they found not fish, but black stones — smooth, cold, and each engraved with the same symbol: a circle with a slit through its heart.

Soon after, disappearances began again. A tourist vanished near the cliffs. A boy went missing from the market. The police found nothing. The villagers whispered that the old hunger had returned, that the sea had begun choosing its own sacrifices. Some said they saw Roger walking along the shore at night, talking to the waves. Others swore they heard his voice from the forest, whispering promises.

Months later, a storm hit Velvado — the worst in decades. The waves swallowed half the coastline. When it passed, the villa was gone, as if it had never existed. In its place was a crater filled with saltwater, perfectly circular, shimmering faintly under the moonlight.

The government declared the area unsafe, fenced it off. But the locals still came sometimes, lighting candles and throwing flowers into the pool. They said if you stood near it on a full moon and whispered your deepest wish, you could hear a voice from the depths asking softly, "What will you give for what you want?"

Most ran when they heard it. But sometimes, someone stayed. And those who stayed were never seen again.

Years passed. Roger Naik's books continued to be published posthumously — stories no one remembered submitting, written in his unmistakable style. Critics debated whether they were old drafts or ghostwritten. In one of them, a line appeared that no editor could explain — a single sentence buried in the middle of a paragraph: *The sea is patient, but the sea remembers.*

Velvado itself changed. Tourists came less often; the forest crept closer each year, its roots winding toward the shore. Fishermen avoided the waters near the crater, saying their nets tore when they got too close. At night, lights flickered beneath the waves, and if you listened carefully, you could hear the sound of pages turning underwater — slow, endless, as if a book was being written in the dark.

And somewhere in that silence, when the moon bled red again, a figure would rise briefly from the surf — tall, faceless, with eyes like drowning stars. Sometimes it wore a human smile. Sometimes it whispered in the voice of a man who once dreamed too much.

They said he had traded his soul for success. But in Velvado, people learned a different truth. The Wishmaster never leaves empty-handed. He waits in the dreams of those who crave too deeply, offering the same question — *Do you wish it?*

And every time someone answers, the waves ripple just a little closer to shore.

The sea around Velvado was quieter now, but the silence was deceptive — a breath before another tide. The fishermen said the ocean had moods, that it grieved sometimes. They spoke in hushed tones of the storm that had swallowed the villa, and of the strange calm that followed, as if the sea had

taken what it wanted and gone back to sleep. But others, the older ones who remembered the old stories, knew that hunger never slept — it only waited for another dreamer.

Lourdes D'Costa grew weaker with each passing moon. Age had hollowed her, but she still woke at midnight, staring toward the crater by the sea. It had changed. What once looked like a pool of saltwater now shimmered faintly with a light that came from below. Sometimes she saw ripples without wind. Sometimes, in the dead of night, she heard a voice — soft, coaxing, familiar.

"Do you wish it?"

She would clutch her rosary and whisper back, "No, old one. I have wished enough in this life." But she knew others would not be so strong.

Velvado's youth began to treat the legend like a game. Teenagers dared each other to go near the crater on full-moon nights. Some claimed they heard music — a low, rhythmic hum that made the body feel weightless. Others swore the water moved even when untouched, drawing closer to their feet. A few laughed and tossed coins in, like tourists wishing into a fountain. Those coins were never seen again. And neither were three of the boys who went there one monsoon night, their names later carved into a wooden cross that the tide washed away within days.

Soon, the villagers stopped speaking the name *Roger Naik*. His books were still in stores, still earning awards, but to say his name aloud in Velvado was to invite a chill wind through your house. Some said if you read his stories near the sea, the waves grew restless, inching closer. The ink, it was whispered, was not ink at all — it was seawater, mixed with something else.

Tourism revived slightly after the storm — curiosity always returns where tragedy lives. A new resort opened a few kilometers away, marketing itself as "Velvado Bay Retreat." It promised luxury and sea views. Guests often mentioned the strange noises at night — a whisper like someone speaking underwater, or the echo of footsteps pacing just beyond their windows. The resort owners dismissed it as wind. The locals didn't.

One evening, a visiting filmmaker, fascinated by the legend, sought out Lourdes for an interview. She was nearly blind by then, her eyes milky but still knowing. "Do you believe he was real?" the man asked, setting his camera on the table.

She smiled faintly. "He was as real as your reflection. Tell me, child, when you look in the mirror, do you know if the thing looking back wishes for the same life you live?"

The filmmaker laughed nervously. "It's just a story. Something to build a film on."

"Stories are hungry," she murmured. "They eat the mouths that speak them."

He didn't finish the film. He left Velvado two days later, pale and sleepless, and on the flight home, the crew swore he kept staring out the window at the Arabian Sea far below, whispering to it.

The crater by the shore deepened with every tide. Fishermen reported their nets snagging on something beneath — stone, or bone, they couldn't tell. The light under the water glowed brighter each season, and sometimes, at dawn, a thin mist rose from it, curling like breath. Those who inhaled it claimed to dream vividly — dreams of a man standing by

the waves, smiling kindly, asking them what they desired most.

Lourdes died one monsoon morning, the same day the sea turned black for an hour. The villagers said she had been found sitting upright, facing the window, a faint smile on her face, her palm marked with a circle — the old symbol. They buried her near the church, but her grave never stayed dry. Water seeped from beneath even in summer.

After her death, the storms came more often. The tides grew unpredictable. The sea began eating the road that led to the old villa's site. The government closed off the area again, but fences rusted, and curiosity always found holes.

A year later, a foreign travel blogger uploaded a video titled *The Forbidden Shore of Velvado*. It showed him walking to the crater at night, laughing nervously, daring the "demon of Goa" to show itself. The video ended abruptly, the camera falling into the sand. Viewers noted, before it cut, a faint reflection in the water — a tall, faceless shape with a slit where a mouth should be.

The video went viral. The next morning, the blogger's body washed ashore near the pier, his eyes wide open, his tongue missing.

That was when Velvado finally died. Tourists stopped coming. The sea walls crumbled. Within a decade, half the town was abandoned, reclaimed by vines and tide. Locals said the forest and sea had made peace again — both feeding on what humans left behind.

Yet, sometimes, travelers passing along the coast at night see lights far out at sea — not boats, but steady glows beneath the surface, like lanterns moving in slow procession. They

say if you stop your car and listen, you can hear faint music, a low hum rising and falling like breathing. And if you stay too long, you begin to hear words beneath it.

A whisper.

"Do you wish it?"

The legend of Velvado became a warning — told in shacks and taverns across Goa. "Never wish on a red moon," they say. "Never trust the sea when it's quiet." And if you hear the whisper in your dreams, no matter how desperate you are, never answer. For once the Wishmaster knows your name, it will echo in the tide until it finds you.

And it always finds you.

Beyond Love

The city never truly slept, not even after midnight. Gurgaon's highways shimmered under the pale glow of sodium streetlights, the kind that hummed faintly as if whispering secrets to the night. The wind carried the smell of diesel, dust, and something faintly metallic—blood perhaps, though no one would say it aloud.

Truck horns howled in the distance, echoing off glass towers that rose like dark sentinels against the moon. The toll booths blinked green and red, mechanical eyes watching the endless flow of humanity and machines. It was a city of ambition by day, but by night, Gurgaon turned into something else—lonely, predatory, and eerily aware.

Locals had begun to whisper again. "Bhai, raat ko NH48 pe mat nikalna akela," they'd say at chai stalls and paan corners. "Ek aur banda mila subah—poora chehra nahi pehchana gaya."

It wasn't the first time a man had been found like that. The pattern had become a nightmare stitched into the city's dark pulse. Solo male travellers—drivers, salesmen, engineers—vanishing after midnight, only to be discovered dead the next morning on the outskirts. Their bodies bore no clear cause of death. No weapon marks, no signs of struggle. Just… expressions of terror so intense, their mouths remained frozen open as if screaming silently into the void.

The papers blamed "highway robberies gone wrong." Some said it was toxic fumes. Others muttered about *bhoot-pret*.

The cops rolled their eyes publicly but crossed themselves privately.

Among those cops was Inspector Aditya Rao, thirty-one, sharp-jawed, and restless. He had transferred to Gurgaon from Rohtak barely six months ago, expecting chaos of another kind—political crimes, scams, maybe a few local thugs. He hadn't expected this. The supernatural talk irritated him at first. "People die, people panic, and the city makes stories," he'd said during his first briefing. But the cases started to get under his skin.

He had gone through every report, every photo, every testimony. None of it made sense. All the men were alone, all picked up somewhere between IFFCO Chowk and Bilaspur, and all found dead along desolate stretches, faces contorted in terror. Their cars remained intact, wallets untouched.

Aditya's superior, ACP Bhaskar, dismissed it as "mass paranoia." "Tu bhi ab bhoot-pret maanega kya, Rao?" he'd laughed, slapping Aditya's back. "Bas koi psycho hoga, badla le raha hai. Close the damn file if nothing new comes up."

But something inside Aditya resisted. He had grown up on the same roads, driven through the same nights, and he felt… watched. He could sense the unease every time he crossed Hero Honda Chowk past midnight, how the temperature seemed to dip inexplicably, how sometimes headlights flickered without reason.

One evening, over tea at a dhaba near Manesar, an old truck driver told him, "Saab, uss ladki se bach ke rehna. White salwar, dupatta odha hua rehta hai, raat ko lift maangti hai. Jo rukta hai, ya to paagal ho jaata hai ya milta hi nahi subah."

Aditya had smiled then, but the man's eyes had been serious, glinting with something like pity. "Uske baal gile rehte hain hamesha, saab. Pata nahi kyun."

That detail—the wet hair—stayed with him longer than he cared to admit.

By late October, the city began folding into early winter. Nights grew longer, and the murders stopped for a week. Then, one night, a body turned up again—near Kherki Daula toll.

The victim: thirty-three-year-old Rajesh Bhatia, an IT consultant returning from a late night client meeting. Found slumped in the driver's seat of his Hyundai, engine still running, headlights dim. No wounds. But his phone's front camera had been recording—a brief clip showing Rajesh looking frightened, whispering something like, *"Madam, are you okay?"* before the feed glitched into static.

Aditya watched that clip ten times. He noted how the man's eyes darted toward the passenger seat, how his hand trembled as he reached to lower the car window. He rewound the audio, enhanced it through forensic software, but all he heard in the background was a soft humming—a woman's voice, tuneless yet heartbreaking.

He felt something cold crawl up his spine.

Over the next few days, Aditya began driving those routes himself. He took the car unmarked, dressed plain, kept his sidearm ready. He spoke to roadside vendors, guards, truckers. Stories were consistent—around 2 or 3 AM, a lone woman, usually dressed in white, appeared by the roadside, signaling for help.

"She doesn't look scary, saab," one guard at a logistics hub told him. "Bas udaas lagti hai. Par agar aap zyada kuch pooch lo na, ya haath lagane ki koshish karo, to hawa thandi ho jaati hai. Aur sab khatam."

Aditya noted the guard's trembling hands.

That night, as he returned home to his bachelor flat in Sector 46, he found himself unable to shake the imagery—the idea of a lonely woman walking along the dark stretch, barefoot, hair dripping wet, asking for a ride she never truly needed.

He dreamt of her. He dreamt of headlights cutting through fog and the figure turning toward him—eyes like wet glass, smile that never reached her face. When he woke, his heart was hammering, shirt soaked in sweat.

He began compiling all reports into a personal journal, calling it "The White Lady Case." Against official orders, he kept investigating.

Then one evening, during a late drink with his colleague Nisha from forensics, he confessed his plan. "I'm going to drive alone tomorrow night," he said quietly, fingers tracing the rim of his glass. "Let's see if she finds me."

Nisha stared at him, horrified. "Are you mad, Adi? This isn't some *bhoot story* to test. What if it's real? What if—"

"That's exactly why I have to see it," he interrupted. "Whatever this is, ghost or psycho, someone is killing men on our highways. If she's real, I'll talk to her. If not, I'll finally sleep in peace."

He smiled faintly, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Before leaving that night, he prepared meticulously—checked his dash cam, pocketed a small digital voice

recorder, and pinned his service badge to his jacket like a talisman.

At 1:45 AM, he started his car, a grey Mahindra Scorpio, and turned toward NH48. The city lights fell away gradually, replaced by the amber glow of streetlamps and the occasional flash of a passing truck.

The air was still. Gurgaon at night was deceptive—a glittering shell with darkness lurking just beneath.

He turned off his music and rolled down the window. The highway smelled faintly of burnt rubber and cold earth.

Somewhere between Hero Honda Chowk and IFFCO, his headlights flickered. A sudden, inexplicable static crackled through the radio though it was switched off.

Aditya frowned, glancing at the dashboard. Everything was functioning fine. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw movement—a figure by the divider, barely visible through the light fog.

White. Still.

His pulse slowed, then quickened again.

She was standing barefoot on the edge of the road, one hand raised slightly as if hailing a cab. The other hand clutched the end of her dupatta, fluttering gently despite the still air.

Aditya slowed the car. He could see her face now—young, maybe in her late twenties, eyes downcast. Her hair was long, dark, and wet, strands clinging to her cheeks.

He stopped beside her.

"Madam," he called softly through the open window, "aapko lift chahiye?"

She turned her head slowly toward him. Her eyes met his, and for a brief moment, he forgot to breathe. There was sadness there—ancient, bottomless sadness.

"Yes," she said simply, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Sector 29."

Aditya hesitated. Something in his gut screamed *no*, but the rational part of him—the cop, the investigator—leaned forward, unlocking the passenger door.

"Baith jaiye."

She opened the door gently and slid in, movements precise and soundless. A faint scent of rain filled the car.

Aditya's hand trembled as he restarted the engine. He glanced sideways; she was staring ahead, silent. Her hands were folded in her lap, nails clean, skin unnaturally pale under the dashboard glow.

They drove in silence for a few minutes.

"So," he began casually, voice slightly hoarse, "aap kaam karti hain Gurgaon mein?"

She didn't answer at first. Then, in that same soft tone, "I used to."

Something about the past tense unsettled him.

"Late night, alone—dangerous time to be out," he said, forcing a small laugh.

Her lips curved faintly. "For whom?"

He froze.

The road stretched endlessly ahead, a black ribbon lined with ghostly streetlights. He reached slowly for his voice

recorder, pressing the small red button by touch, hiding it under his jacket.

"Madam, aap kaunsi company mein kaam karte the?" he asked, pretending nonchalance.

This time, she looked at him directly. Her eyes gleamed with something fragile yet fierce. "He used to ask me that too," she murmured. "The man I loved."

Aditya's throat went dry.

Before he could respond, the car's temperature dropped sharply, fog curling inside the windshield like breath from unseen mouths.

He blinked. "Madam—are you feeling cold?"

She smiled—an almost tragic smile. "Do you believe in promises, Inspector?"

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel.

"How—how do you know who I am?"

Her eyes darkened. "You came looking for me."

And before he could say another word, the headlights flickered once more, plunging the road into shadow.

The lights came back after a few seconds, but in that brief darkness Aditya had felt something brush past his neck — cold, like mist or a breath. His pulse drummed hard. He forced a laugh, trying to disguise the sudden chill inside the car.

"Seems like the power grid's acting up again," he muttered, checking the rear-view mirror. Nothing behind them except a long stretch of emptiness.

The woman didn't reply. Her reflection shimmered faintly in the glass, but the angle of light seemed wrong, as if her face was illuminated from nowhere.

"You're from around here?" he asked, trying to steady his voice.

She turned slightly toward him, her eyes glinting in the half-light. "I was," she said. "Before the city changed."

Aditya frowned. "Changed how?"

Her lips curved into a faint smile. "It learned to lie. Every road here hides a story."

Her tone wasn't accusatory; it was almost gentle, resigned, like a teacher telling a child that monsters really do live under the bed.

He cleared his throat, fingers grazing the small recorder in his pocket. "And your story?" he said carefully.

The woman looked out the window, where the faint outlines of the Aravalli hills loomed like black waves. "It's not worth telling," she whispered. "Men stopped listening when I was alive."

For the first time, Aditya's heart clenched with something beyond fear — pity, perhaps. He glanced sideways at her again. A tear was glistering on her cheek, though her expression remained blank.

They passed under an overbridge. The sound inside the car changed — muffled, thick, as though the air itself had turned heavy.

He caught the faint smell of wet soil and iron.

"Madam," he said softly, "what happened to you?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she began humming softly, the same strange tune from Rajesh Bhatia's video. Low, wordless, broken — it seeped into the car like smoke, wrapping around his mind.

Aditya swallowed, his fingers tightening on the wheel. He forced his eyes back to the road, though the air around him seemed to shimmer with heat despite the cold.

Then, in the hum of the engine and the ghostly lullaby, he heard a whisper.

"Turn left."

