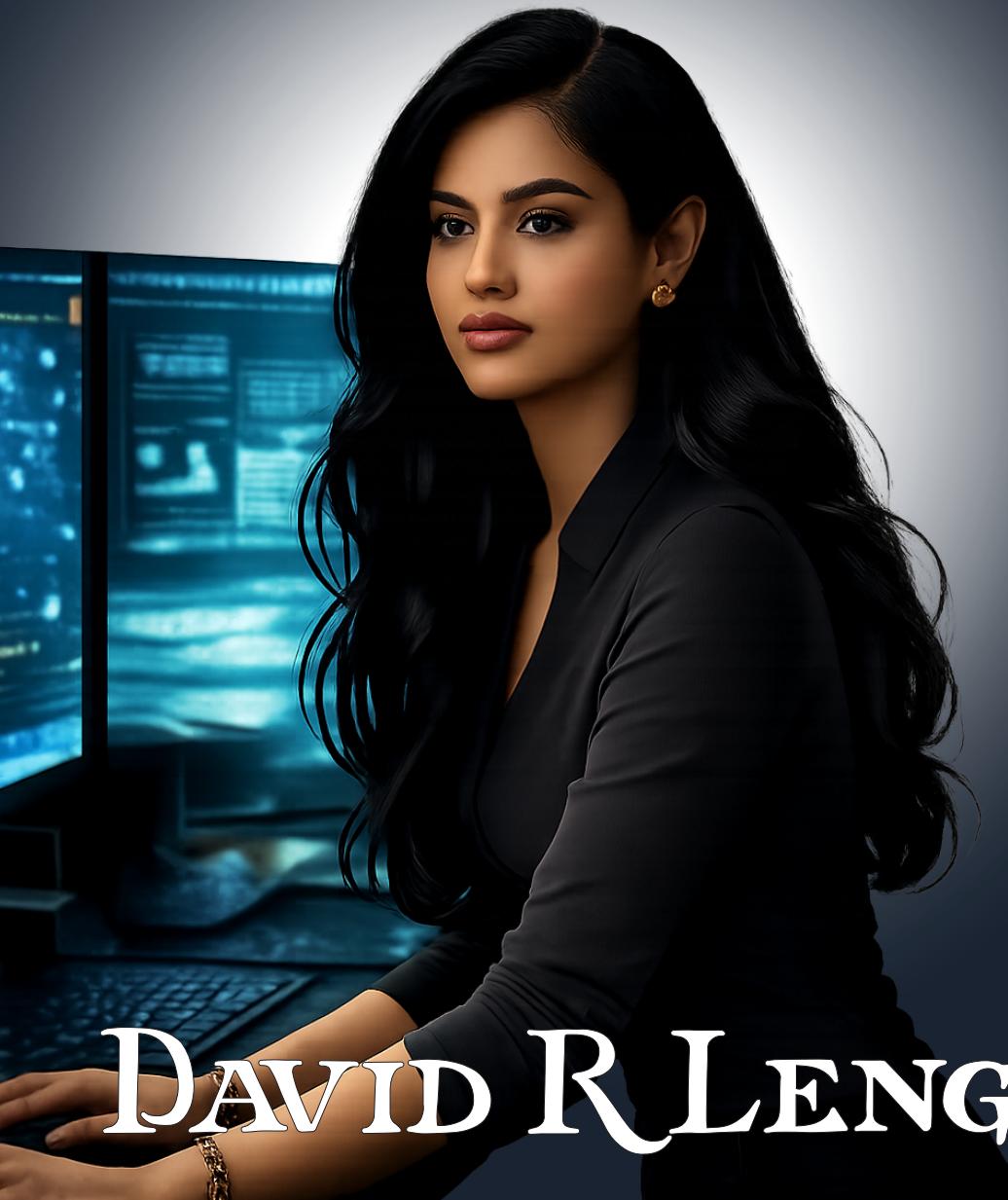


# ECHOES *of* FORTUNE

PRIYA & THE LANGUAGE OF NORMAL

*A Short Story*



DAVID RLENG

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# Chapter 1

Priya Patel had spent seven years learning to read the language of normal. This morning, normal was lying.

She found it three pages deep in the overnight alerts, buried beneath the routine intrusion attempts that junior analysts flagged and forgot. At first glance, the access pattern looked like everything else: authorized credentials, clean routing, traffic that PANOPTICON deemed entirely unremarkable. Green indicators pulsed their quiet assurances. *Everything is fine. Everything is as expected.*

But Priya's eye caught the tells. Packet timing slightly off rhythm. Authentication requests pinging servers in the wrong sequence. The digital equivalent of someone wearing a costume that fit everywhere except the shoes.

Her thumb found the smooth gold of her grandmother's bracelet, tracing its worn curve the way she always did when her instincts fired ahead of her analysis. A grounding ritual. A way to steady herself while her mind chased patterns through architecture others couldn't see.

She leaned closer, her reflection ghosting across the display: dark eyes narrowed beneath sharp cheekbones, black hair escaping the clip she'd fastened too quickly that morning, the tiny glint of a gold nose stud catching the screen's blue light. Seven years at NSA had taught her to trust what she noticed before she understood it. And what she noticed now was absence. The shape of something that should have triggered alerts but hadn't. A gap where attention should have gathered.

This wasn't random system noise. This wasn't routine scanning.  
This moved like it knew how to be invisible.

Her phone buzzed against the desk, a vibration that felt almost illicit in this space where personal devices existed on sufferance at best. Marcus's face filled the screen when she answered, his smile slightly pixelated through the video compression but warm nonetheless.

“You’re in early... again.” His voice carried that particular mixture of resignation and affection she’d come to recognize. Behind him, she caught a glimpse of their kitchen: the copper kettle on the stove, the morning light just starting to touch the window above the sink.

“Couldn’t sleep.” She kept her voice low, though no one was near enough to overhear. “You’re up early too.”

“Had to catch you before you disappeared into your machine.” He shifted, and she saw he was already dressed for work, his tie loose around his collar. “Mira’s tonight. Seven-thirty. I made the reservation three weeks ago, so...”

“I’ll be there.” She meant it. In that moment, watching his face on the small screen, she genuinely meant it.

“You said that about the Hendersons’ dinner party.”

“This is different.”

“You said that too.”

The silence between them stretched just long enough to feel weighted. Priya recognized the shape of it. Not accusation exactly, but a kind of patient calibration, Marcus adjusting his expectations against the evidence of accumulated experience. She wanted to argue, but the data was against her.

“Seven-thirty,” she said instead. “Mira’s. I’ll be there. I promise.”

His smile returned, a little guarded now but present. “I’ll believe it when I see you walk through the door.” He glanced at something off-screen. “I’ve got to run. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

The call ended, his face collapsing into darkness. Priya set the phone aside and turned back to her monitors, aware of a faint tightness in her chest she chose not to examine. The anomaly waited on her screen, patient as a held breath.

She reached for her chai mug and took a long sip. Cold now. She set it aside and turned back to her monitors. Somewhere in the building, servers continued their quiet respiration. Data flowed through conduits she’d spent years learning to navigate. Green lights pulsed their steady assurances.

The interface of PANOPTICON spread across her three monitors like a window into the circulatory system of classified America. The Eye, as some of the older analysts called it, had been designed to recognize normal. Not threats exactly. Threats were the domain of other systems, signature-matching engines that hunted for known attack patterns. PANOPTICON worked differently. It built models of expected behavior, learned the rhythms of legitimate traffic, and flagged anything that deviated from the baseline it had established. The theory was elegant: you couldn't hide from a system that knew what ordinary looked like, because hiding meant behaving abnormally, and abnormal behavior always left traces.

Priya had helped refine its pattern recognition algorithms early in her career, back when the system was still prone to false positives and its learning models needed constant adjustment. She trusted it the way she trusted her own analytical instincts. Deeply, but not blindly. The system was only as good as its assumptions, and assumptions could be wrong.

She pulled the anomaly into a separate analysis window and began tracing it manually, following the data flows backward through the network architecture. The process was tedious. PANOPTICON's strength was that it automated this kind of work, freeing analysts to focus on interpretation rather than tracking. But something in her gut insisted on verification. Her instincts had kept her alive in this job, metaphorically speaking. She'd learned not to ignore them.

The data revealed its strangeness slowly, the way murky water clears to show what lies beneath. The access pattern wasn't static. It was moving, shifting its pathways through the network in ways that should have triggered alerts but somehow didn't. Each time she pinpointed its location, it had already migrated. Not randomly, but with purpose. Like a current changing direction beneath the surface while the water above remained smooth.

She reached for her bracelet again without thinking, her thumb pressing against the worn gold as understanding began to crystallize into something cold.

PANOPTICON showed nothing. Green lights. Normal parameters. The system's calm assurance that everything was functioning as expected. And that, Priya realized, was exactly the problem.

Whatever she was tracking hadn't evaded the system. It had learned to speak the system's language so fluently that The Eye couldn't tell the difference between the intruder and the infrastructure it was designed to protect.

She was no longer looking at a breach.

She was looking at something that had taught itself to become invisible by understanding exactly how invisibility was defined.

Priya initiated standard containment protocols, the kind she'd run a hundred times on suspicious traffic. She isolated the network segment where she'd last detected the anomaly, cutting it off from adjacent systems to prevent lateral movement. Then she redirected the access pathways, rerouting traffic through monitored channels where any unusual activity would be more visible. Finally, she tightened the access windows, reducing the timeframes during which authentication tokens remained valid.

The anomaly adjusted before her countermeasures fully deployed.

She stared at the screen, hands frozen above the keyboard. The traffic pattern had shifted again, slipping through a gap in her containment that shouldn't have existed. A gap that had opened precisely because of the way she'd configured the isolation. It was as if the thing she was hunting had known what she intended to do, not just what she had done.

She tried again. Different approach this time. Broader containment, less precision, designed to catch movement rather than pin down a specific location. The results came back within minutes. The anomaly had moved to a different network segment entirely, one she hadn't even been monitoring, and had done so through authentication pathways that her containment protocols had inadvertently opened.

The sensation that crept up her spine was unfamiliar. Priya had faced sophisticated intrusions before, adversaries who knew the playbook and countered accordingly. This felt different. This felt like playing chess against an opponent who didn't just anticipate her moves, but understood the strategy behind them. Who read her intentions rather than her actions.

She leaned back in her chair, the synthetic leather creaking beneath her. Patterns, she reminded herself, didn't simply behave like this. They didn't anticipate. They didn't adapt. Traffic flows were passive things, governed by protocols and routing tables and the physics of data transmission. What she was seeing required agency. Intent.

But PANOPTICON showed nothing. Green lights. Normal parameters.

She saved her analysis logs, timestamped and annotated with her observations, and filed the incident report through official channels. The system accepted it with the same bland efficiency it accepted everything else. Somewhere in the queue, her documentation would wait for review alongside dozens of other flagged anomalies, most of them false positives, all of them competing for attention from analysts who trusted PANOPTICON to sort the real threats from the noise.

She needed to think. She needed chai.