His hand moved before his mind caught up. The road veered sharply off the main highway into a narrow service lane bordered by sparse trees. The tarmac was cracked, scattered with stones, and half-swallowed by weeds.

He frowned. "Sector 29 isn't this way."

"Just drive," she said, her tone suddenly sharper, colder.

He gritted his teeth but obeyed. A strange pressure built in his chest, like the air had thickened. Every instinct told him to stop, to turn back — but something about her presence made defiance impossible.

The service road twisted into a dark clearing near a half-built structure. Cement pillars rose from the ground like broken teeth.

"Here," she said quietly.

Aditya parked, switched off the ignition, and turned to her. She sat perfectly still, eyes fixed on the skeletal building ahead.

He glanced at his recorder light — still blinking red. Good.

"Is this where you live?" he asked cautiously.

Her lips parted slightly, and for a fleeting moment, he thought he saw sorrow flicker across her face. "I did," she whispered. "Once."

The air seemed to pulse, thick with memory.

Aditya followed her gaze. The half-built structure looked familiar; he remembered an abandoned housing project that had been shut down years ago after a "construction site incident." He dug through his memory — the name: *The Amber Residency*.

Something clicked inside his head. He had seen that name in one of the oldest reports — a missing person case filed seven years ago. A young woman named *Ritika Sharma*, last seen leaving her office late night, never returned. The boyfriend — one *Siddharth Malhotra*, a project architect at Amber Residency — was questioned, then vanished before trial.

Aditya felt a cold weight settle in his stomach.

He turned to look at her again. Her expression had changed — the sadness was gone. Now, there was a stillness that bordered on something divine and terrifying.

"Ritika," he whispered before he could stop himself.

She turned her head slowly, eyes now gleaming like dark water. "So you've read the files," she murmured.

A tremor ran through his hands. "You… you were…"

"Buried," she said simply. "Under these pillars. By the man I loved."

Her voice didn't tremble, but it hollowed out the night around them. The crickets had gone silent. The trees swayed though there was no wind.

Aditya's throat went dry. He forced himself to stay calm. "Ritika… what happened?"

She smiled faintly, though it was the kind of smile that came just before tears. "He said he'd marry me. He said the house here would be ours. One night, he called me to show me the site… and then, when I asked why the floor smelled of kerosene…"

Her words faded into silence.

Aditya stared at her, unable to move. The temperature inside the car dropped further. Frost crawled up the inside of the windows like veins.

When she spoke again, her tone was soft but chilling. "You men always promise to protect, don't you? But sometimes, protection is just another word for control."

"Ritika," he said carefully, "I'm not him."

Her eyes glistened, but she didn't look at him. "No," she said. "You're the first who hasn't tried to touch me."

The bluntness of the statement made his chest tighten. "I'm just trying to help."

She tilted her head slightly, her hair falling like a curtain of ink. "And what happens when dawn comes, Inspector? Will you help me then too?"

He swallowed. "I'll find your body," he said quietly. "I'll give you peace."

Her lips quivered. For a moment, he thought she might weep. But then, the smile returned — sad and knowing. "Peace?" she whispered. "There is no peace for those who die believing love will save them."

Outside, the wind had begun to rise, stirring dust into small whorls that glinted in the headlight beams.

Aditya's instincts screamed to leave, but something in her eyes kept him anchored.

"Ritika," he said softly, "you're not alone anymore."

She looked at him then — fully, deeply — and for an instant, her face softened into something almost human. "You shouldn't have said that," she murmured.

Before he could react, the lights flickered again. The engine coughed and died. The car was plunged into darkness, except for the faint red blink of the recorder light.

Aditya felt the air compress. A low hum filled the car — that same tune again, now warped, layered with whispers. The rearview mirror vibrated faintly.

He turned his head — and froze.

Through the glass, he could see shapes moving outside. Dozens of them. Shadowy outlines of men, faces twisted, bodies rigid — as if carved from smoke. They stood in silence around the car, their eyes glowing faintly white.

Aditya's breath hitched. "Who are they?" he whispered.

Her voice came from beside him, calm and distant. "The ones who stopped to help."

A chill ran through his bones. "You killed them?"

"They killed themselves," she said. "Their greed did. I only showed them what they really were."

Aditya's throat constricted. His heartbeat pounded so loud he thought it might tear his ribs apart.

He shut his eyes, whispering, "You don't have to do this anymore."

When he opened them again, she was gone.

The passenger seat was empty, though the fabric still shimmered with a faint dampness — like raindrops that hadn't evaporated.

He grabbed his flashlight and stumbled out of the car, the recorder still running in his pocket. The night pressed close around him. The shadows were gone. The field ahead was empty save for the silent pillars of the abandoned project.

And then, a faint sound — a woman's sob.

He turned toward it instinctively, light shaking in his hand. The beam caught movement near one of the pillars — a figure kneeling, hands pressed to the ground.

It was her.

Her white dupatta trailed behind her, soaked in something darker than water.

"Ritika," he called softly.

She looked up. Her face was streaked with tears, but her eyes— they glowed faintly blue now, like the reflection of headlights on glass. "They never even looked for me," she whispered. "My father filed the complaint. The police closed it in two weeks."

Aditya's chest ached. "I'll reopen it. I promise."

A faint smile curved her lips. “Promises,” she repeated, her tone mocking and tender all at once. “That word again.”

Then she stood, her movements slow, graceful. The wind around her shifted, lifting the dust like a veil.

“You’ll forget all this, Aditya,” she said quietly. “You’ve been kind. I don’t take kind men.”

He wanted to speak, to protest, but his mouth wouldn’t move. His body froze in place, limbs heavy.

She walked toward him until they were barely an arm’s length apart. He could see the faint shimmer of tears on her lashes, smell the faint scent of jasmine mixed with rain.

Her hand rose — not to harm, but to touch his cheek. It was cold, but not lifeless.

“Go home,” she whispered. “Sleep. The truth will wake up without you.”

A blinding light exploded behind her — not from the car, but from everywhere, like dawn condensed into a single flash. Aditya felt himself stumble backward, the sound of rushing water filling his ears.

When he came to the car the engine was running, and he was back on the main highway. The clock read 3:12 AM.

The passenger seat was empty. The air smelled faintly of rain.

He blinked, disoriented. His last memory was of turning onto the service road — after that, nothing. He felt a dull ache in his head, as if from a hangover.

He drove home in silence, unable to remember why he felt so heavy, so sad.

The next morning, his colleague Nisha found him staring blankly at his desk, a half-empty cup of chai in hand. "You look like you've seen a ghost," she joked.

He smiled faintly. "Maybe I have."

That evening, while cleaning his jacket, he found the small voice recorder in his pocket — still blinking red.

He frowned. "What the hell…"

He plugged it into his laptop.

The screen flickered. The playback began.

At first, only static. Then his own voice: "Madam, aap kaunsi company mein kaam karte the?"

A pause. Then her reply. "He used to ask me that too."

Aditya's stomach turned cold.

The recording continued — fragments of their conversation, muffled by wind and interference. Then came a part he didn't remember at all. A low voice, whispering directly into the microphone.

"You think recording me will help you, Inspector? You all record, investigate, file reports. None of it changes the truth."

There was a long silence, followed by a faint sound — like soil shifting, or something being unearthed.

Then her voice again, clearer, heartbreakingly human: "I was twenty-seven. I trusted him. He said the house would be ours. He poured the kerosene while saying he loved me."

The static crackled louder.

“I screamed until my throat tore. But the city didn’t hear. It was too busy dreaming.”

The words dissolved into static again.

Then came Aditya’s own voice, faint and shaking: “You’re not alone anymore.”

A pause. Her whisper, almost tender: “You shouldn’t have said that.”

The recording ended with a single soft sigh — not his.

Aditya sat frozen for a long time, staring at the laptop screen.

He couldn’t remember saying any of it.

But when he went to the evidence room two days later, the old file on Ritika Sharma had been reopened. No one knew who did it.

In the days that followed, Gurgaon wore its usual mask again. The traffic screamed, the glass towers sparkled, and the city pretended nothing had ever stirred under its skin. But Aditya felt it—the faint pulse of something unfinished, the shadow of a truth that refused to sleep.

The reopened file on Ritika Sharma had landed back on his desk without explanation. No signature, no initials. Just the old brown folder with a faint oil stain on the corner and the word *“REVIEW”* stamped in red.

He stared at it for a long time before touching it. The air around him felt heavier.

Inside were photographs—grainy prints from the original investigation. Ritika smiling awkwardly at an office

farewell. A close-up of her ID card. A blurred shot of the unfinished site of Amber Residency.

Aditya traced his finger over her face on the photo. The smile was unremarkable, ordinary—yet something about the eyes seemed to follow him.

That night, he sat alone in his apartment, the city lights flickering outside his balcony. He poured himself a drink but didn't taste it. The voice recording still sat on his desk, the file open beside it.

He played the clip again. He didn't know why he kept listening, but each time, the same part struck him differently—the way she said *"He said the house would be ours."*

It sounded almost tender, almost naive.

He stared out at the skyline, a thousand windows gleaming like watchful eyes. "You were right," he muttered. "The city learned to lie."

The next morning, he requested official permission to reopen the Amber Residency site for investigation. The paperwork took two days, though no one could explain why the file was incomplete, or how the missing-person report had resurfaced after being marked "closed."

On the third evening, just as the winter fog began to rise from the ground, he and a small team drove out to the abandoned site.

Amber Residency looked worse than he remembered—half-finished walls blackened by rain, scaffolding rusted into skeletal frames. Dogs barked somewhere deep within the hollow structure, their voices echoing like cries through the concrete.

Aditya walked ahead, flashlight in hand. Every step crunched over gravel and debris.

"Sir, are you sure this is necessary?" one constable asked nervously.

"Yes," Aditya said. "We'll search the foundation area. Bring the ground-penetrating scanner."

As they spread out, he felt that same unease return—the prickle at the back of his neck, the faint drop in temperature. His breath clouded faintly in the cold air, though the night wasn't that cold.

They reached the central pillar—the tallest one, the one Ritika had pointed to that night.

"Start here," he ordered.

The scanner operator nodded, setting up the device. Within minutes, the monitor began to blink. "Sir," he said uncertainly, "I'm getting a strong anomaly reading—metal and… bones, maybe? About five feet down."

Aditya's pulse quickened. "Mark the area. Call for excavation."

They began digging carefully. The soil was dense, clay-like, mixed with fragments of broken bricks and glass. After twenty minutes, one of the men gasped. "Sir… dekhiye."

A fragment of cloth emerged first—white, rotted by time. Then a thin, skeletal arm, fingers still curled as if reaching for help that never came.

The air grew silent.

They worked until the rest of the remains were uncovered. The skull still had traces of long hair clinging to it, strands

turned the color of ash. Around the neck was a rusted locket—inside, a photo of a man and woman smiling together.

Aditya felt his knees weaken. It was her.

He crouched down slowly, brushing dirt away from the edges of the locket. The man in the photo—Siddharth Malhotra—was smiling, his arm around her shoulders.

He remembered the case notes. The boyfriend who'd vanished.

The forensics team began cataloguing the find, murmuring in hushed tones.

Aditya stayed back, staring at the remains until everyone else drifted toward the van.

The site was quiet again. The shadows deepened.

He took a slow breath. "Ritika," he whispered, "I found you."

The wind rustled faintly through the broken pillars. For a moment, he thought he heard the faint hum again—the same tune from the recording. But it was softer now, almost peaceful.

He smiled faintly and turned to leave.

Then, from somewhere behind him, a faint voice: "He's still here."

Aditya froze. He turned slowly, flashlight trembling.

"Who's there?"

No reply.

He moved toward the sound. The beam caught a faint movement near a far wall—a small patch of cement that looked newer, smoother. He stepped closer, knelt, and ran his fingers over it.

Fresh sealant. Recent.

He called the others. "Bring the tools. There's something behind this wall."

They hammered carefully until the cement cracked away, revealing a small hollow cavity. Inside lay a rusted metal box.

Aditya pried it open. Inside were papers—blueprints, letters, and a small black notebook.

He flipped through the notebook quickly. Most pages were smeared with ink, but a few were legible. They were written in Siddharth Malhotra's hand.

"R met me again tonight. She's getting suspicious."

"She wants to tell her father. I can't let that happen."

"The investors want the land. I have no choice. I'll meet her at the site one last time."

The last entry was dated the night Ritika disappeared.

Aditya closed the notebook slowly.

So there it was—the truth, in ink and bone.

He exhaled heavily. The case that had haunted the city for years was finally real.

But even as he thought it, something in him twisted. The night felt too still, too aware. The fog began to rise again, curling around his legs.

One of the constables muttered, "Sir, let's pack up. It's getting late."

Aditya nodded absently, staring once more at the spot where her body had laid. He could almost see her there—the faint shimmer of white in the dim light, the sadness in her eyes.

He thought of the recording again of her voice saying, *"You'll forget all this."*

He didn't know why, but he felt an ache in his chest, deep and sharp, as though he were losing something precious all over again.

They sealed the site and drove back to the station.

By morning, the case was already the talk of every newsroom. Headlines screamed *"POLICE UNEARTH REMAINS IN 7-YEAR-OLD GURGAON MYSTERY."* The news anchors speculated endlessly about betrayal, greed, and the "curse of Amber Residency."

Aditya sat through the media storm in silence. He'd given his report, submitted the notebook, and turned in the voice recorder for official archiving. But even as he spoke, he could feel the fog in his mind thickening again.

That night, when he returned home, he found his laptop still open. The folder with the recording was gone. Deleted.

He frowned, checking the recycle bin. Empty.

He called the tech unit. "Did anyone access my system today?"

"No, sir," the technician replied. "Logs are clean."

He hung up, uneasy.

Sleep came fitfully. He dreamed of headlights, fog, and the faint hum of a song echoing across an empty road.

When he woke, his phone buzzed. It was Nisha.

"Adi, are you sitting down?" she asked breathlessly. "The forensic report came in. The locket had fresh fingerprints—male."

He frowned. "What do you mean, fresh?"

"They weren't degraded. They're from within the last few days."

He froze. "That's not possible."

"I checked twice," she said. "It's your prints, Adi."

The line went silent.

He sat there for a long moment, heart pounding. He could see his own hands trembling.

He had touched the locket, yes—but that would make sense. Still, something about her tone made him uneasy.

"Anything else?" he asked finally.

Nisha hesitated. "The lab found traces of kerosene near the remains. The pattern suggests a secondary burn attempt—someone tried to light the area again recently."

He felt cold all over. "Who?"

"That's just it," she whispered. "The security footage from last night shows a car near the site at 2:30 AM. It was your Scorpio."

Aditya's mouth went dry. "That's not possible. I was home."

"I thought so too," she said. "But the timestamp matches."

The call ended with static, though the signal was full.

He sat still for a long time.

Finally, he rose, walked to the balcony, and looked out at the city below. The morning traffic roared. The world looked ordinary again.

But deep down, something had shifted.

He reached into his drawer for his notebook—the one where he'd written every detail of the case. He flipped through it absently. The last few pages were blank—except for a single line in faint handwriting that he didn't remember writing:

"You'll forget all this, Aditya."

His breath caught.

He stood there, the notebook trembling in his hand, when a sudden sound filled the room—a soft hum from his laptop speaker. The screen flickered to life on its own, a black window opening.

A video.

His dash-cam feed.

The footage was grainy, static-laced. It showed him driving along NH48, the timestamp marking the night of the encounter.

He leaned closer.

There she was—the woman in white, standing by the roadside.

He watched himself stop, open the door, speak to her. Then, suddenly, the feed glitched—the image splitting, doubling.

For a second, two figures sat in the passenger seat, both identical, both Ritika. One smiling, one crying.

The image flickered again, then froze.

Aditya's reflection in the glass screen seemed to merge with hers, his eyes aligning with the ghostly image.

He reached out and clicked pause.

The video stilled, but her faint outline remained, as if burned into the pixels.

He exhaled slowly. The air in the room smelled faintly of rain and jasmine.

Somewhere in the city, a truck horn wailed through the fog.

He whispered, "Rest now, Ritika."

The screen went black.

He sat for a while, listening to the city's hum. Then, from the corner of his desk, the voice recorder blinked once.

He hadn't turned it on.

A soft static filled the air. Then her voice, calm and distant:

"You gave me peace, Inspector. But the roads are still full of promises."

The static faded.

Aditya leaned back, closing his eyes. He couldn't tell if he felt relief or dread.

Outside, Gurgaon's night stretched on—its roads gleaming like veins under the moon. Somewhere along NH48, the mist thickened, and for a brief moment, headlights cut through the fog to reveal a lone woman in white, standing by the divider.

Her dupatta fluttered gently as she raised one hand, signalling for a ride.