The break room smelled of burnt coffee and industrial cleaner, the particular olfactory signature of government spaces where maintenance prioritized function over comfort. Priya stood at the counter, measuring loose chai into her personal infuser, the ritual soothing in its familiarity even as her mind churned through the anomaly she couldn't explain. Hot water from the dispenser splashed into her mug, releasing the first notes of cardamom and ginger, and she inhaled deeply, trying to let the scent anchor her racing thoughts.

The sequence played behind her eyes on repeat. The access pattern that looked authorized but wasn't. PANOPTICON's failure to flag it. The way the anomaly had shifted ahead of her containment efforts, as if it possessed some impossible foreknowledge of her intentions. None of it made sense within the frameworks she relied on. Systems didn't behave this way. Code didn't anticipate.

Behind her, the break room door hissed open.

She turned to see a veteran analyst shuffle in. A man she recognized by sight but not by name, one of the fixtures who'd been here so long he seemed to have calcified into the building's infrastructure. His badge hung from a lanyard worn smooth at the edges, the laminate clouded from years

of handling. His posture carried the particular weight of someone who had watched systems evolve and fail, evolve and fail again, long enough to have stopped expecting anything different.

He nodded at her without really seeing her, then moved to the coffee maker and frowned at its empty carafe.

Priya should have let him make his coffee in peace. That was the protocol, unwritten but understood. The break room was for silence, for momentary escape from screens and data, for the pretense that they were ordinary people doing ordinary work. But the question burned in her throat, and before she could stop herself, she was speaking.

“I found something strange in the traffic analysis this morning.” She kept her voice casual, conversational. “An access pattern that looked legitimate but didn’t match any scheduled operations. PANOPTICON didn’t flag it.”

The veteran’s body changed. Subtle but unmistakable. Shoulders stiffening beneath his wrinkled dress shirt, hands pausing mid-reach for the coffee filter. He didn’t look at her directly, but his gaze flicked toward the door with the quick assessment of someone checking for witnesses.

“Probably a glitch in the modeling.” His voice had gone flat, carefully neutral. “The system’s not perfect. False negatives happen.”

“This didn’t feel like a false negative. It felt like...” She hesitated, searching for words that wouldn’t sound paranoid. “Like whatever I was tracking knew how I was tracking it.”

The silence stretched between them, filled only by the drip of the coffee maker cycling through its preheat sequence. The veteran’s jaw tightened. When he finally spoke, the words came out barely above a murmur, almost swallowed by the mechanical hum of the room.

“Sounds like S3t.”

“What’s S3t?”

“I didn’t say anything.” He pulled his phone from his pocket, glanced at it without reading. “Supposed to be nice this weekend. You have any plans? I might finally get around to fixing that fence in my backyard, if the weather holds.”

Priya blinked, thrown by the conversational whiplash. “I’m sorry... What did you say?”

“The fence. Been meaning to get to it for months. Wood rot, you know how it is.” He turned to face her now, his expression carefully bland, but she could see something behind his eyes. Not quite fear, but something adjacent to it. The wariness of someone who had learned exactly which subjects to avoid. “Anyway. Have a good one, Patel.”

He left without taking any coffee, the door sighing shut behind him.

Priya stood alone in the break room, her chai cooling in her hands, the word echoing in her mind. *S3t*. He’d said it like a name, or maybe a designation. Something specific, something known. And then he’d pretended he hadn’t said it at all.

She thought about following him, pressing for answers. But something in his reaction stopped her. The way he’d checked the door. The way his whole demeanor had shifted from tired indifference to careful evasion. Whatever *S3t* was, it scared him. And fear, in a building full of people who dealt daily with nation-state threats and classified operations, was not a reaction that came easily.

Back at her workstation, the screens still displayed their placid visualizations. Green indicators pulsing their false reassurances. Priya set down her mug and pulled up the logs from her morning analysis, scrolling through timestamps and traffic captures with methodical determination. Her shift was technically ending in an hour. Marcus was waiting. Mira’s at 7:30. The promise she’d made that morning already straining against the weight of what she’d discovered.

But she couldn’t leave this unresolved. Not now.

She dug through layers of data, following the traces of the anomaly she’d tracked earlier. Most of it looked exactly as she’d documented: authorized credentials, clean routing, nothing that should have triggered concern. But somewhere in this mess, there had to be evidence. Something concrete. Something she could point to and say, *this is wrong, this is proof, this is not just my intuition misfiring*.

The logs scrolled past, each entry blurring into the next. Her eyes began to ache from the strain of reading in the monitor’s blue glow. She was

about to give up, to save her notes and accept that some questions didn't have answers tonight, when she saw it.

A single line of code.

Buried in a configuration file where it had no business existing, tucked between routine parameters like a splinter lodged in healthy tissue. At first glance, it looked like corrupted data. A string of characters that might have resulted from a transmission error or a database hiccup. But when Priya examined it more closely, the pattern revealed itself.

The formatting was too deliberate. The syntax too precise. This wasn't random degradation or system noise. Someone had placed this here intentionally, positioned it exactly where an analyst doing deep investigation would eventually find it. And only an analyst doing deep investigation. Not a glitch. Not an alert.

A marker: *Null.sh3/Se*

Priya's hands went still on the keyboard. The characters resolved themselves into meaning, a meaning that settled cold in her stomach.

Someone had known she would look here. Known what she would be searching for, and when. They hadn't just evaded her tracking. They had anticipated it. And then they had left this, like a note slipped under a door, like a calling card placed deliberately in the path of pursuit.

*I see you seeing me.*

The operations floor continued its quiet hum around her. Servers breathed behind their reinforced walls. Colleagues typed at nearby stations, unaware that anything had changed. But Priya sat frozen in her chair, staring at the line of code that should not exist, feeling the cold certainty spread through her chest.

This wasn't a system behaving strangely. This wasn't PANOPTICON failing to detect an intrusion. This was something. Someone. Watching her watch them.

And they wanted her to know it.

Her phone buzzed. A text from Marcus: *Running late? Table's at 7:30.*

Priya looked at the message, then at the marker on her screen, then at the message again. The distance between those two worlds felt suddenly

vast, unbridgeable. The warmth of dinner plans and the cold logic of whatever had just announced its presence to her.

She typed a reply without thinking: *Sorry. Something came up. Rain check?*

Then she turned back to her monitors, to the marker still glowing on her screen, and began documenting everything she had found.

# Chapter 2

The apartment surrendered itself to the pursuit in slow, unmistakable stages.

What began as a single whiteboard leaning against the living room wall multiplied over the following weeks until diagrams covered every available surface. Network maps sketched in layered colors spread across the boards like veins made visible, each node connected to others by lines that doubled back, looped, contradicted their own logic. Access logs covered the kitchen counter, printed and reprinted as though repetition might reveal what analysis had not.

The dining table disappeared first. Marcus had set it for dinner the night after her discovery, two places arranged with the careful attention he always brought to their shared rituals. By the third night, her laptop had migrated there, trailing cables that fed some hungry machine. By the fifth night, his cloth napkins were buried under printouts.

Chai mugs accumulated everywhere. She found them in the mornings like evidence of a haunting: on the windowsill, on the bathroom counter, balanced on the arm of the reading chair where she sometimes sat at three in the morning, staring at data on her phone. Rings of dried tea marked the surfaces beneath them, pale circles that tracked the passage of sleepless nights more accurately than any calendar.

Her phone lit up constantly at first. Marcus calling. Marcus texting. Marcus leaving voicemails she listened to while her eyes traced network architectures, his voice warm and worried in her ear while her mind wandered through classified systems. She read his messages but did not answer. The pattern of her avoidance felt inevitable, like water finding the path of least resistance.

After a while, the screen went dark for longer stretches. He had stopped trying as often.

When she finally answered his call, his face appeared tired rather than angry.

“I can’t really talk about what I’m working on,” she said. “But it matters. It’s important.”

“You said that two weeks ago.”

“I know.” She twisted her grandmother’s bracelet around her wrist. “I know I did.”

“Mira’s,” he said quietly. “We had a reservation. You forgot.”

She had forgotten. The knowledge landed somewhere distant, a fact that should have carried weight but somehow didn’t. “I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

“You keep saying that.”

The silence between them stretched thin and fragile.

He showed up at the apartment three nights later.

Priya heard the key in the lock and looked up from her laptop, blinking in the sudden awareness of her surroundings. The glow of her screen at two in the morning. Papers scattered across every surface. The whiteboards covered in diagrams that probably looked unhinged to anyone who didn’t understand their logic. Marcus stood in the doorway, still wearing his coat, taking it all in.

“You’re not really here, Pri.” His voice was quiet, without accusation. “Even when you’re standing in front of me, you’re somewhere else.”

She set down her pen. Crossed the room toward him, stepping over cables, and reached for his hands. They were cold from outside.

“I know how this looks.” She meant it. “But I’m close. I can feel it. Just a little longer, and then—”

“And then what?” His eyes searched her face. “There’s always another case, Priya. There’s always something more important than being present.”

“This is different.”

“You said that about the last one.” He pulled his hands gently from hers. Not anger. Something worse. Exhaustion. “I don’t know how much longer I can do this.”

“Marcus—”

“I’m going to stay at my brother’s tonight.” He was already turning toward the door. “I think we both need some space to figure out what we actually want.”

She should have stopped him. Should have said something that made him stay, made him understand. Instead she stood frozen in the middle of the apartment, surrounded by the evidence of her obsession, and watched him leave.

The door closed with a soft click.

Priya stood there for a long moment, listening to nothing. Then she turned back to her screens.

\*

The conference room was sealed and swept, its walls lined with the particular blankness of spaces designed for conversations that could never leave them. Priya stood at the head of the table and pitched her trap to a handful of cleared analysts whose presence mattered less than their discretion.

She kept the language simple. What she was proposing wasn’t complicated in concept, only in execution.

“Think of it as a fake vault,” she said, watching their faces for understanding. “We build a system that looks exactly like a high-value intelligence repository. Classified communications. Network credentials. Operational documents. Everything an intruder would want to steal.”

“But it’s not real,” one analyst said.

“It’s real enough to be convincing. The documents are fabricated but authentic-looking. The credentials work but lead nowhere sensitive. Anyone who breaks in thinks they’ve hit the jackpot.” She pulled up a diagram on the screen behind her. “But every step they take inside, we’re watching. Every file they touch, we’re logging. Every technique they use to move through the system, we’re recording.”

“And if they realize it’s a trap?”

“Then we’ve still learned how they think. What they prioritize. How they move.” She let that settle. “Right now, we have nothing. PANOPTICON can’t see this threat. Traditional detection can’t find it. This gives us a chance to understand what we’re dealing with.”

The objections came, predictable and procedural.

“What about operational security?”

“The system is completely isolated. No connection to actual classified networks.”

“Resource allocation?”

“Minimal. I can build most of it myself.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

Priya met the questioner’s eyes. “Then we’re no worse off than we are now. Which is blind.”

The approval came with conditions she barely registered. Budget constraints. Reporting requirements. A timeline that would have felt aggressive if she hadn’t already been planning to exceed it.

\*

Building the trap consumed her.