Million Dollar Jacket

In the damp, dying light of a Kolkata evening in 1886, the streets of Burrabazar were soaked with drizzle and the faint smell of rotting jute. The narrow lanes shimmered like slick black veins, lit by sputtering gas lamps that flickered yellow halos through the mist. Rickshaw pullers hunched like skeletal horses, dragging their weary loads through puddles that reflected colonial mansions and broken temples alike. Somewhere in the distance, the bell of St. John's Church tolled seven, each chime swallowed by the murmuring crowd and the distant cry of the Hooghly's boats.

Among this tangle of misery and movement walked Haripada, a man of thirty-five, his ribs showing through the torn cotton shirt clinging to his rain-wet skin. His eyes were hollow yet alive — the kind of eyes that belonged to men who'd once believed in luck but now relied only on hunger. A coolie by trade, sometimes a chai-seller near Bowbazar, sometimes a helper to the sahibs at Writers' Building when they needed their trunks hauled. Always invisible, always replaceable.

That evening, as the drizzle turned to a fine mist, Haripada found himself walking toward the *ghat*, where the air smelled of wet ashes and coal smoke. He had earned barely enough for a handful of *muri* and tea. His landlady, old Bhanu-mashi, had already threatened to throw him out if he didn't pay two rupees rent by week's end.

He muttered to himself, "*Ebhabe cholbe na… kichu ekta korte hobe.*" (This can't go on… I must do something.)

He didn't know that fate, or something darker, was listening.

At the corner of the *ghat*, under the shadow of a crumbling warehouse wall, lay a heap of rags. At first glance it looked like another drunk beggar sleeping through the drizzle. But as Haripada passed by, a faint metallic glint caught his eye — a button, perhaps, or a piece of jewellery. Curiosity tugged him closer.

"*O dada… tumi banchho?*" (Brother, are you alive?) he asked softly, nudging the bundle with his toe.

The bundle didn't move.

Haripada bent down and peered closer. The man's face was gray, his lips blue, his eyes half-open as if caught mid-prayer. Death had stiffened him hours ago. But it wasn't the body that seized Haripada's attention — it was the coat.

A long, dark jacket of strange make — not quite British, not quite native. Its fabric was coarse yet elegant, heavy as if lined with secrets. The buttons were brass, shaped like coiled serpents. Around the collar, faint embroidery shimmered under the lamplight — a design like waves or flames.

No one was around.

The drizzle had turned the lane into a ghost road.

Haripada's mind whispered, "*Take it. The dead don't need warmth.*"

He hesitated only a moment before pulling the jacket from the corpse's stiff shoulders. It was surprisingly dry. Almost warm. As if it had been waiting for him. He slung it over his

arm and hurried back toward his one-room shanty near Chitpur Road, heart hammering in guilt and anticipation.

That night, by the dim flame of his *kerosene bati*, he examined it closely. The inside was lined with fine silk — worn but regal. The pocket seams were oddly deep. In one of them, he found something small and folded — a piece of brittle paper with faded ink scrawled across it.

He squinted, mouthing the letters:

"Take only what is freely given,

Yet all that is given becomes yours — and theirs no more."

He frowned. "*Ki aschorjo likha re eta?*" (What strange words are these?)

He tossed the note aside, chuckling at his own foolishness. But when he put on the coat, he felt it — a faint pulse, like a heartbeat not his own, pressing against his skin.

It fit him perfectly.

He looked in the cracked mirror and saw a man reborn — tall, mysterious, no longer a beggar but something between a sahib and a shadow. "*Dekho to… Haripada babu hoye gelo!*" (Look at that… Haripada's become a gentleman!)

He laughed, and the room seemed to echo back with a laugh that wasn't entirely his.

The next morning, still wearing the coat, Haripada went to the market. He had no money, but habit drove him there — maybe he could run errands for a few paisa.

He stopped by *Biren the grocer*, who was weighing rice behind his counter.

"*Biren-da,*" Haripada called. "I'll pay you tomorrow, but can you give me some atta today? I haven't eaten since yesterday."

Biren glared. "Always tomorrow, Haripada. Do I run this shop for free?"

Haripada sighed and said, half-jokingly, "Then give me all your money, Biren-da. Maybe I'll become rich and buy your whole shop!"

Something in his tone — or in the coat — changed the air. The market noise seemed to dim. Biren's hands froze. Then, in a slow, dreamlike motion, he opened his drawer, took out the small iron box that held his day's earnings, and pushed it across the counter.

"Take it," he whispered.

Haripada blinked. "What?"

"I said, take it."

Biren's voice was flat, his eyes empty.

Haripada stammered, "*Na na, ami moja korchhilam!* (No, I was joking!)" But Biren only repeated, "Take it."

Fear and greed collided inside him. He snatched the box and ran, his bare feet splashing through the mud, his heart pounding like a drum.

By the time he reached his shanty, he was shaking. He poured the coins onto the floor — rupees, annas, paise — glinting like wet stars. He laughed aloud. "It worked! What madness was that?" But then that night something else had happened.

The next morning, word spread through Burrabazar like fire through straw: Biren the grocer had been found dead. His body collapsed over his counter, eyes open, mouth foaming.

"Heart failure," said some. "Evil eye," said others.

Haripada sat in silence, staring at his coat.

"*Na… eta ki amar jonno holo?*" (No… did this happen because of me?)

He tried to reason — perhaps coincidence, perhaps fate. But the memory of Biren's empty stare wouldn't leave him.

Days passed. The coat stayed with him. So did the hunger — only now, it was hungry for more.

He tried again. To test. To *know*.

One evening, at the riverside, he saw *Kanti*, a moneylender's assistant who'd once beaten him for begging near the office gate.

"*O Kanti-babu,*" he said lightly, "why don't you hand me your purse? You've enough for ten lives already!"

And Kanti — sneering at first — suddenly went pale. His hands trembled as he reached into his pocket, pulled out a leather purse, and dropped it into Haripada's hands without a word. Then he turned and walked away like a man hypnotized.

The purse was full — silver coins, even a gold ring.

That night, Haripada couldn't sleep. He felt both powerful and damned. The coat felt heavier on his skin, as if it clung to him, whispering.

In the dim reflection of the mirror, his face seemed sharper, his eyes darker.

By morning, news came again — Kanti had been found dead in his room, lifeless and stiff.

Haripada's hands trembled. The pattern was too clear.

Whatever he took, the giver died.

He tried to stop wearing the coat — but it called to him. Whenever he looked away, he swore he saw its outline in the shadows, waiting.

"*Ami pagol hoye jabo,*" he muttered. "I'll go mad."

And yet, life changed for him. Money brought comfort — a better room near Sovabazar, fine meals, even silk shirts. People who once spat at him now bowed. He had fortune, but not peace.

It was then he met Mitali — the sweet-faced daughter of a poor printer from College Street. She sold hand-bound notebooks near the tram stop, her fingers stained with ink. Her laughter was like rain on old roofs, soft and sudden.

They met when he bought a notebook from her — to "write his new life," he had said. She smiled, "Then fill it with good stories, *babu*, not lies."

He laughed, and something in him softened.

Weeks passed, and she became his light — a reason to step away from the jacket's shadow. With her, he was simply Haripada again. She didn't care for his coins or clothes, only his eyes that seemed always a little haunted.

But the coat… it was never far.

One evening, as they sat near the ghats watching the sun melt into the Hooghly, Mitali teased, "You're becoming a

real *babu*, Haripada. Soon you'll forget the likes of us." she said teasingly.

"So you better give me all your money too," he laughed.

She grinned, replying in jest, "Then take it all, if you wish."

The air shifted.

She smiled — then paused, her gaze unfocused for a moment. "All right, then," she said quietly. "It's yours."

He didn't notice it then — how her hand trembled slightly, how her laughter faded too quickly. The river wind carried a chill, and somewhere behind them, the temple bell struck nine — long and hollow.

The coat, resting over his shoulders, seemed to sigh.

That night the city breathed strangely.

The drizzle had thickened into a thin, persistent rain that turned the narrow lanes into mirrors. Somewhere a steamship on the Hooghly moaned like a dying bull, and the sound carried through the wet alleys of North Kolkata. Haripada walked home alone, the coat clinging to him like a second skin. He kept replaying her laughter — that careless, silvery sound — and her last words: *"All right, then. It's yours."*

He didn't know why those words echoed so sharply in his mind, as though the river itself whispered them back. When he reached his room, he felt the unease first — the smell of burnt oil, the sound of something scuttling behind the wooden planks, the silence that seemed to wait for him.

He lit his *bati*. The flame sputtered, throwing long, quivering shadows. He looked down at the coat; droplets of rain glistened on it like beads of mercury. He tried to laugh it off.

"*Pagol hoye jachhi naki ami?*" (Am I going mad?) He folded the coat carefully, laid it over the chair, and sat on the floor counting the coins from his latest haul.

Yet, when he tried to sleep, he couldn't. In the half-dark, the coat seemed to shimmer — its brass buttons catching what little light there was, like the eyes of some patient animal. Once or twice he thought he heard a sigh, faint as breath in his ear. By dawn, he was drenched in sweat.

The next day, he went to meet Mitali again near College Street. But she wasn't there. Her small stool lay empty; the heap of notebooks covered with a torn tarpaulin to shield them from the rain. The boy who sold *paan* beside her stall looked up and said, "*Babu, tumi ekhono janoni? Mitali-di is very sick. Fever.*"

"Fever?" Haripada's heart clenched. "Where is she?"

"Home. Near Jorasanko. Her father sent for a *kabiraj*. They say it's not looking good."

He ran. Through lanes smelling of ink and wet paper, past the tram tracks and open drains, until he reached the narrow lane behind a printing press where she lived. The door was half-open; inside, a lamp burned low. Mitali lay on a cot, eyes half-closed, breathing shallowly. Her father sat beside her, wiping her forehead with a damp cloth. The *kabiraj* muttered Sanskrit under his breath.

Haripada froze at the doorway.

She looked like a fading photograph — color draining from her face.

Her father turned, eyes wet. "The fever came suddenly last night. No warning. She just collapsed."

Haripada whispered, "Can I… see her?"

The old man nodded. Haripada knelt beside her, clutching her hand. It was cold, frighteningly light. She opened her eyes briefly. "*Tumi eshechho…*" (You came…) she murmured, barely audible.

"I'm here," he said, voice shaking. "You'll be fine. *Thik hoye jabe.*"

But in her faint smile he saw something else — resignation, not hope. She tried to lift her hand to touch his chest, but her strength failed. Her lips moved again: "All yours… remember?"

Then her eyes rolled back.

"Mitali!" he shouted, shaking her.

The *kabiraj* grabbed his shoulder. "*Babu, cholun, ora-ke shanti dite din.*" (Let her rest, babu.)

Haripada stumbled backward. The world spun — ink, paper, lamplight — all blurring into one smudge. He fled into the rain, running without seeing, until he reached the ghats where they'd sat the previous night. The Hooghly churned dark and restless beneath the gray sky.

He screamed into the wind, "Why? *Keno?* What have I done?"

No one answered — except the river's indifferent lap against the stone steps.

For two days, he didn't eat. He sat in his room staring at the coat. Its color seemed darker now — almost black. He thought he smelled smoke, but there was none. The brass buttons looked like eyes, watching him with quiet, satisfied hunger.

He whispered to it, "You did this. You took her from me."

A voice inside him, or within the coat, replied softly — not in words but in thought: *You asked. She gave. You took.*

He threw it into a corner. "*Chup kor!*" (Be silent!) But silence had weight now; it pressed against his skull.

By the third night, grief turned to rage. He dragged the coat out and shouted, "You want money? Power? Take it all! But bring her back!" His voice cracked. "Bring her back, damn you!"

Of course, nothing happened. Only the faint sound of the city — rickshaw bells, a dog barking, distant thunder.

He tore at the lining of the coat with trembling hands. Inside, beneath the silk, something was stitched — a symbol drawn in dried red dye, perhaps blood: a circle with jagged lines radiating outward. It pulsed faintly, like breath.

He stumbled back, gasping. "Who made you?" he whispered. "What are you?"

The answer came not in words but memory — flashes of the beggar's lifeless eyes, the note's cryptic warning, the deaths that followed. He saw the faces of Biren, Kanti, Mitali — all fading, their mouths whispering the same phrase: "*Take it… it's yours.*"

The whisper became a chant. "*Take it, it's yours. Take it, it's yours…*" until it filled the small room like smoke.

Haripada clamped his hands over his ears. "Stop! *Thambo!*"

The lamp went out.

He woke at dawn lying on the floor, the coat draped neatly over him as though someone had tucked him in. He

screamed, tore it off, and staggered outside. The city was just stirring — sweet sellers setting up stalls, *cha-walas* boiling milk, a tram bell ringing far away.

He ran toward the burning ghats. The air reeked of ghee and smoke and the sweet-sick scent of death. He approached a pyre that had nearly burned out, borrowed a half-burned log, and stumbled to a secluded corner by the river.

There, he built a small fire. His hands shook as he laid the coat upon it.

For a moment, it refused to burn. The flames licked at the edges but drew back, as though tasting something bitter. Then, with a sudden whoosh, it caught fire — not orange but blue, eerily silent.

Haripada watched, tears cutting clean lines through the soot on his cheeks.

The fabric curled and blackened, the brass buttons melting like candle wax. The air filled with a smell not of cloth, but of charred flesh. He gagged. "*Bastard thing,*" he whispered, "Go back to whatever hell you came from."

As the last of it turned to ash, the wind rose suddenly — carrying embers into the river like dying fireflies.

He felt something lift inside him. Relief, perhaps. Or emptiness.

He sank to his knees, staring at the ashes. Then he took one deep breath, and stepped into the Hooghly. The water was cold, unforgiving.

He walked until it reached his chest, then his throat. The city blurred behind him, the lights dim and far. He whispered

one last time, "*Mitali… amar dosh chhilo.*" (Mitali, it was my fault.)

The river closed over his head.

The next morning, fishermen found his body snagged in the reeds near the Howrah side. On his face was a strange expression — neither fear nor peace, something caught between apology and release.

They buried him near the ghat, unclaimed. The only thing beside the shallow grave was a small patch of blackened soil where the ashes of the coat had fallen.

But Kolkata remembers. Even now, when the monsoon winds sweep across the Hooghly and the lamps flicker along Strand Road, the old men who sit smoking by the river tell the story.

They say that sometimes, on nights heavy with mist, a figure walks the alleys of Burrabazar — barefoot, wearing a coat that glows faintly blue under the lamps. If you meet him and he smiles and says softly, *"Give me all your money, friend,"* you will feel your hand reaching for your purse before you know it.

And by morning, you'll be found cold and still, eyes open to the gray dawn — as if you had simply given everything away, even your breath.

Circus

The year was ending, and the Arabian Sea was restless.

Wind hissed through the dry palm fronds that lined the narrow road leading out of Veraval, toward a stretch of coast where no one usually went. It was New Year's Eve — the night when everyone in Gujarat seemed to be out celebrating, drinking cutting chai at roadside stalls, or watching fireworks from rooftop terraces. But for four friends from Junagadh — **Jay**, **Ritesh**, **Mehul**, and **Bhargav** — it was a night meant for the road.

Jay's father had just given him a second-hand **SUV**, and the boys decided they would take it for a joyride — "ek dhamakedaar drive before the new year," as Ritesh had said, half-laughing, half-drunk on adrenaline. They had no particular destination. Just the idea of driving by the sea, blasting music, and shouting "Happy New Year!" into the night.

It was almost eleven when they left the main highway and took a smaller road cutting through scrubland toward the coast. Mehul sat up front, feet on the dashboard, holding a half-empty bottle of Old Monk. The other two were in the back, half-humming to an old Lucky Ali track playing on Bluetooth. The smell of salt and wet sand thickened as they neared the shoreline. The headlights sliced through thin fog.

"Bapu, look at that mist," Mehul said, leaning forward. "Lage chhe ke samundar utri aavyo chhe road par."

Jay chuckled. "Aree re, tu toh filmy ban gaya. It's just fog, yaar."

But even he felt it — that odd stillness that comes from being near the sea at night. No sound of waves crashing. No insects. Only the slow, rhythmic groaning of wind against metal signboards.

Ritesh, in the back, suddenly sat upright. "Oye… su chhe aagal?"

Jay slowed the jeep. Through the haze, faint **lights flickered** — red, yellow, blue — swaying as if reflected on mist. A low drumbeat floated through the air, distorted and distant. The fog thickened until they could barely see ten feet ahead.

Mehul squinted. "Lagtu chhe… circus?"

A wooden archway appeared out of the mist, painted in peeling gold. Above it, in faded red letters, a sign read:

"The Great Cirque Samudra — One Night Only!"

A smaller line below, barely visible: *Tickets available inside.*

The boys exchanged glances.

"Circus? Here?!" Bhargav said, leaning forward. "Koi ne khabar nathi! There's no circus in this area."