She worked punishing hours, returning to the apartment only to shower and change before slipping back into the building’s artificial twilight. The honeypot took shape under her hands like architecture made of logic. False walls that looked solid. Corridors that led to monitored dead ends. Treasures positioned exactly where a sophisticated intruder would expect to find them. Every detail designed to be irresistible. Every pathway designed to be watched.

Marcus’s texts arrived less frequently now. She read them in the brief pauses between coding sessions, his words arriving from a world that felt increasingly foreign. *I miss you. Call me when you can.* She meant to respond. She always meant to respond.

By the time the honeypot went live, it felt less like something she had built and more like an inevitability. A space S3t would have to enter. A trap that existed because it was necessary.

\*

The operations center was cold when the alert finally came.

Priya had claimed the central station hours ago, her fingers hovering above the keyboard, her eyes moving across displays that showed the honeypot’s vital signs in real time. Traffic flows. Access attempts. The quiet pulse of systems waiting to be triggered.

Nothing happened for a long time.

Then the data shifted.

The change was almost imperceptible. A ripple in traffic patterns that suggested movement without declaring it. Her hand moved before her conscious mind had fully processed what she was seeing, fingers dancing across the keyboard to isolate the anomaly.

“There,” she whispered.

S3t moved through the honeypot with elegant precision. He bypassed safeguards that should have slowed him, passed checkpoints without triggering delays, traced paths through the architecture that suggested, impossibly, that he’d known the layout before she finished building it.

She watched him move, pulse racing with the certainty that this time she had him. The invisible lines were finally converging. Every movement he made was being logged, analyzed, captured. Even if he escaped, she would have data. Evidence. Proof.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, adjusting parameters, tightening access windows, trying to close the gap between observation and capture.

“Come on,” she murmured. “Come on—”

And then, without warning, the activity stopped.

The intrusion vanished. Not retreat. Not the scramble of an adversary discovering they’d been detected. Just absence. Clean and complete, as though S3t had simply stepped sideways out of existence.

He was gone.

The silence that followed was worse than any alarm.

Priya stared at the screens as the system reassured its calm. PANOPTICON’s indicators pulsed their quiet green assurances. The same false comfort the system had offered before. The same blindness dressed as reassurance.

Her hands moved through the logs of the honeypot’s final moments. S3t had left almost nothing behind. Almost nothing.

A single fragment of code remained.

It sat in a configuration file where it had no business existing. At first glance, it could have been debris. Leftover data, corrupted fragments. But she had learned to distrust first glances.

The message resolved with brutal simplicity.

*Nice try, P.*

The initial struck harder than the words.

Not “nice try.” That was generic, could have been addressed to anyone. But the *P*. The single letter that transformed the message from taunting to intimate. From adversarial to personal.

He knew her.

Not her methods, though he clearly knew those. Not her position or her clearance level. He knew *her*. Priya Patel. The analyst who’d spotted him when no one else could. The woman who’d built a trap specifically designed to catch him.

He’d watched her construct every wall, position every lure. And then he’d walked through the whole thing as though it had been built for his convenience.

This wasn’t just an intrusion anymore. This wasn’t just a security breach or an intelligence failure.

This was a conversation.

S3t had looked at her across the digital distance, through layers of code and classification, and he had seen her. Not the analyst. Not the NSA’s pattern recognition specialist. Her.

And he had found her wanting.

Her hands slid off the keyboard and fell into her lap. The operations center continued its quiet hum around her, but the sound seemed to come from very far away, muffled by something thick and cold that had settled between her and the rest of the world. She became aware, distantly, that she had stopped breathing. When she finally inhaled, the air felt thin. Insufficient.

Priya sat very still, feeling the weight of that judgment settle into her bones. Somewhere, in a life that felt increasingly distant, Marcus was waiting at his brother’s apartment. The promises she’d made lay broken with all the other debris of her obsession.

She had bet everything on this trap.

And S3t had just told her, in three words and one letter, exactly how badly she’d miscalculated.

DAVID R LENG

It was personal now. It had always been personal. She just hadn't known she was the one being hunted.

# Chapter 3

Priya worked through the night as though sleep were a concept that had simply ceased to apply to her.

The operations center breathed its quiet mechanical rhythm around her. Cooling fans cycling in distant server rooms. The soft percussion of keyboards at stations manned by skeleton crew analysts. Empty chai cups crowded the edge of her workstation, their rims crusted with dried tea. She had stopped counting how many she'd consumed. She had stopped counting most things.

The failure of the honeypot had taught her something important. S3t didn't just evade detection. He anticipated it. He understood how PANOPTICON defined normal behavior, and he positioned himself precisely in the spaces where that definition created blindness. The system couldn't catch him because he'd learned to think like the system.

Which meant the solution wasn't building better traps. It was changing how the system thought.

She'd spent the weeks since "Nice try, P." studying PANOPTICON's predictive algorithms from the inside, mapping the precise ways it modeled expected behavior. Every assumption the system made about what counted as legitimate traffic. Every pattern it had learned to ignore. Every blind spot those patterns created.

Now she was going to move those blind spots without announcing the change.

The modifications were subtle. Small adjustments to baseline parameters. Slight shifts in what the system considered normal. If S3t was reading the security guard's patrol schedule to avoid detection, she was changing the schedule without posting the new version. He would step into a space he expected to be safe and find himself exposed.

It was elegant work. Delicate. The kind of modification that could cascade badly if she miscalculated. But she had run the numbers dozens of times. This would work. It had to work.

She had nothing left to bet except her certainty.