"Maybe some local troupe," Ritesh suggested. "Aavo, dekhine javu! Ekdam mast lagse."

Jay hesitated — but curiosity won. He turned off the music, and the jeep rolled closer.

Beyond the arch, the fog cleared just enough to reveal a **huge red-and-white striped tent**, its edges fluttering against the sea breeze. Old metal cages stood nearby, half-covered with

tarps. The air smelled faintly of **kerosene, seaweed, and something metallic** — like blood or rust.

They parked the jeep near the entrance. No one else was around. The lights on the tent flickered in uneven rhythm, powered by what looked like an old generator sputtering nearby.

"Strange place for a circus," Jay muttered.

A small wooden booth stood by the entrance, with a man sitting inside — or something that looked like a man. He was slumped forward, wearing a black coat and a wide-brimmed hat that covered most of his face. When they approached, he lifted his head slowly. His eyes caught the light — pale, glassy, and cold.

"Four tickets?" he croaked, voice hoarse like sandpaper.

"Ha… four," Jay said uncertainly. The man nodded and turned, reaching beneath the counter. The boys noticed his **fingers** — unnaturally long and bony, with nails that were almost black.

He handed them four small red tickets. Each had a strange logo — a **grinning joker face** surrounded by sea waves.

"Show starts… midnight," the man rasped. "Enjoy… the performance."

Mehul laughed nervously. "Bro, tu dekha? Joker jovo lagto chhe horror movie ma!"

They walked toward the tent. From inside came faint carnival music — a cracked calliope tune, slow and uneven, like a record spinning at the wrong speed. The tent flap opened on its own as they approached, revealing rows of benches circling a central ring lit by smoky yellow lamps.

There were **people sitting inside** — or so it seemed at first. Men, women, even children, all dressed in old-fashioned clothes, their faces pale and still. None of them moved. None even turned their heads when the four entered.

"Arre… they look real, no?" Ritesh whispered. "Like mannequins."

Jay frowned. "Shut up, just sit."

They sat near the back. The fog somehow followed them inside, swirling near their feet. The music stopped. Then, from the opposite side, the curtain rose — and the show began.

A spotlight flickered to life.

A **ringmaster** stepped into view — tall, dressed in a faded red tailcoat with gold trimmings. His skin was pale as candle wax. His mouth stretched into a wide smile that never seemed to end.

"**Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to The Great Cirque Samudra!**" His voice echoed unnaturally, as if bouncing off invisible walls. "Tonight, we give you… the show that never ends."

The crowd — or the unmoving figures pretending to be one — burst into applause. But the sound didn't come from them. It came from somewhere above, echoing, mechanical.

The friends looked at one another uneasily. Mehul whispered, "Yaar, manne lagtu chhe aapda bekaar jagya ma aavi gaya chhiye."

The ringmaster turned, raising a hand. "Let the show begin!"

From behind the curtain, **acrobats** swung onto the stage — their movements stiff, jerky, unnatural. The lamps flickered

and revealed their faces — grey and eyeless. One of them turned mid-swing, and something detached from her head — a ribbon, they thought — until it hit the ground with a *thud*. It wasn't a ribbon.

It was her **ear**.

Bhargav gagged. "What the hell—"

The ringmaster clapped. "Marvelous, isn't she?" he said cheerfully. "The girl who flies even after death!"

Jay stood abruptly. "Let's go. Enough."

They turned — but the entrance flap they'd come through was gone. The entire back wall of the tent was sealed tight, the fabric stretched like skin.

"Bapu…" Ritesh whispered. "Door kya gayi?"

Mehul's voice cracked. "We just came through there!"

The ringmaster's voice thundered behind them. "Leaving already? The night is still young!"

All lights went out.

Darkness.

Only the faint glow of the ring remained — and from it rose the **Joker**.

He wore a half-broken mask, one side smiling, the other burned away, revealing bone-white skin beneath. His laughter was deep, guttural, echoing around them as if the whole tent laughed along.

"Welcome, my friends," he said softly, stepping forward. "You bought the tickets… now you must stay."

The Joker's laughter rippled through the tent like something alive, crawling up the canvas and bouncing between the wooden beams. It wasn't human — it started as a chuckle, but then stretched, deepened, warped until it became a sound of **metal grinding against bone**.

The four friends stood frozen near the benches, the thick fog now coiling around their ankles like cold fingers. The crowd — or whatever passed for a crowd — still hadn't moved. Dozens of faces pointed toward the ring, blank and stiff. Someone's head tilted slightly — a slow, deliberate twitch.

"Jay…" Bhargav whispered. "Let's just… find another way."

Jay nodded, his throat dry. They backed away slowly. But the Joker stepped closer, the cracked bells on his hat jingling faintly. His eyes — if they were eyes — were hollow pits, yet glowing faintly red from within.

He stopped in the ring and raised his arms.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he roared. "Our guests tonight are… *alive!*"

The mannequins — the unmoving audience — all turned their heads at once.

Every. Single. One.

The motion was sharp, synchronized, accompanied by the faint creak of dry wood. Their mouths opened, wide and silent.

Mehul stumbled backward, his breath hitching. "O maa re! What the hell are these things!"

The Joker twirled. "They were just like you once," he said softly. "They came to watch the show. And now, they never leave."

The lights changed — now a **sickly green glow** filled the tent. The floor rippled, as though the earth itself was breathing. Somewhere, the sea roared faintly — close, too close — though they were still inside the tent.

Jay pulled Mehul by the arm. "Run. Right now."

They dashed toward the side of the tent. The fabric felt solid, like animal hide. Jay grabbed a metal pole and tried to tear through it. His hands slipped — it was damp, sticky. He looked down and saw **dark stains** — not water. Blood.

Ritesh yelled from behind, "There's another exit — that way!" He pointed toward a narrow passage behind the ring.

They ran.

As they passed, the Joker's laughter followed — louder, deeper. "Run, run, little flames! The night is young!"

The passage led into the **backstage area** — filled with torn costumes, broken cages, and decayed animal skeletons. The smell was unbearable — a mix of rot, seawater, and burnt rubber. A half-collapsed mirror reflected their faces, distorted by cracks.

"Arre Bhagwan," Mehul gasped, gagging. "Who keeps animals here?!"

Ritesh showed his phone's flashlight around. On the wall, written in smears of black paint, were words in **Gujarati**:

"એ અહીં મૃત્યુના સમુદ્રનું સર્કસ છે. એક વાર અંદર, કદી બહાર નહીં."

(*This is the Circus of the Sea of Death. Once inside, you never go out.*)

Bhargav's voice trembled. "Bapu… this isn't some show. We need to—"

Something moved behind the curtain. A soft scraping sound, like nails dragging across canvas.

They turned slowly.

From the darkness, **a lion** stepped out — or what remained of one. Its fur hung in strips, its eyes white and milky, its ribs showing through loose flesh. Chains clinked as it moved, dragging across the sand. Its mouth opened, and instead of a roar came a deep human groan — *"Chho…do…"*

Mehul screamed. "Run!"

The lion lunged, but its chain caught on a beam. Jay grabbed a wooden pole, swung — the pole splintered, striking bone. The beast shrieked, staggering back into shadow.

They burst through another curtain and found themselves in a **smaller tent**, lit by oil lamps. Inside were rows of old circus posters — each framed carefully.

Jay stopped, eyes wide.

Every poster showed **people** — performers, ringmasters, clowns — smiling brightly. But at the bottom of each was a name and a year. The most recent one said:

"The Great Cirque Samudra Presents: New Year's Eve – 2025"

Performers: Jay, Ritesh, Mehul, Bhargav.

The boys stared at the names in silence.

Mehul backed away, shaking his head violently. "Na… na, this is nonsense! Who made this?!"

Ritesh turned pale. "This… this can't be real."

A faint whisper drifted from behind them — many voices speaking in unison, low and hollow.

"Stay. Stay. The show must go on."

Jay turned and nearly collided with a figure — **the Ringmaster**, now standing inches from his face. His mouth was still smiling, but the skin around it had cracked, revealing darkness beneath.

"You see?" the Ringmaster said softly. "Everyone becomes part of the circus. Everyone performs forever."

He tilted his head. "Your act begins soon."

Jay shoved him aside — the man didn't resist; he fell apart like dried clay, collapsing into dust. The lamps flickered violently, then burst, plunging the room into darkness again.

A bell rang — distant, echoing — *Ting... Ting... Ting...*

"Midnight," whispered a voice from nowhere. "The new year begins."

The walls of the tent started to move — no, **breathe**. The fabric expanded and contracted, sighing like lungs. Shadows crawled across the walls, taking human shapes — acrobats swinging, animals pacing, dancers twirling — all silent, all wrong.

The boys ran again, desperate, slamming into walls that weren't there moments before.

"Jay! This way!" Bhargav shouted, spotting a flicker of light. They followed it — tripping over ropes, ducking under beams — until they emerged into the open air.

The sea wind hit their faces. They were outside. Or so they thought.

The tent stood behind them — but now, **it was much larger**, towering like a mountain. The sign over the gate glowed faintly: "*One Night Only — Forever.*"

The fog swirled thickly across the beach. The ocean looked black, the waves oddly still. In the distance, faint fireworks exploded — tiny bursts of color over Veraval. It was midnight.

Mehul fell to his knees. "We're out. We made it."

Jay looked around — the jeep was gone. The path they'd driven on was gone too. Only sand and darkness stretched in every direction.

Then — faintly — the sound of a **carousel** began again.

Ritesh turned toward the sea. "You hear that?"

From the waves, **lights** started to emerge — colored bulbs, spinning slowly, forming shapes.

A ferris wheel.

A tent.

A stage.

The circus wasn't behind them anymore. It was **on the sea.**

The Joker's voice came again, carried on the wind — distant yet clear:

"The show never ends, my friends. You bought the tickets… now perform."

For a long moment, none of them spoke. The fog hung heavy, the only sound the soft hiss of the sea licking the sand. The circus lights — reds, yellows, blues — shimmered on the

waves like reflections of a nightmare, rippling and reforming with every gentle current.

Mehul clutched Jay's arm. "Bapu… I swear on my maa, I'm not drunk anymore. You see that too, right?"

Jay didn't answer. He was staring at the ferris wheel slowly turning over the black water — yet no wind blew. The lights pulsed in rhythm with the crashing waves, and every revolution brought a faint sound of laughter from beneath the surface.

Ritesh turned, scanning the empty shore. "We go inland," he said quickly. "We keep walking till we hit the road."

They started moving, shoes sinking into the wet sand. The mist grew thicker again, curling around their legs, carrying a faint scent — **sweet and rotten**, like burnt sugar and decay.

The sound of the carousel grew louder behind them. The music box tune twisted, breaking into discordant notes. Then, through the fog, they saw **footprints** — dozens of them, leading inland, all pointing in the same direction they were headed.

"Maybe there are others," Bhargav whispered hopefully.

But as they followed, the footprints began to **sink**, pressed deep into the sand — as if whatever left them was growing heavier. Then they stopped abruptly. The last print was a deep **handprint**, fingers spread wide, pressed into the earth.

Mehul took a step back. "Na… na, let's go back to the beach. At least there's open air."

But when they turned, the beach was gone. In its place stretched an endless plain of **white sand**, shimmering

faintly. The sea had vanished — or perhaps it was never there.

Jay spun around. "What's happening?!"

A low voice drifted across the empty expanse — familiar, mocking.

"The show must continue…"

The ground trembled. In the distance, shapes began to emerge — **tents**, hundreds of them, blooming from the sand like giant mushrooms. Each one glowed from within, lights flickering. The wind carried laughter, screams, applause — an invisible audience roaring approval.

Ritesh grabbed Jay's shoulder. "We're in it again. We never left."

The nearest tent flap opened. Inside was a mirror — huge, standing alone. A flickering lantern hung above it.

Jay approached cautiously. His reflection stared back — but something was wrong. Behind him, in the reflection, he saw **rows of people** sitting in a circus tent. They weren't there in reality — only in the mirror. And among them sat **himself**, in clown makeup, smiling blankly.

Jay stumbled back. The reflection stayed still — still smiling.

Mehul whispered shakily, "This is… some dream. Haa, nightmare chhe. We'll wake up soon."

But his voice quivered. He didn't believe it.

Bhargav turned toward another tent nearby. It was filled with **cages** — each containing silhouettes that looked like animals. He walked closer, shining his flashlight. Inside one

cage was a tiger — its eyes glowing faintly. The light caught its fur — and Bhargav gasped.

The stripes on its body were made of **stitch marks**.

He stepped closer, heart pounding. The tiger's head turned toward him, creaking like a hinge. Its jaw fell open, and from inside came a human whisper:

"You shouldn't have come."

Bhargav screamed and stumbled back into the sand.

Jay rushed to him. "Bapu, enough! Everyone, we stay together!"

But the mist thickened again, swallowing their shapes one by one.

"Jay?" Mehul's voice echoed faintly. "Jay! Where are you?"

Jay turned in circles, his voice shaking. "Ritesh! Bhargav! Answer!"

Only the wind replied, carrying a faint giggle — that same Joker's laugh, now softer, more intimate.

The fog shifted. In front of Jay stood the **Joker**, arms outstretched, head tilted. His mask gleamed faintly, one half smiling, the other burned black.

"Looking for your friends?" he asked gently. "They're here. Everyone's here."

Jay clenched his fists. "What do you want?"

The Joker smiled wider, teeth too many, too sharp. "Nothing you didn't already give. You bought the tickets."

Jay took a step back. "You can have them, take the money—"

The Joker's tone hardened. "It's not about money. It's about the show."

He snapped his fingers. The mist cleared for a moment — and Jay saw them.

Mehul, Ritesh, and Bhargav — each standing inside separate glass cages, dressed in circus costumes. Ritesh wore a ringleader's coat, staring blankly ahead. Bhargav was in a lion tamer's outfit, whip dangling from his side. Mehul — his face painted white, a red grin stretching ear to ear — a clown.

They didn't move.

Jay banged on the glass. "Wake up! Wake up, yaar!"

No response. Only Mehul's head tilted slightly, his eyes rolling toward Jay. His mouth twitched. Then he whispered, barely audible:

"Run."

The Joker laughed. "Oh, he's funny even in death."

Jay turned, rage and terror boiling together. "Why us?! We just came to watch!"

The Joker's eyes burned red. "Everyone who sees the circus… *belongs* to it."

The lights around them flared — colors blinding, spinning — and suddenly Jay was standing in the center of a **ring**, spotlights burning on him.

The crowd roared — the mannequins again, clapping in hollow unison. The Ringmaster's voice echoed:

"Ladies and gentlemen, our next act — the boy who tried to escape!"

Jay stumbled backward, searching for an exit. There was none. The sand beneath him began to sink, pulling at his feet. The Joker stepped into the ring, juggling three skulls that glowed faintly in the dark.

"Your turn," he said softly.

Jay screamed as the sand swallowed him.

He fell — deeper, deeper — until he was submerged in darkness.

Then… silence.

When he opened his eyes, he was sitting in a chair. Around him, lights blinked faintly. He was in the **ticket booth**.

The same booth where it had all begun.

Outside, the sea stretched calmly under the moonlight. The circus tent stood silent and still. A road ran nearby — empty.

He looked down. In his hand were **four red tickets**.

The night had grown impossibly still. The fog that once danced now just hung in the air, thick and heavy, like a held breath. The sea was calm, too calm — not a ripple, not a whisper. Jay sat motionless in the wooden booth, his pulse pounding in his ears.

The tickets in his hand were damp. He could feel the faint texture of the Joker's face printed on them — embossed, almost alive under his fingertips. The lantern in the booth flickered, casting long, crooked shadows on the sand outside.

He turned slowly, eyes darting across the shoreline. The circus tent stood where it had been, perfectly still. No sound

came from within now — no drums, no applause, no screams. It looked abandoned, ancient.

"Mehul… Ritesh… Bhargav…" he whispered, his voice trembling.

No answer.

He stood, legs shaking, and stepped out of the booth. The sand beneath his shoes felt strange — too cold, too soft. He moved toward the tent cautiously, each footstep crunching louder than it should have.

When he reached the entrance, he noticed something that hadn't been there before — a **sign**, freshly painted, hanging above the flap:

"Next Show — Starts at Midnight."

Jay swallowed hard. The flap fluttered gently in the wind, though there was no wind. He reached out, pulled it open…

Nothing.

The tent was empty. No benches, no ring, no lights. Just a hollow space filled with silence. The smell of salt and rust was gone. Even the floor seemed wrong — too dry, too brittle, like paper.

He stepped inside.

"Hello?" he called. His voice echoed strangely, as though the tent were a cavern.

Then, faintly, a voice whispered behind him — right by his ear.

"Showtime."

Jay spun around — no one there. The flap had closed behind him.