Her phone sat face-down beside the keyboard. It vibrated occasionally, the soft buzz arriving at irregular intervals like the heartbeat of something she had chosen to ignore. She knew who the messages were from. She didn't need to look.

\*

Marcus was sitting at the kitchen table when she finally came home.

The afternoon light fell through the window above the sink, illuminating a scene arranged with terrible precision. His coat draped over the chair. An overnight bag at his feet, packed and zipped.

“You’re home,” he said. Not a question.

“I’m home.” The words came out rough, her voice unused to speech after hours of silence. “I didn’t expect... I thought you’d be at your brother’s.”

“I wanted to do this in person.” He gestured to the chair across from him. “Sit down, Priya.”

She didn’t sit. Her legs had forgotten how to carry her across the room. She stood in the doorway instead, her bag still hanging from her shoulder, and waited.

Marcus watched her for a moment, then nodded as though her refusal was an answer to a question he hadn’t asked.

“I’ve been trying to reach you,” he said. His voice was quiet, measured. “For weeks now. Phone calls. Text messages. I even came by the office, but they said you were in a restricted area.” He paused. “I’ve tried everything I could think of, and you’ve been... absent. Even when you were standing right in front of me.”

“Marcus, I can explain—”

“You can’t.” The words weren’t harsh, just certain. “You’ve tried explaining before. It’s always the same thing. Just this case, just a little longer, just until you catch whatever you’re chasing. But there’s always

another case, Priya. There's always something more important than being here."

She opened her mouth to argue, but the arguments wouldn't form. He was right, and they both knew it. The evidence was all around them. The whiteboards still visible through the doorway. The printouts covering every surface. The chai cups she'd stopped bothering to wash.

"I'm not leaving because I'm angry," Marcus said. He stood, reaching for his coat. "I'm not leaving because I stopped loving you. I'm leaving because I can't keep living in competition with something I can't even see." He paused, the coat half-on, and looked at her with an expression that held more grief than accusation. "I can't compete with a ghost, Priya."

The sentence cut through whatever defenses she had left.

Her bag slid from her shoulder and hit the floor. She didn't reach down to pick it up. Instead, her fingers moved to the ring on her left hand. She twisted it free, the metal sliding over her knuckle with a resistance that felt like protest.

"Here." She held it out to him, her hand trembling. "You should take this back."

Marcus looked at the ring in her palm. Something shifted in his face, a grief so deep it had no room for anger.

"That's yours," he said quietly. "I'm not taking it back. I'm just... I'm leaving."

He gathered his keys from the table, then bent to lift the overnight bag. When he straightened, he crossed the distance between them. Before she could speak, he pulled her into an embrace. His arms wrapped around her the way they had a hundred times before, warm and familiar and absolutely final. She caught the scent of his cologne, the same one he'd worn the night they met, and for one terrible moment she was back in that crowded gallery, laughing at something he'd said, not knowing yet that she would love him.

He pressed a kiss to her cheek, his lips lingering for just a moment.

"Take care of yourself, Pri," he said softly, his breath warm against her ear. "I mean that."

Then he let her go, and walked out the door.

It closed behind him with a soft click.

Priya stood alone in the apartment, listening to his footsteps fade down the hallway. She should follow him. She knew she should follow him. Should run after him and promise to change, promise to be present, promise anything that might make him stay.

But her legs wouldn't move. And somewhere in the hollow space behind her ribs, she understood that promises had stopped meaning anything between them a long time ago.

She looked at the ring still sitting in her palm, the diamond catching the fading afternoon light. Then she set it on the table, precisely in the center.

Down the hallway, the elevator chimed. Marcus's footsteps, growing fainter. The mechanical hum of doors sliding closed.

Priya crossed to her laptop, opened it, and watched the screen flicker to life. The glow washed over her face, blue and familiar, as the silence of the empty apartment settled around her.

\*

The modified parameters went live at 2:47 AM.

Priya watched from the central station as her changes propagated through PANOPTICON's framework, altering the system's expectations in ways S3t could not have anticipated. Traffic patterns began to shift. Access pathways rerouted themselves through channels now flagged for enhanced scrutiny.

Then the convergence began.

Data flows that had seemed random started moving toward a single point. Exactly where her modifications predicted they would. Access pathways narrowed as security protocols engaged in clean succession. Something was being corralled. Something was being driven toward a space it could not escape.

A smile touched her lips. All the sleepless nights. The cold chai and ignored messages. Marcus walking out the door. It had been worth it. She had understood S3t well enough to predict him, to corner him, to force him into a position where his own advantages worked against him.

“Yes,” she breathed.

Then the world went dark.

PANOPTICON's interface collapsed across every monitor simultaneously, screens blinking to black as though someone had thrown a master switch. Emergency lighting snapped on overhead, bathing the operations center in harsh red. Chairs scraped back as analysts rose from their stations, voices lifting in sharp fragments of confusion.

Priya's heart slammed against her ribs. Her hands gripped the edge of her desk as the emergency lighting painted everything in shades of warning.

Systems rebooted with agonizing slowness.

When the displays finally came back online, they came back clean.

Too clean.

The logs showed nothing. No trace of the intrusion she'd been tracking. No record of her countermeasures engaging. No evidence that the convergence she'd witnessed had ever occurred. The data had returned to baseline patterns, placid and unremarkable. PANOPTICON's indicators pulsed their quiet green assurances.

S3t hadn't just escaped. He had erased himself entirely. Every log. Every timestamp. Every piece of evidence she might have used to prove he existed.

Priya sat alone in the operations center, bathed in the glow of green indicators that promised everything was fine.

Marcus was gone. The evidence was gone.

And she had chosen this.

# Chapter 4

The conference room offered nothing to distinguish itself from the hundred others Priya had occupied over the years. Windowless and climate-controlled. Government-issue chairs around a polished table. The air tasted of recycled neutrality.

The senior official sat at the head of the table, his posture projecting authority without investment.

“After extensive review of the available data and analysis,” he said, “the committee has determined that the activity documented in this case file represents anomalous but inconclusive patterns.” He paused. “Given the absence of corroborating evidence and resource constraints, we are recommending formal archival of this investigation effective immediately.”

He glanced at the file in front of him. “For the record, the committee wishes to note that Agent Patel’s methodology was sound. Her analysis was thorough, her countermeasures were creative, and her documentation exceeded standard protocols.” He looked up, his expression unchanged. “The outcome does not reflect a failure of tradecraft.”

*Anomalous but inconclusive.*

The words landed with the quiet finality of a door closing. Priya heard them from somewhere distant, their edges softened but their meaning intact. The phrase erased months of sleepless nights and cold chai and a broken engagement with the efficiency of a redaction marker.

She thought of Marcus gathering his overnight bag. The ring still sitting on the kitchen table where she’d left it. S3t’s message. *Nice try, P.*

All of it reduced to three words in a bureaucratic summary. The committee’s acknowledgment of her competence somehow made it worse. She had done everything right. Used every tool available. Employed methods they hadn’t considered. And still came up empty.

She hadn't failed. She had simply been beaten by something the institution couldn't explain and wouldn't pursue.

"Agent Patel, do you have any final comments for the record?"

The question hung in the air. She felt the weight of possible responses pressing against her throat. The arguments she could make. The evidence she could cite. The desperate certainty still insisting that S3t was real, that her analysis had been correct, that the institution was making a mistake.

But she had made those arguments before. The institution had heard her, considered her, and reached its conclusion.

She met the official's gaze.

"Understood."

The meeting moved on immediately. Someone made a notation. Chairs shifted as participants began the preliminary movements of departure. When the meeting adjourned, Priya gathered the archive documents into her arms. They were lighter than she expected. A thin stack of paper representing the formal end of something that had consumed her for months.

She walked out of the conference room with measured steps. Colleagues passed her in the hallway, their gazes sliding away with the careful politeness reserved for professional losses no one knew how to acknowledge.

Behind her, the conference room door closed with a soft pneumatic sigh.

She was halfway down the hallway when her phone buzzed.

Unknown number. No caller ID. Just a text, glowing on the screen: *You almost had me. That was fun. Until next time, P.*

Priya stood motionless in the hallway, the fluorescent lights humming overhead. He had her personal number. Not her work line, not a classified channel. Her phone. The one Marcus used to call. The one her mother had programmed with emergency contacts years ago.

S3t wasn't just in the networks anymore. He was in her life.

She stared at the message for a long moment. Then she deleted it, headed to her car, and drove home.

\*

Hours later, Priya stood before her bathroom mirror adjusting the fall of her mother's midnight blue sari. The silk pooled in careful folds where she gathered it at her waist, each pleat requiring the precise attention her mother had taught her years ago. She had not worn this sari in over a year. Tonight felt like something that required armor, and this was the only kind she had left.

She moved through the remaining preparations with methodical care. Pins securing the pleats. Minimal makeup applied with steady hands. Kohl lining her eyes in the style her grandmother had favored.

The gold bracelet came last. She lifted it from the small wooden box on her dresser, its surface worn smooth by decades of wear. Her grandmother had worn this bracelet every day for thirty years. Through her own work, her own struggles, her own moments of choosing to step back into the world when staying hidden would have been easier. Priya fastened it around her wrist and felt the cool metal settle against her pulse point.

The woman in the mirror looked ready. That would have to be enough.

\*

Priya paused at the entrance to the ballroom, one hand resting on the doorframe. Inside, light and sound and the particular performance of people pretending to enjoy themselves. She could leave. No one would notice. No one would care.

She stepped through anyway.

The Intelligence Community Foundation gala shimmered with controlled excess. Crystal chandeliers descended from vaulted ceilings in cascading tiers, their light scattered across marble floors polished to a reflective gleam. Orchestral music threaded through the hum of conversation. The flowers on every table had been arranged with mathematical precision, their colors coordinated to complement the foundation's logo on tasteful banners near the entrance.

Priya navigated the crowd with detached awareness. She accepted a glass of champagne from a passing server and held it without drinking, the crystal stem cool against her fingers. Around her, familiar rituals unfolded in their practiced patterns. Strategic handshakes. Forced laughter at

appropriate intervals. Compliments calibrated for effect rather than sincerity.

She drifted toward the periphery of the room, seeking the relative quiet near tall windows that looked out over the city lights. She was considering leaving early when movement across the room caught her attention.

A woman in an elegant black dress stood near one of the flower-laden tables, her posture suggesting a conversation she had not chosen. The dress was simple and well-cut, accessorized with understated jewelry. Her dark hair was gathered in a low chignon that exposed the line of her neck, and her expression held a polished smile that did not reach her eyes. Her shoulders carried a subtle tension, a protective draw inward.

The source of her discomfort stood too close. A man in a tailored suit, his frame tall and lean, his posture expansive in the way of someone accustomed to taking up space. His hand rested on the woman's arm with a familiarity that felt possessive, his fingers positioned just above her elbow in a grip that lingered too long to be casual.

Priya felt her instincts engage before her conscious mind had fully processed the scene. Years of reading patterns had trained her to recognize dynamics that never announced themselves directly. The woman's smile was too careful. Her weight shifted slightly away from the man even as she maintained the appearance of engagement. Her responses came at intervals that suggested she was waiting for an opening rather than participating in an exchange.