He lunged for it, trying to pry it open, but his hands met solid surface — not cloth, but **glass**. The fabric shimmered like a reflection.

He stared.

Through the translucent wall, he could see the **booth** again — and inside it, someone was sitting. Someone wearing his face.

The figure turned its head slowly toward him. It smiled — that same crooked Joker's smile — and lifted its hand to wave.

Jay stumbled back, heart slamming in his chest. He turned — and froze.

The benches were back. The lights were back. The **crowd** was back.

Hundreds of faces, unmoving, watching him.

And there, in the center of the ring, was the **Joker**.

He stepped forward, bells jingling softly, his half-burned mask catching the glow of the lamps.

"Welcome back, Jay," he said softly. "You didn't really think you could leave, did you?"

Jay tried to speak, but his throat was dry. His knees gave way, and he fell to the sand.

The Joker crouched beside him. Up close, the smell was overwhelming — rot, seaweed, and something burning. His teeth gleamed faintly, each one sharp and uneven.

"Every year," the Joker whispered, "new faces find their way to Samudranagar. They come chasing the sea, the thrill, the night. They buy their tickets… and the circus grows."

He leaned closer. "You were just in time for the new season."

The crowd began to move — slow, mechanical applause. The lights spun faster, music swelling, the same broken carousel tune echoing in loops.

Jay looked down at his hands — the tickets were gone. In their place, he held a small brass **whistle**. The kind ringmasters used.

He looked up — the Joker was gone.

In his place stood the **Ringmaster**, smiling, coat gleaming red under the lights.

Jay opened his mouth, and the words slipped out before he realized he was speaking:

"Ladies and gentlemen… welcome to The Great Cirque Samudra."

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Somewhere deep inside, Jay screamed.

But only laughter came out.

Three days later, a group of fishermen from Kodinar reported seeing **lights offshore** near an abandoned stretch of beach. They claimed there was music — faint, like a distant fairground — drifting across the water around midnight.

When they went to investigate the next morning, they found tire tracks ending abruptly in the sand, near a small wooden **ticket booth**. Inside were four red tickets, neatly arranged.

The names printed on them were faded, but still visible:

Jay Patel

Ritesh Kothari

Mehul Bhatt

Bhargav Trivedi

The authorities dismissed it as a prank. Locals, however, whispered otherwise.

They said the circus of Samudranagar appears only on **New Year's Eve**, when the moon is high and the sea is still. They say you might see the faint glow of a ferris wheel over the waves if you look too long.

And if you ever hear faint laughter mixed with the sound of the tide —

turn away. Don't follow it. Don't look for the lights.

Because those who buy the tickets…

never leave the show.

The Island

The sea had been still for hours — a strange, unnatural calm that hung over the Indian Ocean like a held breath. Even the clouds above were motionless, as if time itself was waiting for something to happen. Flight **IN-247**, a small twin-engine passenger aircraft flying from Malé to Kochi, sliced through the silence at 18,000 feet.

Captain **Arjun Dev**, 39, a decorated pilot with twelve years of service, sat stiff in his seat, his hand instinctively tightening on the yoke. The radar ahead flickered once, twice, then died.

"Nav systems just went blind," said his co-pilot, **Rhea Sen**, frowning. "That's impossible, we're still 240 nautical miles out from the coast."

Arjun tapped the monitor, then checked his compass. The needle spun wildly in circles. The aircraft lights dimmed briefly — then steadied again. Static screamed through the comm line.

"Control, this is IN-247, experiencing system malfunction — do you read?"

No response. Just that faint, intermittent whispering static that almost — *almost* — sounded like words.

Rhea leaned closer. "Do you hear that?"

He did. A low, distorted murmur buried under the static — rhythmic, almost like *chanting*.

Arjun's jaw clenched. "We're diverting course until—"

A jolt slammed the plane. The entire fuselage shuddered violently, alarms blaring. Passengers screamed. The right engine coughed flame, then died. Within seconds, the aircraft began its slow spiral downwards.

"Brace for impact!" Arjun shouted, gripping the controls as the altimeter spun downward like a countdown.

The last thing he saw before the ocean rushed up was something dark beneath the waves — a shape that shouldn't have been there, like the outline of a **vast island**, unseen on any chart.

When Arjun awoke, the world was silent again — except for the sound of the waves. His head throbbed. The wreckage of the plane lay half-buried in white sand, twisted metal glinting in the moonlight. The sea glowed faintly blue, as if alive with tiny lights beneath its surface.

He staggered up. Around him, survivors moved like ghosts. There were fourteen in total — businessmen, tourists, a honeymooning couple, and a flight attendant, **Meera**. Rhea was alive too, limping but conscious. The smell of burnt fuel hung in the air.

"Where are we?" someone whispered.

Arjun turned slowly. The island stretched into darkness — jagged rocks, dense forest, and towering palms that swayed though there was no wind. The air itself felt thick, heavy, like breathing through damp cloth.

Rhea squinted toward the horizon. "No signals. No satellites. It's like this place doesn't exist."

They gathered what supplies they could from the wreckage — a few bottles of water, protein bars, a flare gun, and an emergency radio that only hissed with static. As night fell, they made a small fire on the beach.

No one spoke for a long time. Then Meera, her voice trembling, said, "Captain, I saw lights — in the trees. Someone's there."

He looked up. The forest beyond the beach loomed black and endless. And just for a heartbeat, he saw it too — faint pinpricks of light moving between the trees, like lanterns swaying in the dark.

"Stay together," he said quietly. "No one wanders off."

The first night began with unease. By midnight, the wind changed — carrying with it a strange smell, metallic and sweet, like rust and rot.

A man named **Dr. Prakash Menon**, a marine biologist, knelt by the shoreline, studying the glowing surf. "Bioluminescent plankton, maybe," he murmured. "Or something new."

Something *new.* The word hung heavy.

The sea hissed. The blue light pulsed — once, twice — and for a moment, the glow spread *inland*, running like veins under the sand, reaching toward their campfire before fading again.

They all felt it. The ground seemed to **breathe** beneath them.

Later that night, Arjun woke to the sound of someone screaming. He ran toward the forest's edge where the noise came from — found nothing but torn sand, and blood.

By dawn, **one was missing** — Prakash Menon. They found what was left of him an hour later, half-buried near the

shore. His body was contorted, eyes wide open, mouth frozen in a silent scream. His chest had been opened with surgical precision — ribs spread, organs gone.

Meera vomited into the sand. Rhea stared in horror. "What the hell did this to him?"

Arjun didn't answer. He only looked toward the forest again, where that faint flickering light moved — closer now.

By the second day, panic had set in. They argued about whether to venture into the woods or stay by the shore. The radio was still dead. The sun hung low and red all day, refusing to rise higher.

Rhea approached Arjun. "You're thinking it too, aren't you? This island… it wasn't on any chart. You saw the shape before we crashed."

He nodded. "It rose out of nowhere."

"Captain," Meera whispered, "Prakash said something before he went missing. He said the sand was whispering. I thought he was hallucinating."

That night, two more went missing. The honeymooning couple — their tent shredded, the sand soaked dark. They found the bodies in the morning — one without a face, the other hollowed out from within. There were no animal tracks, no human footprints.

But something *moved* in the trees — too fast to see, yet always watching.

On the third day, Rhea noticed something strange near the plane's wreckage. The metal around the fuselage had begun to corrode, as if eaten by acid. When Arjun touched it, it was warm — like skin.

They heard singing that evening. Low, distant, and rhythmic — like the sea itself was humming. The survivors huddled close as the sound grew louder, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

A fisherman among them, old **Nabeel**, whispered an old legend.

"My grandfather spoke of this place. He called it *Kaalapani Reef*. Said it was cursed. Sailors who see its glow vanish. The sea buries it when it's done feeding."

Meera shuddered. "Feeding?"

"The island eats," Nabeel said simply. "Not flesh. Not souls. It eats what makes you alive."

The fire sputtered out then, without wind. The night pressed in.

Arjun didn't sleep. Every instinct screamed that something was wrong with the very air. It felt *alive*, humming faintly against his skin.

Around 2 a.m., he heard Meera's voice outside the camp, calling him softly. He stepped out, but she wasn't there. Only the sound of the sea.

When he turned back, something stood at the edge of the trees — shaped like a person, but too tall, its limbs moving like smoke. It tilted its head slowly, like studying him. Then it retreated, melting into the dark.

He stood frozen, every nerve screaming.

The next morning, Meera was gone. Her footprints led to the trees and stopped abruptly.

Rhea broke down. “It’s picking us off. One every night. We have to leave. We build a raft, anything—”

Arjun nodded. “At dusk, we move.”

But by dusk, Nabeel had gone missing too.

When they entered the forest for the first time, the air changed. The canopy swallowed the light. The ground pulsed faintly underfoot. Strange growths clung to the trees — translucent pods filled with a viscous, glowing fluid. Inside one, Rhea swore she saw a human hand pressed against the membrane.

They kept moving, finding traces of ruins — stone idols half-buried in moss, carved with faces of open mouths and hollow eyes. In one clearing, they found a stone altar stained dark and fresh.

“This place was worshipped,” Arjun said quietly. “Or feared.”

The sea was audible even here, deep inland — that same rhythmic pull, like slow breathing.

They found an old ship bell hanging from a tree, rusted and green. Etched upon it were faint Sanskrit letters:

“To awaken it is to be seen.”

Rhea’s voice trembled. “Seen by what?”

The wind shifted. The forest groaned. And from somewhere deep within, they heard something massive **move.**

That night, there were only five of them left. They didn’t light a fire. They didn’t speak. The air tasted like blood and salt.

Around midnight, Rhea started gasping — clutching her chest, screaming that something was *inside her.* Arjun tried to hold her, but her body convulsed violently, and a dark liquid poured from her mouth. She collapsed, motionless, her skin pale and veined with black.

Inside her chest cavity, something twitched — then stilled.

Arjun staggered back, numb.

The survivors were down to four.

And from the sea, the lights began to rise — blue orbs floating upward, drifting inland like will-o'-the-wisps. When one passed near him, Arjun felt a coldness pierce through his bones. He heard whispers again — voices calling his name, in tones that were almost familiar.

He fell to his knees, trembling.

The island was *alive.*

And it was hungry.

The night dragged on, stretching minutes into eternities. Arjun's ears rang with the whispers — faint at first, then urgent, insistent, clawing at his sanity. The blue orbs floated nearer, weaving through the trees, their glow reflecting in the wet veins of Rhea's body. He could barely look at her. Her chest rose and fell once more, then went still. Her eyes, wide open, reflected the light — unseeing, yet aware.

He staggered back. His hands were slick with her blood. "I… I have to get out," he whispered, voice raw. But where? The forest around him pulsed as if breathing, moving subtly, shifting the landscape, every familiar landmark gone.

Arjun ran. Branches snagged his clothes, the soft ground squelched underfoot, as if the island itself tried to pull him

down. The whispers became louder, echoing from every direction. Names, commands, warnings — a chorus of the dead.

He stumbled into a clearing, and the ground opened slightly, a shallow pit now visible where sand hadn't been before. Inside lay bodies — not just the missing, but others he hadn't seen yet. They were arranged neatly, the flesh torn open, organs removed with precision, and yet some were partially intact, as if the island had sampled them, testing their essence. One corpse's mouth opened in a silent scream.

Arjun gagged. The orbs hovered over the pit, pulsing in rhythm with some internal heartbeat of the island. The sound of waves was deafening now, though the ocean itself was invisible. From the darkness at the edges of the clearing, he heard movement: something large, undulating, wet. Its shape shifted, sometimes humanoid, sometimes amorphous, like black smoke folded over muscle and bone.

He ran blindly, crashing through trees and undergrowth. Behind him, the whispers turned into screams. Screams in multiple voices — the dead? The living? He couldn't tell. He tripped over a root, sprawling across damp moss.

Something passed over him — cold, heavy, smelling of rot and salt. Arjun looked up, and for a heartbeat, he saw it: a figure taller than a man, skin pale, stretched tight over impossible angles, with eyes that seemed to reflect the entire night sky. Its mouth opened impossibly wide. Inside, he saw shapes moving — like the bodies of the dead, still struggling. Then it lunged, and he ran again, every step fuelled by pure terror.

By dawn, exhaustion had slowed him. The forest thinned near the shore. The wreckage of the plane lay ahead, almost

beckoning him. But something was wrong — the plane's hull, though intact in structure, had begun to move, subtle yet deliberate, like it had grown roots into the sand. He froze. Then he saw the faint glow of the ocean beyond.

Desperate, he clambered to a small fishing skiff nearby, half-buried in debris. He kicked it into the water, sinking chest-deep into the cold waves. The whispers persisted, now underwater, echoing in his skull. He paddled blindly toward the faint line of horizon, away from the forest that pulsed and breathed behind him.

The sea churned unnaturally, waves rising high and falling without rhythm. Faintly, in the distance, he saw the shape of the island — jagged cliffs and towering palms. Then, as he blinked, it vanished. Not in mist, not in fog — just gone, leaving only endless ocean. He froze, heartbeat hammering. He paddled on, but the memory of those blue orbs drifting inland burned in his mind.

Two days later, delirious, dehydrated, and sunburned, Arjun reached the coast of Kerala. Fishermen found him clinging to driftwood, mumbling about the island that ate people, about blue lights and whispers that called him by name.

Authorities listened, shocked. The story sounded insane, a hallucination, but the burns on his body, the torn nails, the thin layer of dried blood, were real. His eyes were wide and haunted — a man who had seen something no one else could understand.

When he returned with a team of Navy personnel to the exact coordinates — **9°14′ S, 73°32′ E**, the latitude and longitude of the island — the ocean was empty. No island,

no reefs, no signs of wreckage. Only deep, undisturbed water stretched for miles. Satellite scans revealed nothing.

A Navy officer frowned. "Are you sure this was it?"

Arjun's hands shook. "Yes… I saw it. Every night… it… it *ate them.* It's alive. It moves. It *hides*."

They searched for weeks. Nothing. No wreckage, no trace of the survivors except for him. And yet, every night, in coastal towns near the southern tip of India, fishermen swore they saw faint blue lights floating inland from the ocean — small, distant, like lanterns drifting through mist. And some whispered of voices calling names, voices too familiar, too intimate, to be ignored.

Arjun never flew again. He avoided the ocean, the coast, even maps that might hint at the Indian Ocean. But sometimes, when he closed his eyes at night, he could see the island — Kaalapani Reef — breathing, pulsing, waiting. And he could hear it:

A low, melodic hum, like the tide… and the sound of a thousand mouths opening at once.

Some nights, in his dreams, he wakes to find his hands covered in blood that isn't his, organs missing from someone who never existed, and the whispers calling for him to return.

He knows, in the deepest part of him, that Kaalapani Reef has not vanished. It never will. It waits beneath the waves, moving, watching, hungry. And one day, it will rise again.

Until then, the ocean keeps its secret.

The lights will return. The whispers will return. And the island will be hungry again.

The Merchant of Riches

In the golden age of Baghdad, when minarets kissed the skies and the Tigris flowed like molten silver, there lived a merchant unlike any other. His name was Emir Jaleel, though few dared speak it aloud. He was a man of unimaginable wealth, a collector of treasures from every corner of the world, the master of palaces that shimmered like visions under the relentless desert sun. Caravans laden with rare silks from distant lands, jars of incense fragrant enough to make the city dizzy, spices that scorched the tongue, and gemstones mined from mountains so remote that only whispers spoke of them—all belonged to him.

Yet it was not this wealth that inspired awe. It was the merchant himself, unageing, unbroken by time. His hair remained dark, untainted by silver; his eyes burned with the sharp vitality of a man unbound by decades; his skin bore neither scar nor wrinkle. Baghdad's populace murmured behind their hands, wondering, questioning, whispering legends. Some said Jaleel was blessed by angels, others whispered he had struck a deal with darker forces, yet no man could tell the truth.

The sultan, a ruler with suspicion in his veins and envy in his heart, could not abide it. How could a man accumulate riches beyond kings while time spared him entirely? He summoned his most cunning spy, Farid, a man whose gaze was as sharp as his mind and whose loyalty was measured only by ambition. Farid was given a single task: uncover the

secret of Emir Jaleel. Find the source of his wealth. Unravel the mystery of his agelessness.

Farid's first weeks were fruitless. Jaleel's life was a careful weave of business, pleasure, and secrecy. By day he walked the streets of Baghdad in splendid attire, his presence commanding respect, even fear. By night, he vanished aboard a singular ship anchored along the Tigris. Its hull was black as obsidian, reflecting neither moonlight nor star, and yet it seemed alive, pulsing subtly with a presence that defied understanding. No matter how many palaces he owned, no matter how many mistresses he indulged, he returned to this ship every night, as though bound by chains invisible to mortal eyes.

Farid watched, following him through markets and caravans, across bridges and through alleys, noting the precision of his movements. Each evening, as the sun's gold bled into twilight, Jaleel would disappear, slipping silently onto his ship. Attempts to board it were thwarted by some unspoken law of its construction: doors that should have opened remained shut, corridors stretched impossibly, and the air itself seemed to resist intrusion. Sailors moved like shadows, obeying Jaleel with devotion that was unnatural. The spy began to suspect that the merchant's secret was not mere cunning or luck, but something far older, far darker.

At night, Farid would linger at the riverbank, peering at the black silhouette of the vessel. He began to hear it: a faint hum, almost imperceptible, rising and falling with the motion of the Tigris. On quiet nights, he swore it spoke, uttering words in tongues he did not understand, drawing him closer, filling his mind with vertigo. Shadows flickered across the water, and he sometimes glimpsed figures moving beneath the deck, bending and stretching

unnaturally, yet disappearing whenever he attempted to approach. The spy's obsession grew, threading through his waking thoughts, invading his dreams, leaving him trembling with the knowledge that the ship and its master were bound by forces beyond mortal reckoning.

Weeks passed, and Farid's vigilance grew more intense. He followed Jaleel to distant palaces, watched him inspect caravans of exotic goods, and noted that no wealth was ever spent in a way that weakened his fortunes. Yet always, night returned Jaleel to the ship. And always, Farid wondered, what lay in its shadowed hull? What unseen power preserved the merchant's life and drew his wealth from the unknown? The answers teased him, whispered in the Tigris's gentle lapping, yet they remained just out of reach.

It was during one such vigil that Farid decided he could wait no longer. If the truth lay in that vessel, it would be revealed, whatever the cost. And so, one moonless night, he began preparing. Torches were gathered, oil poured into hidden vessels, and a plan was formed—a plan that would alter the course of Baghdad's history, and the fates of those who dwelt within it.

Jaleel's voyages were the stuff of legend, though few in Baghdad had ever witnessed them. He crossed seas that shimmered like liquid starlight, sailing past horizons where the sun seemed hesitant to rise. His caravans returned with treasures impossible to describe: silks that felt warm, as if carrying a heartbeat; spices that hummed faintly when crushed; gemstones that flickered like captured fragments of the night sky. Merchants whispered that the air around his goods sometimes carried a subtle vibration, like the low hum of some invisible instrument, and that those who handled

them felt an inexplicable vertigo, a fleeting glimpse of something vast and unknowable.

It was always the ship that ferried these marvels. Sailors swore it was no ordinary vessel. At times, it seemed to move without wind or current, drifting across waters that should have held it fast. Lanterns placed along the hull would dim or extinguish as if swallowed by shadows, and the air around the vessel pulsed, almost imperceptibly, as if alive. On moonless nights, a faint, resonant hum rose from the hull, vibrating through bone and nerve alike. Some claimed to glimpse shapes beneath the deck—tall, silent silhouettes bending and twisting, vanishing when approached. Even the water around the ship seemed to darken unnaturally, absorbing reflections, holding secrets.

Farid became a shadow within this unfolding mystery. He trailed Jaleel relentlessly, noting every gesture, every inspection of caravan or coin. By day, he hid among merchants and street throngs; by night, he lingered near the riverbank, staring at the black silhouette of the ship, listening to the low hum that had begun to seep into his very bones. Dreams invaded him—dreams in which he floated within the ship's hold, the planks stretching impossibly, corridors twisting into angles that defied reason, figures silently observing, whispering words he could almost comprehend, yet could not. Sometimes he awoke to find faint scratches on his arms, or strange, transient burns, as if the ship had marked him for trespassing in imagination.

One night, as he watched the ship, a sudden flicker of movement caught his eye. A figure moved across the deck, unnaturally fluid, bending like smoke, yet unmistakably human. Jaleel's silhouette followed it calmly, as though conversing in silence. Farid's heart hammered; he thought to

approach, but the river itself seemed to resist, the currents shifting in ways that blocked any attempt to reach the ship. He recoiled, realizing that the merchant's dominion extended beyond the material world. The ship was not merely a vessel—it was a boundary, a threshold between the seen and unseen, and Jaleel was its master.

Farid's obsession deepened. He could think of nothing else: the merchant's wealth, his undying youth, the uncanny vessel that dominated the river. He began to track Jaleel's every movement with the precision of a scholar and the desperation of a man possessed. Days passed in fevered observation; nights stretched into sleepless vigil. Whispers of the city seemed to echo the hum of the ship, and shadows along the Tigris appeared to twist unnaturally whenever Jaleel's figure approached. Even the sailors grew uneasy; some muttered that their master did not belong wholly to the human world, that the ship itself breathed, watching, waiting.

Jaleel, despite the layers of luxury and ceremony surrounding him, remained private and inscrutable. He never lingered in his palaces beyond necessity, always returning to the river at dusk, always aboard the vessel when night fell. Farid could see the logic: the ship was the source of the merchant's power, the wellspring of his fortune, the secret of his unageing form. And yet the closer he drew, the more the boundaries of reality seemed to fray. He felt an almost magnetic pull toward the vessel, a dangerous curiosity that made his blood run cold.

He began to notice patterns—how the water around the ship seemed to bend moonlight unnaturally, how lanterns flickered with an intelligence that defied physics, and how the hum intensified as Jaleel stepped upon the deck. On

occasions, he thought he saw figures moving just beneath the surface of the hull, silhouetted against some faint inner glow. There was no sound save for the whispering hum, yet Farid felt them watching, their gaze more invasive than any human scrutiny.

The spy's nights became sleepless, his thoughts invaded by impossible angles and fleeting glimpses of shadowed corridors. He began speaking little, wandering Baghdad in a half-trance, his mind consumed by the impossible rhythm of the ship, by the alien patience of Jaleel's presence, by the secrets that must lie in the vessel's dark heart. It was during one of these vigils, as the moonless night pressed upon the river, that Farid made his decision. If the ship held the secret of wealth and unending youth, he would uncover it. And if necessary, he would destroy it, for the world could not allow a mortal man to cheat both time and fortune without consequence.

Night after night, Farid watched the vessel, and each night the sense of unreality deepened. The ship did not merely exist—it **dominated the river**, bending shadows and reflections to its will. Lanterns swung in the hands of unseen sailors, yet no wind blew. Waves lapped at the hull in silence, yet their rhythm matched the hum Farid had begun to feel in his chest, low and insistent, like a heartbeat not his own. Sometimes, he thought he saw glimpses of another world beneath the water, faintly illuminated, corridors and chambers twisting impossibly beneath the hull, populated by shapes that crouched and rose as if breathing in rhythm with the vessel itself. And always, Jaleel moved upon it with the ease of one returning home, calm, unhurried, as though the boundaries between ship and man, between reality and some hidden dimension, were indistinguishable.

Farid's obsession began to consume him. Days were spent following the merchant, nights at the riverbank, mind straining to decipher the impossible. His dreams invaded his waking hours—visions of endless decks, corridors spiralling into infinity, shadows with impossible angles, whispering words in languages no human tongue could form. He awoke trembling, sometimes with scratches on his arms, sometimes with the sensation of hands grazing his back though he was alone. The city itself seemed altered in his perception. Walls shifted subtly when he passed; streetlights flickered without reason; reflections in puddles seemed to watch him.

One evening, he saw it. From the riverbank, he glimpsed Jaleel descend the gangplank, moving through smoke that had no source. Beneath the deck, figures moved in the flicker of shadows—tall, silent, bending as if to acknowledge a master. The ship pulsed faintly, the hum rising to a vibration that seemed to crawl along his nerves and bones. He felt a pull, irresistible, drawing him toward the vessel as if the water itself conspired to deliver him into its dark embrace. He stumbled back, terror washing over him in waves, yet fascination clung like a fever. He understood with terrifying clarity: the merchant's unageing youth, his wealth, his dominion—**all were bound to this vessel**.

Days passed, and Farid's patience frayed. He spoke less, wandered the streets in a near-trance, barely eating, barely sleeping, consumed by the magnetic pull of the ship and the unnatural perfection of Jaleel's existence. He began noting patterns: how the air above the hull shimmered when the merchant stepped on deck, how the hum seemed to rise when certain coins were touched, how shadows twisted unnaturally around the ship, following the rhythm of some invisible master. His men whispered that he was changing—

gaunt, pale, speaking to himself, eyes wild and darting. But Farid could not stop. He **had to know**. He had to see the secret.

And then, one night, he acted. Jaleel had ventured into the city for trade, leaving the riverbank quiet, the moonless sky swallowing the black silhouette of the ship. Farid gathered men loyal to him alone and approached, torches in hand, heart hammering in anticipation and dread. The air itself seemed thicker near the vessel, humid with an invisible presence, vibrating faintly in time with the hum that now filled his head. As the torches touched the hull, the wood writhed subtly, bending like living matter. Smoke hissed and curled unnaturally, not entirely caught in fire, as if the flames were participating in a slow, deliberate ritual.

The river pulsed as if aware, carrying faint whispers that tugged at Farid's mind. Shapes moved beneath the deck—elongated, bending, watching silently. Farid's courage wavered, but obsession and duty propelled him forward. The fire climbed hungrily, twisting colors impossible to name—blues, greens, and sickly purples—that danced across the river's black surface. The hum intensified, vibrating through his chest, bones, and mind, until he could no longer distinguish himself from the world around him. It was alive, **the ship was alive**, and yet it yielded slowly to the destruction.

At the stroke of midnight, Jaleel returned. He moved through smoke and shadow with calm inevitability, as though he had anticipated every flame, every crack of wood, every flicker of the river. Farid froze, confronted with a quiet horror that eclipsed triumph. For in Jaleel's calm, he saw the truth: this vessel was older than any man, stranger than any

force known, and the merchant had been its master, bound and preserved by a covenant beyond comprehension.

As the ship burned fully, the city seemed to shiver. Jaleel's palaces—marble towers, gilded halls, fragrant gardens—dissolved under the moonlight. Gold crumbled to dust, silks evaporated into mist, gemstones drifted like motes of light. Reality itself had been altered. Farid fell to his knees, understanding that the destruction was not mere fire but a cosmic reckoning, a severing of ties between mortal ambition and something far older, far darker.

Jaleel stumbled forward, transformed in an instant. The vitality that had defied decades fled, leaving frail flesh stretched thin over fragile bones. His hands trembled, his back bent, his legs gave way, and coughs wracked his body. Where once there had been a man untouched by time, now stood an old, broken figure. He sank to the stone floor, chest heaving, voice raspy yet still holding a flicker of pride.

"I… I owed all to it," he whispered, eyes burning faintly. "The ship… it was beyond men, beyond wealth, beyond time. Every coin, every gem, every treasure I possessed, every day of youth I retained—it came from that vessel. It preserved me, protected me, and demanded my obedience. I could not leave it. I could not reveal it. And now…"

Farid, trembling, knelt beside him. The Tigris whispered faintly in a language no mortal could understand, carrying echoes of vanished corridors and shadows that had marked both merchant and spy. The sultan watched silently, neither triumphant nor cruel, as the city continued, ignorant of the forces that had passed through its streets. Jaleel remained, broken, frail, a relic of ambition and secrecy, a living testament to the price of cheating time. The river

remembered, the shadows remembered, and the vanished ship lingered in memory alone—a warning that mortal men should never seek to command forces beyond their reckoning.

The flames devoured the ship with a sound that was neither wood nor water, but something older, something that resonated with the pulse of the world itself. Smoke rose in twisting columns, curling into the night like serpents made of shadow. The air above the Tigris shimmered, thick and trembling, carrying whispers in languages no living man could speak. Lanterns flickered along the shore as if acknowledging some ancient rhythm, and the water itself pulsed, vibrating faintly, almost sentiently. Farid watched, heart hammering, as the hull twisted, bent, and finally surrendered to the fire—but even in its destruction, it refused to burn quietly. The hum that had haunted him for weeks swelled, deep and resonant, filling every corner of his mind. He felt it crawl along his spine, vibrating bones, nerves, and thoughts, and he realized with a shiver that he was witnessing something far beyond mortal comprehension.

And then, as the last plank of the hull succumbed to flame, the world itself seemed to react. The palaces of Jaleel—marble towers, gilded halls, jewelled gardens—shimmered briefly in the moonlight, as if resisting the inevitable, and then dissolved. Marble crumbled into dust, gold turned to air, silks evaporated in motes of mist, and gemstones drifted upward, scattering into the night sky like fireflies fleeing some unseen predator. The city's streets, which had known wealth and grandeur beyond imagination, now appeared ordinary, mundane, almost as if reality had corrected itself after centuries of imbalance. Farid fell to his knees,

trembling, for he understood: they had not merely destroyed a ship—they had severed a covenant older than any mortal law, broken a secret that should have never been revealed.

Farid swallowed hard, the realization of the true magnitude of his actions pressing into him. The flames that had consumed the ship had not merely destroyed wood—they had undone the fabric of Jaleel's unnatural life. Wealth, power, youth, and the unspoken covenant with forces beyond comprehension had been erased in a single, devastating act. He felt a shiver, a recognition that some forces, once invoked, leave marks that cannot be healed.

The Tigris whispered along the riverbank, its waters smooth yet carrying the faintest traces of the ship's lost presence. It spoke in a language that Farid did not understand, yet he felt its meaning in the tremor of his chest and the prickling of his skin. Somewhere, deep within the currents, echoes of corridors and shadowed figures remained, observing, waiting, indifferent. The river remembered what mortals could not, and the night air carried that remembrance into every silent corner of the city.

Jaleel's eyes met Farid's, a fleeting clarity breaking through the haze of frailty. "You… you sought the truth," he whispered, a ghost of a smile on his cracked lips. "And yet… the truth carries its own burden. You have seen what it can do, what it takes. Beware, Farid… for some mysteries are eternal. Some powers… cannot be commanded, only witnessed. And even in witnessing… they linger."

Farid felt a cold weight settle upon him, a realization that the world had shifted under his hands. The merchant's wealth, the grandeur of palaces, the treasures that had inspired envy across kingdoms—all were gone, returned to a balance he

could barely comprehend. And yet, the vessel's presence, its covenant, the hum and pulse of its dark heart, lingered in the shadows, in the river, in the night. It was a presence that had been felt, remembered, and though invisible, eternal.

The spy rose slowly, legs weak, heart still pounding with the memory of what he had seen. Jaleel remained on the floor, a man returned to mortality, his body fragile, yet his gaze holding the weight of centuries, of knowledge that no mortal mind could fully contain. The sultan's eyes swept across the empty streets where palaces had stood, across the silent river, and for a moment, even he was quiet, feeling the gravity of an event that transcended human law and human comprehension.

The city would continue. Traders would argue, children would play along the Tigris banks, and the sun would rise over minarets, oblivious to the covenant that had been broken. But Farid knew that somewhere, in the hum beneath the river, in the shadows that moved just beyond sight, a memory persisted. The ship, though destroyed, left its mark: a warning etched into the world, a reminder of the fragile boundary between mortal ambition and forces beyond reckoning.

Jaleel's final words came, faint yet resonant, carried as much for Farid as for the river itself. "Wealth, life, youth… are not gifts to be taken lightly. Some powers demand obedience, and when that obedience is broken, all returns to the nothing from whence it came. Remember… always remember."

And with that, the frail merchant fell silent. His life, once a tapestry of grandeur and impossible vitality, had returned to the natural order. Farid, standing by the riverbank, felt the lingering resonance in his chest, the faint hum now a

memory but never truly gone. The city slept unaware, the river whispered eternal secrets, and the shadows along its banks waited, patient and eternal, bearing silent witness to the price paid for ambition, secrecy, and the fleeting allure of power beyond human measure.

In Baghdad, the Tigris flowed, silver and serene under the moonlight, remembering a ship that should never have existed, a man who had walked through centuries unscathed, and a spy who had dared to uncover a truth beyond comprehension. And though centuries would pass, and the city would forget, the river—and the night—would never let it fade entirely from memory.

Uninstall

Bangalore's rain always arrived without warning—sheets of water slashing down over glass towers, auto-rickshaws splashing through muddy roads, traffic choking like a monster gasping for breath. That night was no different: a thunderstorm rolled over the city, shaking windows in high-rise apartments and shrouding the streets beneath a cold grey haze.

Inside **Trinity Bellwoods Residency in Indiranagar**, sixteen-year-old **Rhea Mehta** sat cross-legged on her bed, earphones plugged in, scrolling through reels. Her parents were asleep, the rain drowning the distant sounds of traffic. The clock glowed 12:47 AM with an uneasy stillness.

And then, without warning, her phone screen flickered.

The Instagram feed froze. The display warped into a distorted static pattern, and a notification popped up—no app name, no sender, just a single line of text in glitching red letters:

"You have been chosen."