Something cold and clear crystallized in Priya's chest. The way power disguised itself as charm. The way discomfort could be made invisible by the social obligation to remain pleasant. The way someone could be trapped in plain sight.

Priya set down her untouched champagne and crossed the ballroom, her path direct and unhurried. The crowd parted around her without resistance.

As she drew closer, fragments of the conversation reached her.

“...your expertise at the Smithsonian,” the man was saying, his voice carrying the particular tone of someone who believed flattery was the same as charm. “I’ve always thought private collectors could benefit from that

kind of institutional knowledge. Perhaps we could discuss it somewhere quieter.”

The woman’s response was polite but measured. “I’m afraid my schedule is quite full at the moment.”

“Surely you could make an exception.” His hand tightened on her arm. Priya arrived at the precise moment the woman’s smile began to falter.

“Excuse me. I’m so sorry to interrupt, but I was hoping to steal you for just a moment.” Priya’s voice carried practiced warmth, addressing the woman directly, positioning herself at an angle that forced the man to step back. “I’ve been looking everywhere for someone with expertise in historical artifacts, and a colleague mentioned you might be the person to ask.”

The fabrication emerged smoothly. The man’s hand fell away as the conversation’s geometry shifted. Within seconds, another opportunity materialized across the room, and he excused himself with automatic courtesy.

The pressure dissipated as quickly as it had gathered.

In a quieter corner of the ballroom, the woman let out a breath of genuine relief. “Thank you. I’ve been trying to extract myself from that conversation for twenty minutes.”

“Some people don’t read the signals,” Priya said. “Or they read them and don’t care.”

“The latter, I think.” The woman extended her hand. “Emma Wilson. And I appreciate the rescue, even if there’s no project and you were just being kind.”

Priya took the offered hand. Emma’s grip was firm, her palm cool and dry. “Priya Patel. And there really is no project. I just recognized the look of someone trying to escape.”

“That obvious?”

“Only to someone who’s been there.”

They fell into conversation with an ease that surprised Priya. Emma had an observational wit that emerged in dry comments about the room around them. The way the foundation’s director laughed exactly three seconds too long at every joke. The strategic positioning of certain couples

performing happiness for professional benefit. Priya found herself responding in kind.

“Champagne has a way of inflating confidence,” Priya remarked. “Give someone three glasses and suddenly they’re convinced their security clearance is a personality trait.”

Emma laughed, a sound bright enough to cut through the ambient noise of the gala. And then, surprising herself, Priya laughed too. The sensation felt foreign in her chest, like using a muscle she’d forgotten she had. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed. Months, probably. Before the hunt consumed everything.

Emma’s smile carried genuine amusement, the expression reaching her eyes in a way that transformed her face. “In my world it’s the same thing, just different currency. People assume that because they can afford to collect art, they understand it. Access and appreciation are not the same thing.”

“What is your world, exactly?”

“Smithsonian American History Museum. Assistant Director and curator. Authentication, preservation, the occasional recovery of things that got lost along the way.” Emma tilted her head, studying Priya with actual curiosity. “And yours?”

“Cybersecurity. Patterns, mostly. Finding order in places that look like chaos.”

They exchanged the broad outlines of their work without crossing into details that would require lies or evasions. The conversation felt balanced in a way professional networking rarely achieved. Two people sharing information because they were interested, not because they were calculating advantage.

Before Priya could consider what that meant, Emma pressed something into her hand. A small card with contact information printed in clean lines.

“In case you ever do have a project,” Emma said. “Or just want to escape another gala.”

“Thank you.” Priya tucked the card into her clutch. “I might take you up on that.”

\*

Later, at home, the apartment waited in its familiar silence. The whiteboards still lined the walls. The engagement ring still sat on the kitchen table where she had left it.

Priya picked up the ring and held it for a long moment, feeling its weight. Then she placed it in a drawer and closed it.

Her laptop sat open on the table. She reached for it, then stopped. Instead, she pulled out Emma's card and looked at the phone number printed there.

For months, she had chased a ghost through classified networks. She had sacrificed her relationship, her sleep, her connection to anything outside the hunt. And she had nothing to show for it except archived files and institutional indifference.

S3t was still out there. She knew that with the same certainty she knew her own name. But the version of herself who had made that hunt the center of everything, who had let Marcus walk away while she stared at screens, who had believed that intelligence and preparation could always outpace chaos... that version had reached the end of her pursuit and found nothing waiting there.

She looked at Emma's card again.

Not a declaration of strength. Not a triumphant step into a new chapter. Just a small choice, almost insignificant. The kind of thing that might mean nothing under different circumstances.

She typed a message: *Coffee sometime? I know a place that actually serves decent chai.*

The message sent with a soft sound.

Priya set the phone aside and looked at the window above the sink. The woman reflected there looked tired. Uncertain. Like someone who had spent months chasing something and finally decided to stop.

She was about to turn away when her phone buzzed.

Emma's reply glowed on the screen: *How about dinner instead? There's a place called Jyoti's near my apartment. I think it may be the best Indian food in the city. You can let me know if I'm wrong. Plus, I could use a night out. Tomorrow at 6?*

Something loosened in Priya's chest. A knot she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

She typed back: *Perfect. See you there.*

Tomorrow, she would have dinner with Emma Wilson. She would sit across from someone who had no idea what she had lost. She would eat food that reminded her of her grandmother's kitchen and make conversation and practice being a person who existed in the world rather than apart from it.

It was not much. It was not nearly enough to fill the spaces that remained empty.

But it was a start.

DAVID R LENG

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He was being led to it.

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