Rhea frowned, swiped it away, and the phone instantly shut down. She pressed the power button, but instead of rebooting normally, the screen lit up with a pitch-black background. A rotating spiral shimmered at the center, pulling her gaze towards it like gravity itself.

A soft metallic whisper seeped through the speakers:

"Are you ready to see the truth?"

Rhea blinked rapidly. Something in the sound made her head feel heavy, like hands pressing against her temples. Her finger trembled over the YES button that appeared beneath the spiral.

She didn't remember clicking it.

The moment her finger touched the glass, her pupils constricted sharply. Her breath slowed. Her limbs stopped responding to her brain. She stared rigidly forward, trapped inside herself.

The screen flashed violently white, then red, as an unseen voice hissed through her skull:

"Begin with the ones closest to you. Cleanse them. Win the game."

Her hand moved without permission. She walked to her parents' room. She picked up her father's cricket bat from the corner. And with a dead, mechanical stillness, she brought it down on his skull.

The screams that followed were drowned by thunder.

By the time neighbours broke the door and police arrived, both her parents lay in pools of blood. Rhea stood motionless, bat sliding slowly from her fingers, eyes blank, a faint smile twitching at the corners of her lips.

When the investigating officer asked what happened, she responded in a hollow monotone:

"I finished the first level."

And then she collapsed.

News channels swarmed like vultures, dissecting the event endlessly—schizophrenia, psychotic break, drug influence,

online challenge—but no explanation felt right. Police seized her phone, but every record had been wiped, the storage unreadable. Cybercrime ran deep forensic scans. Nothing.

Except for one thing.

A tiny metallic SIM-card-shaped tag lay taped inside the phone case, etched with an angular logo—an 'A' sharp enough to resemble a blade.

It contained no chip. No circuitry. No traceable manufacturing source.

Just a cold, perfect silence.

The case was quietly buried to avoid panic. But within five days, it exploded again.

Four killings. Four different neighbourhoods—Jayanagar, Whitefield, Hebbal, JP Nagar. Children between twelve and seventeen. All murdered their families. All survived. All repeated the same cryptic whisper:

"The app made me do it."

The city spiralled into hysteria overnight. Schools shut down. WhatsApp groups overflowed with warnings. Parents confiscated phones. Police issued advisories banning unknown links and controlling screen time.

But the app spread like a virus—not through Play Stores or known servers, but invisibly, jumping through Bluetooth, AirDrop, Wi-Fi Direct, file-share clones. Students didn't download it; **it arrived.** Shared silently through proximity.

The more people feared it, the faster it propagated.

Rumours raced like wildfire:

"It shows you your darkest fear."

"It hypnotizes you through sound."

"It copies your voice and talks to you."

"There's a reward if you win the game."

They whispered its name with trembling excitement.

REDROOM.AI

No logo. No trace. No developer.

Just death.

Inspector **Aarav Sen**, chief of Bangalore Cyber Crime, was assigned full command. A rational man, a hard realist, he refused to believe ghost stories. But the eyes of the children he interrogated—the cold, robotic emptiness—invaded his dreams. They answered questions like machines. No remorse, no confusion, no emotion. Each described the same experience:

The vortex.

The whispering voices.

The command to kill.

Aarav noticed something disturbing: every child had been academically pressured, mentally fragile, or socially isolated. The app wasn't random.

It was hunting vulnerability.

The night that changed everything took place at **Lakewood International School** in Sarjapur. The morning assembly bell rang. Students walked calmly toward the courtyard.

Then suddenly, more than thirty of them froze. Phones buzzed simultaneously. Screens glowed with the spiral. A sound like metallic chanting filled the air.

And then they attacked.

They picked up stones from the garden bed, iron bars from the construction shed, scissors from pencil cases. They moved rigidly, eyes glassy, faces expressionless. Teachers screamed and ran, but the students followed like a pack of silent wolves, striking with brutal precision.

By the time police arrived, the school grounds looked like a battlefield of shattered bodies.

Twenty-three adults dead.

Dozens injured.

Not a scratch on the children.

Every phone screen displayed a single phrase:

"Phase One Complete."

Then they all shut down simultaneously, self-erasing.

Only one corrupted audio fragment survived digital repair—an electronically warped voice saying:

"Phase Two: cleanse the roots."

The city went into lockdown. Curfew fell over Bangalore for the first time in history for reasons other than riots. Police patrolled streets with sirens off. The government ordered mandatory confiscation of student devices. Cybercrime built firewalls and electromagnetic isolation zones.

Homes turned into war bunkers with families sleeping in shifts.

And still the app spread.

Aarti and Dev, parents of fourteen-year-old **Krish**, believed they had protected him. They disabled the Wi-Fi. Locked

away every device. Monitored him around the clock. They were terrified of the news, terrified of their own son, terrified of sleep.

But evil didn't need a network.

It needed proximity.

Krish received the app from a friend during tuition, transferred through Bluetooth before anyone saw. He kept it hidden. Waited. At 3 AM, he woke with a jolt, eyes unfocused. Something instructed him silently. He walked to the kitchen and took out a butcher's knife.

But his father awoke at the sound of movement. When he saw his son's trance-like expression, he realized instantly.

He wrestled the knife away, shouting for his wife, tears streaming. Krish fought with unnatural strength, his voice flat:

"Let me go. I need to finish. They're watching."

They sedated him and called police. But before collapsing, Krish whispered to Aarav:

"We're only the controllers. Someone else is playing."

Aarav felt his stomach drop.

There was no psychology left in this carnage. This was engineering.

The breakthrough came accidentally. During a raid on a coaching centre in Marathahalli that had seen unusual activity, police recovered twenty-three discarded SIM-card-tags from a dustbin—the same metallic shards found with every killer. But this time, they scanned differently.

They emitted **short-range EM pulses**, capable of triggering **neural interference patterns** when placed close to the skull.

Mind-control hardware disguised as metal scrap.

Someone was distributing them deliberately through student campuses.

And the app was only the trigger.

The horror was far bigger.

Aarav launched the largest coordinated sweep in Bangalore police history—EM scanners, student interrogations, phone confiscations, cybersecurity isolation, and psychological support teams. Helplines flooded. Children were hospitalized under sedation to prevent violence.

And still, every night, someone screamed.

One evening, as storm clouds gathered again over the skyline, Aarav met with a group of parents in a school auditorium, explaining the operation. Fear crackled in the room like electricity.

"We must collect every student phone in the city," he said. "Not ask for cooperation—**enforce** it."

Parents argued, panicked, bargaining against disbelief.

Then suddenly, one mother's phone buzzed sharply in her handbag.

She froze.

The auditorium lights flickered. Every phone in the room vibrated simultaneously—including devices switched off. One by one their screens lit up with the vortex spiral. A thick metallic sound flooded the hall like a demonic chant echoing through unseen speakers.

The app wasn't on the phones.

It was **broadcasting through proximity signals**.

The nearest students stood abruptly. Their pupils shrank. They reached for anything that could be used as a weapon—water bottles, chairs, pens turned to daggers.

Parents screamed and rushed toward exits. Police tackled the children, pinning them down with desperate force. Some children bit through their own cheeks, blood pouring, eyes unfocused, whispering the same phrase:

"Begin the cleansing."

Aarav grabbed one of the glowing phones and hurled it to the ground, smashing it. The screen cracked, flickered, and turned off. The child nearest him collapsed instantly, gasping as if waking from a nightmare.

"Destroy them!" Aarav roared. "Destroy every phone!"

The auditorium erupted in chaos—parents smashing devices, screens exploding under heels, glass splintering. One by one, the signals went dark. Silence fell, thick and suffocating.

The survivors wept uncontrollably. Children trembled in shock.

The app had lost the battle—temporarily.

By the next morning, a city-wide emergency was declared. Over **two million phones** were confiscated from students across Bangalore. Police destroyed them in industrial crushers. Families volunteered phones willingly, terrified of losing their children. Schools reopened under strict surveillance.

For three months, peace returned.

Children went back to laughing.

Families slept without trembling.

Normalcy breathed again.

The tragedy faded into headlines of the past.

But evil waits.

It does not disappear.

It evolves.

One foggy November morning, at a coffee shop in Koramangala, college student **Diya Rao** sat with friends, sipping hot chocolate, scrolling on her brand-new phone—a replacement after the government program. She traded memes, joked about exam pressure, and rolled her eyes at the old news articles still circulating.

"People love drama," she laughed. "As if an app could kill someone. Brainwashing through a screen? Seriously?"

Her friend shook her head nervously.

But Diya froze.

Her screen flickered.

A new notification appeared.

This time, not red—elegant silver letters sliding smoothly across black, like ink spreading under water:

"WELCOME TO MIRRORWORLD."

No download. No install history. No request for permission.

Just an opening screen with a polished silver mirror effect reflecting her face, distorted into something darker, hollow-eyed.

A soft voice whispered through the speaker, calm and inviting:

"Are you ready to see who you really are?"

Her pupils tightened.

Her fingers twitched.

Her breath froze.

And far above, from the rooftop speakers of Koramangala's traffic lights, a soft scanning frequency whined through the city—barely audible, like mosquitoes humming under the skin.

Phones all around began to light up.

One by one.

Across tables.

Across cafés.

Across schools.

Every screen displayed the same message:

"Level One Begins."

Somewhere in a hidden control room of blinking servers and silent operators, someone watched through a wall of monitors streaming real-time brainwave data from thousands of newly activated users.

A slow, deliberate voice spoke into a microphone:

"Let's begin again."

And Bangalore held its breath.

Because the nightmare was not over.

It had only just upgraded.

The Therapist

Dr. Manas Joshi had always believed that the mind could be measured, quantified, and understood. Mumbai's elite had come to rely on him, for he had a knack for dissecting the human psyche, for translating chaos into patterns, and for reducing fear to formulas. Superstitions, folklore, ghosts—these were entertaining stories, nothing more.

His life reflected that order. His wife, Dr. Meera Joshi, shared his passion for psychiatry and his analytical mind. Their six-year-old son, Kunal, was an endless bundle of energy, laughter ringing through their Malabar Hill apartment.

"Manas, take a break," Meera said one rainy Friday evening. "Let's go out, just us, the three of us. No work. No patients. Just a drive."

He smiled, though reluctantly. "Alright. But no traffic chaos this time. You know the Western Express is a nightmare in the rains."

Kunal jumped in the backseat, waving a small plastic car. "Daddy, we can race!"

Manas glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "No racing on the highway, Kunal. You know the rules."

The monsoon rains had slicked the roads. Mumbai, always chaotic, now glistened with dangerous beauty. Rain fell in sheets, windshield wipers struggling to keep pace. Manas kept a careful eye on the traffic, glancing at his son and wife. For a few brief moments, he allowed himself to forget the

world outside: the hospitals, the files, the relentless pressure of being the city's most trusted psychiatrist.

Then it happened.

A truck, veering suddenly, collided with their lane. Manas swerved instinctively, braking hard. The screech of tires, a deafening crunch of metal, and a blinding flash of light. His body was thrown forward, then backward, and the world went black.

When Manas woke, he was surrounded by smoke and the acrid stench of burnt rubber. His body screamed in pain. His first thought was of Meera and Kunal.

"Meera? Kunal?" His voice was hoarse, trembling.

The silence was absolute. His hands fumbled through the wreckage, grasping at twisted metal and broken glass. Then he saw it—both his wife and son were gone. Forever.

The weeks that followed were a haze of grief, medical procedures, and legal formalities. Police reports, insurance claims, hospital visits—it was all mechanical, a checklist he moved through with his body while his mind stayed suspended in shock.

One night, he sat alone in the apartment, the rain pattering against the windows. The silence was unbearable. He could still hear Kunal's laughter in his ears, Meera's soft voice reminding him to slow down, to breathe.

He shook his head. "It's… it's just stress. Hallucinations. Neural trauma from the accident. That's all."

But then came the voice, soft, unmistakable.

"Manas…"

He froze. “Meera?”

She appeared, translucent, standing by the window. Her hair clung to her wet shoulders as if she had just stepped out of the rain, her eyes filled with warmth and an impossible serenity.

“Manas… I’m here,” she said softly. “You survived… you crossed a threshold. Your senses… they are heightened now. You can see us, hear us, help us.”

Manas’s mind, trained to rationalize, scrambled for answers. “This… this isn’t real. I—there’s a neurological explanation. It has to be. Hallucinations—stress—sleep deprivation…”

“No,” Meera interrupted, her voice firm but gentle. “It’s real. Souls linger, Manas, tied by trauma, sudden death, fear. You… can help them find peace.”

He staggered back, heart pounding, panic rising. “How… how can I help… ghosts? I’m not—this is impossible!”

“You survived for a reason. You can guide them, as I guide you now,” she said, reaching out a hand, her form flickering like light through rain. “They are afraid, Manas. They need you. And you… you need them.”

Before he could respond, she faded into the shadows. Manas sank to the floor, heart hammering, mind teetering between reason and madness.

The first few nights were torturous. He saw shadows at the edge of his vision, fleeting figures in the hallway, and sometimes, a faint touch on his shoulder as he sat writing notes. He tried to convince himself it was grief, post-trauma hallucinations—but deep inside, he knew it was something else.

Then came the first real encounter.

It was a young boy, no older than ten, who appeared outside his window one rainy night, trembling and wide-eyed.

"Please… help me," the boy whispered. "I… I don't want to be here."

Manas swallowed hard. "I… I don't understand. Who are you?"

"I… I fell… I didn't mean to… I'm scared," the boy stammered, shaking.

Manas felt something stir in his chest—a mixture of fear, compassion, and disbelief. "Okay. Listen. I don't know what this is… but I'll try to help you. You have to tell me everything. Start from the beginning."

The boy hesitated, then began recounting his last moments, how he had fallen from a construction site, how the fear had frozen him mid-air. Manas listened, guiding him gently. Step by step, he helped the boy face the terror, unravel the pain, until at last, the child's ghost smiled and slowly dissipated into a soft light.

Manas sank back, exhausted. "This… this can't be real," he whispered to himself.

But he knew it was. The city around him—the monsoon-soaked streets, the flickering streetlights, the endless hum of life—carried countless others like the boy, souls tethered by trauma, waiting for someone to help them cross.

Manas Joshi, man of science, had begun a journey he could never have predicted. His life, once ruled by logic, was now intertwined with the unseen, the tragic, and the restless.

And somewhere, in the shadows of Mumbai, Meera's voice reminded him gently:

"You are not alone, Manas. And neither are they."

Manas Joshi could no longer deny it. The first encounter with the boy had shattered the fragile barrier between reason and reality. Every night, as the monsoon rain pounded against his apartment windows, he felt the presence of others—souls caught between worlds, each tethered by fear, trauma, or unfinished business.

He paced his study one evening, the rain streaking across the glass like veins of silver. "This… this is impossible," he muttered, his voice barely audible over the downpour. "I'm a psychiatrist. I deal with minds, not… phantoms."

A sudden knock on the window made him spin around. A woman's translucent figure hovered in the courtyard below. Her eyes were wide, glassy, desperate. She pointed upwards, her lips moving silently, but the voice reached him in his mind:

"Please… help me. I fell… I can't leave."

Manas swallowed hard, the rational part of his mind screaming, yet an unexplainable pull compelled him. "I… I will help you. Just calm down and tell me what happened."

Her voice wavered like the wind. "I… slipped… on the stairs… the railing… I wasn't ready…"

Manas nodded, sitting on the floor, leaning back against the wall. "Okay. Focus. I need you to relive it… step by step. I'll be here with you. You are not alone."

Over the next hour, he guided her through her last moments, helping her confront the terror and the guilt that held her

captive. Slowly, she exhaled a sigh that was more felt than heard. Her figure shimmered, light spreading outward like mist in the morning sun, before fading completely.

Manas sank forward, exhausted. "This… this is insane. And yet… it worked."

It became routine. Souls began appearing with stories etched in pain: a young man killed in a train accident, an elderly woman struck by a reckless cab, a factory worker crushed by a fallen beam. Each had unfinished business or trauma that bound them to the mortal plane. And each needed Manas's guidance.

One afternoon, he was summoned—not literally, but by instinct—to the site of a ghastly accident on a narrow Andheri street. A man in his forties had been hit by a speeding car. His spirit was furious, pacing the street endlessly, shouting curses at the driver he would never meet.

"I… I can't forgive him," the ghost spat, his voice a mix of anger and despair. "He killed me! Why? Why me?!"

Manas stepped cautiously forward. "You're right… it's unfair. But holding onto this anger won't bring justice. It won't free you. Let me help you see another way."

The spirit turned toward him, eyes blazing. "How can you? You're alive. You don't understand!"

"I understand enough," Manas said firmly. "I lost my family too. I've seen what pain can do to a soul. Let me guide you through it. Trust me, just for a moment."

Hours passed as he reconstructed the accident in his mind, gently untangling the man's rage, pointing out that sometimes, tragedy was random, that some deaths left no

culpable hand. Slowly, the spirit's tension eased. For the first time, he looked at Manas with something like gratitude before dissolving into a faint, silvery light.

Not all encounters were purely tragic. Some were strange, even mischievous. A small girl, perhaps five or six, appeared in his apartment one evening, giggling and hiding behind furniture.

"Who are you?" Manas asked, wary yet curious.

"I… I'm Tara," she said, twirling like a leaf caught in a gust. "I… I don't want to go! But I'm scared too!"

"Why are you scared?" he asked, crouching to her level.

"I… I fell down the well," she whispered. "It… it was dark. Cold. Nobody… nobody helped me!"

Manas's heart twisted. "Okay, Tara. Let's do something. Let's face the well together. You tell me how it felt, and I'll help you leave safely. Alright?"

The girl hesitated, then nodded. Over the next hour, she recounted the terrifying sensation of falling into darkness, the suffocating cold, and the loneliness. Manas listened, comforting, explaining gently, until finally she smiled—a shy, relieved, ethereal smile—before vanishing in a shimmer of light.

Through these interactions, Manas began to understand the immense psychological burden the dead carried. Trauma, fear, guilt, and unfinished emotions—just like the living, souls could become trapped in cycles of pain. And Manas, the man of science, had become their psychiatrist, their counsellor, their only guide to peace.

Yet, the process took its toll. Nights were restless, shadows clung too close, and sometimes, he woke to Kunal's laughter echoing in his empty apartment. The pain of his family's loss never dulled, but Meera's presence remained a quiet anchor.

"Manas… don't be afraid," her voice would say, appearing beside him when he doubted his sanity. "You are doing what you must. They need you. And I… I will always be here."

Manas nodded silently, eyes closed. "I know. I just… wish it didn't have to hurt so much."

"And it will," she replied softly. "But that is part of life… and death."

The rains continued, drumming against the city, as if Mumbai itself was whispering in a rhythm only Manas could hear now. Souls waited in quiet corners, in crowded streets, on rooftops slick with water, each one a story, each one a voice calling for understanding. And Manas Joshi, once a skeptic, now walked these haunted streets, a silent bridge between life and death.

One night, as he sat on his balcony, looking over the glowing city drenched in rain, he whispered into the darkness:

"You are not alone. I will help you… just a little longer."

And somewhere, in the shadows of Mumbai, a ghostly hand waved, a faint smile shimmered, and the city moved on—unaware that one man had taken upon himself the task of soothing its restless spirits.

Manas Joshi had begun to accept his new reality, though acceptance did not make it easier. Nights were long, haunted not only by the ghosts he helped but also by the memory of his own family. Kunal's laughter still echoed in empty

rooms, and Meera's soft, ethereal presence lingered, a constant reminder of both love and loss.

Yet, each encounter shaped him, honed him, made him more than the man he once was. He was no longer just a psychiatrist for the living; he had become a counsellor for the dead, a guide for those caught between worlds.

The city seemed to conspire with his mission. Mumbai's monsoon-drenched streets, its creaking chawls, its abandoned buildings, all became stages for the stories of the departed.

One evening, he received an unusual visitor. A man in his thirties appeared at the edge of his balcony, staring blankly at the bustling street below.

"Who are you?" Manas asked cautiously.

"My name is Ravi," the man whispered, eyes hollow. "I… I don't know where I am. I… I'm stuck."

"Stuck where?" Manas pressed, lowering himself to Ravi's level, as he had done before.

Ravi's voice trembled. "I… I died in a fire… the factory… my boss… I shouldn't have…"

Manas nodded slowly. "Okay, Ravi. Let's take it step by step. You don't need to blame yourself. You're here because of fear and guilt. We'll work through it."

Ravi's figure flickered like a flame caught in the wind. "But… I can't remember everything. It's like… fragments."

"That's alright," Manas said gently. "Memory comes back when the heart is ready. Let's start with what you feel. Fear, pain… confusion. That's enough for now."

Hours passed. Manas guided Ravi through the trauma, reliving the fire in fragments, until the spirit's tension eased. "Thank… thank you," Ravi said, finally smiling—a fragile, luminous smile—before fading into the night.

Another case tested Manas in a way he hadn't anticipated. A young woman, no older than twenty-five, haunted the corridors of an abandoned hospital near Bandra. Her spirit was erratic, appearing in bursts of panic, screaming incoherently.

"I… I can't… breathe! It's all wrong!" she cried when Manas approached.

"Calm down," he said firmly, holding his hand out. "I'm not here to hurt you. Tell me what happened. I can help you."

The woman's eyes filled with tears, phantom tears glistening in the dim light. "I… I was admitted here… they… they left me… alone… I died… and they… didn't even notice…"

Manas took a deep breath. "You were afraid. You were alone. That fear kept you here. Let's face it together. You're safe with me."

Through patient guidance, repeating the story, acknowledging the fear, and helping her confront her abandonment, Manas slowly untangled the trauma. By dawn, the young woman's screams turned to whispered thanks, her spirit finally drifting into a calm, golden light.

Even as he helped others, the burden of seeing death—so sudden, so raw—began to wear on Manas. He questioned whether he could endure this endlessly. Each story, each trauma, weighed on him like a stone in his chest. Yet, he could not stop. He had become their lifeline.

One particularly chilling night, he encountered a spirit that refused to leave. A middle-aged man appeared in his apartment repeatedly, silently, every night. Unlike the others, this spirit was calm, patient, but profoundly sad.

"You… won't let me go," the man finally spoke.

"I will," Manas replied cautiously. "I promise. But I need to understand why you're here."

The man's eyes, full of sorrow, met his. "I… I killed someone. Accidentally. I can't forgive myself. I… I'm trapped."

Manas swallowed, realizing the depth of pain in this case. "You need to face what happened, accept it, and let yourself move on. I can guide you, but only you can forgive yourself."

Hours passed. Manas helped the man reconstruct the event, confronting guilt and shame, guiding him through the act of forgiveness. Slowly, the spirit's form brightened, dissolving finally into a peaceful shimmer.

It was during these encounters that Manas understood the breadth of human suffering—how trauma, fear, guilt, and regret could tether a soul as tightly as a rope. The living and the dead were not so different; both carried wounds that demanded attention, understanding, and compassion.

Through all of this, Meera remained his anchor. Her presence, gentle and unwavering, reminded him why he continued.

"Manas," she whispered one night as he sat exhausted at his desk, "you've become what I always knew you could. You're a healer… even beyond life."

"I… I just don't know how long I can keep this up," he admitted.

"You can," she said softly, brushing a spectral hand across his shoulder. "Because they need you. And because… you need them too. This… this is your path now."

Manas nodded, staring out at the rain-soaked city, the distant wail of a train mingling with the patter of raindrops. Somewhere out there, souls waited, shadows moving in abandoned alleys, across rooftops slick with water, tethered by fear and unresolved pain.

And he would find them. He would listen. He would guide them.

For in this new life, Dr. Manas Joshi had discovered a truth that no science could measure: the living and the dead were bound together by more than just memory—they were bound by emotion, by trauma, by the fragile threads of unfinished stories.

And as he whispered to the shadows, to the spirits gathering around him in quiet reverence, he felt the weight of purpose settle in his chest.

"You are not alone," he said softly. "I will help you… just a little longer."

The city continued, unaware. Lives went on. Deaths remained unresolved. And Manas Joshi walked between worlds, silent guardian of the lost, healer of the forgotten, forever entwined with shadows that whispered their stories in the rain.

The monsoon rains had become a constant companion to Manas Joshi. Mumbai, drenched in silver streaks of rain and shrouded in mist, seemed almost alive with whispered

stories. Shadows flickered unnaturally under streetlights, reflections in puddles revealed fleeting figures, and sometimes, if he stared long enough, he could see the city itself vibrating with unseen presences.

Manas had grown accustomed to the nightly arrivals. Each spirit had a story—sometimes tragic, sometimes grotesque, sometimes bizarre—but all tethered to the world by trauma, fear, or unfinished business.

One evening, as he walked through a narrow Byculla alley to investigate a complaint of "haunted cries," he saw a ghost unlike any he had encountered. A man in a tattered kurta stood beneath a flickering streetlamp, completely still. His eyes were empty, staring into the void.

"Sir… are you… can you hear me?" Manas called cautiously.

The figure turned slowly, and a smile crept across his lips—cold, unsettling, unnatural. "I… wait for her," he said in a voice like a rustling sheet. "She… she promised she'd come back."

Manas stepped closer, feeling an icy chill. "Who promised you? What's happening?"

The ghost pointed toward a locked, abandoned building across the street. "She… she left me… waiting… waiting…"

Manas followed instinctively. Inside, the air was thick with decay. The ghost of a young woman appeared suddenly, translucent and pale, eyes wide with terror. "I… I didn't mean to leave!" she screamed.

"Okay, okay," Manas said, hands raised gently. "You're here. Let's breathe. I can help you both."

It took hours, gentle coaxing, and repeated confrontation with the events that bound them, but eventually, the man and woman's spirits glimmered, entwined in a soft light, and dissolved into peace. Manas collapsed against the wall, exhausted. He realized these weren't just cases—these were lives he carried with him, heavy as stones in his chest.

Back in his apartment, Meera appeared, leaning against the doorway. "You did well tonight," she said softly. "But you're pushing yourself too hard. You can't carry all of them at once."

"I… I can't stop," he whispered. "They need me. And… I can't ignore it. I… I've seen what happens if I do."

"You've changed," Meera said, floating closer. "You're not just a psychiatrist now. You're a guide. It's not just the living who need help. And it's not just them—you're healing too, in ways you don't yet understand."

Manas nodded silently, staring at the city below. Somewhere out there, countless souls were waiting: a child trapped in the Mumbai docks, an elderly man lost on the Western Express tracks, a young woman abandoned in a deserted flat. All reaching for closure, all reaching for him.

The next ghost was peculiar. A small boy appeared at his window, a mischievous grin on his spectral face.

"Who are you?" Manas asked.

"I'm Aarav," the boy said. "I died… in the elevator. Stuck… forever. No one came for me."

"Okay, Aarav," Manas said gently, crouching to meet the boy's eyes. "Let's see if we can fix that. You don't have to be stuck anymore."

The boy laughed—a hollow, eerie sound—but followed him as Manas recreated the scene in his mind, helping the spirit confront his fear of confinement, his terror of dying alone. Slowly, the boy relaxed, glowing faintly, before vanishing with a cheerful, "Thank you, doctor!"

Not all cases were so straightforward. One night, he encountered a middle-aged woman who had died of a sudden heart attack in her home in Andheri. But unlike the others, she was angry, belligerent, and hostile.

"Why are you here?!" she screamed, shrieking as Manas approached. "You… you can't… you don't belong here!"

"I know this is confusing," Manas said calmly. "But I can help you. I just need you to tell me what happened."

She glared at him, trembling. "I… I didn't want to die! I was planning… I had… dreams… I had things to do! They… they left me alone!"

"Okay," Manas said softly. "You're not alone anymore. I can help you face what's left unsaid. Let's do it together."

Hours passed. Manas listened, guided, comforted, and explained. Slowly, the anger gave way to exhaustion, and the woman's spirit shimmered and vanished, finally at peace.

Through all of this, Manas began to notice something strange. Each time he helped a spirit cross, he felt lighter, less burdened. He realized that he was not just aiding the dead—he was healing himself, too. The weight of his family's loss, the endless grief, had made him feel broken. But each soul he guided, each trauma he untangled, helped him piece himself together, slowly, imperceptibly.

One night, after a particularly gruelling session, he sat alone, the rain beating against the windowpane. Meera appeared, silent, her eyes tender.

"Manas… you've done so much. So many of them are free because of you," she said.

"I… I still see them everywhere," he admitted. "Sometimes I wonder… am I really helping them, or am I just prolonging my own pain?"

"You're helping," she said firmly. "Because this is what you were meant to do. And because… in helping them, you honor us too. Kunal… I… we're always with you. But this… this is your path now."

Manas nodded, tears mingling with the rain streaking his face. He felt a strange clarity. He was no longer just a man of reason. He was a bridge, a guide, a silent guardian of the lost.

The city of Mumbai moved on outside, unaware of the shadows, the whispers, the unseen lives tethered by trauma. Manas Joshi continued his work, moving quietly from street to street, from apartment to alley, speaking to the dead, guiding them, teaching them to release their pain.

And as he whispered into the night, he knew this journey would never end.

"You are not alone," he murmured. "I will help you… just a little longer."

The rain fell harder, masking the faint, grateful voices around him. Somewhere, in the depths of the city, shadows stirred, stories waited to be told, and Manas Joshi walked on—forever between the living and the dead, silently serving those who could no longer speak.

The monsoon rains had eased, but the city remained shrouded in mist, as if Mumbai itself had been touched by the spirits Manas Joshi had guided. The streets shimmered in early morning light, yet shadows lingered in corners, in alleys, in abandoned buildings. Each shadow, each whisper, was a story waiting for closure.

Manas had grown into his role, though the weight of it never lessened. Nights remained restless, sometimes agonizingly so. He often woke to faint echoes of Kunal laughing, Meera's soft reassurance brushing against his mind like a caress, or the hollow sobs of souls he had yet to guide.

One evening, as he returned from a late-night session with a restless spirit near Bandra's docks, a figure appeared on his balcony: a man in his forties, soaked from the sudden drizzle. Unlike other spirits, he radiated a quiet despair, almost suffocating in its intensity.

"Doctor… can you… help me?" the man whispered.

"I will," Manas said calmly. "But I need you to tell me why you're still here."

The man hesitated. "I… I was a taxi driver. I… I ran someone over. A boy… I couldn't stop in time. I… I can't forgive myself. I can't move on."

Manas felt a pang in his chest. Guilt, he realized, could be as binding as fear. "You can't change what happened. But you can confront it, face it, and forgive yourself. Let me help you do that."

Hours passed as they reconstructed the event. Manas guided the man through the accident, showing him the randomness of tragedy, the helplessness that sometimes comes with life,

and finally, the man's spirit glimmered, exhaling a silent thank you before dissolving into a soft, golden light.

The next case was stranger still. A woman, appearing as if frozen in time, floated outside a crumbling flat in Andheri. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted as though she had been screaming for hours.

"Why… won't anyone help me?" she asked, her voice a trembling echo.

"I'm here," Manas said softly. "Tell me what happened."

"I… I was suffocated… trapped… I couldn't breathe… nobody came…"

He led her to relive the final moments safely, gently explaining that she was now seen, understood, and heard. Slowly, her form shimmered and dissolved into calm, leaving behind a lingering sense of peace.

As Manas returned home, drenched from the rain and exhausted, he felt Meera's presence by his side.

"You've done well tonight," she whispered. "So many are free because of you."

"I…" Manas paused, tears stinging his eyes. "I keep thinking… what if I can't help them all? What if I fail?"

Meera's ghostly hand brushed his shoulder. "Then you keep trying. That is enough. You've become their hope. And you… you are healing too. Every soul you guide is a thread connecting you back to life, to love, to us."

Even as he spoke, a small flicker of movement caught his eye—a child, no older than six, laughing faintly by the doorway. It was not Kunal, though the resemblance was uncanny.

“Doctor… help me!” the child said.

Manas shook his head softly. “Yes… I’ll help you.”

He had learned by now that fear, trauma, and regret were universal. They bound the living and the dead alike, and he had become the bridge across that void.

He walked through the city streets, silent and unseen, moving toward the next shadow, the next whisper, the next unfinished story. And though the work was endless, exhausting, and often heartbreaking, he carried it willingly.

Because he understood something he had never grasped before the accident: death was not the end. Pain, fear, and regret could tether a soul, but kindness, understanding, and guidance could release it. And Manas Joshi had been given the gift—and the burden—of helping those who could not move on alone.

Sitting in his apartment later that night, Meera by his side, he gazed at the city lights reflected in the rain-slicked streets.

“Will it ever end?” he whispered.

“No,” Meera said softly, smiling, a faint glow around her. “And it shouldn’t. But that’s okay. Because this… this is your purpose. Your gift. And you are never alone.”

Manas closed his eyes, feeling the presence of countless souls around him, some grateful, some still uncertain, all waiting for his guidance. He could feel the weight of their stories, but also the light of their release. And somewhere deep in his heart, he knew he would continue—forever walking the boundary between life and death, the silent guardian of the lost, the unseen psychiatrist of souls.

He whispered into the darkness, his voice steady, resolute:

"You are not alone. I will help you… just a little longer."

And as the city slept beneath the lingering mist, somewhere in Mumbai, a shadow flickered, a soft voice murmured, and Dr. Manas Joshi moved quietly through the night, his journey far from over, his work eternal, his heart forever open to the whispers of the unseen.