



The Hanuman Cipher

Nikhil Bajaj

THE HANUMAN CIPHER

by Nikhil Bajaj

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For those who listen between breaths.

Author's Note

Some stories announce themselves with thunder. Others whisper through static, through satellite data that refuses to behave, through patterns that emerge when you are patient enough to let numbers speak.

The Hanuman Cipher began that way—with a young engineer in a Colaba café noticing anomalies that shouldn't repeat, with a researcher learning to breathe in patterns that made stone respond, with communities reclaiming knowledge that had been theirs all along but that institutions had convinced them required expert permission to access.

This is a story about power and service, about the difference between seizing what you discover and stewarding it, about learning that some knowledge tests you before it teaches you. It's about breath as language, stone as teacher, and the recognition that ancient wisdom was often more sophisticated than modern frameworks give it credit for.

But more than anything, this is a story about consent—about asking permission before crossing thresholds, about listening to communities who've maintained sacred sites for centuries, about understanding that some capabilities should never be deployed just because they can be.

If you're coming to this story fresh, without having read *The Ashvattha Protocol*, you should know: this world contains mysteries. It contains the Great Seal and the Accord—ethical

frameworks older than institutions, preserved by communities called the Protectors. It contains places like Bhuj, where Riham learned that some sites test worthiness through resonance that unmakes those who approach with forcing. And it contains the possibility that what we call myth was sometimes just technology so old we forgot it was technical.

You don't need the first book to understand this one. But you should know: this is Book 2 in a journey that's learning, slowly and at cost, that some knowledge requires you to change before it allows itself to be known.

To my readers who trust me with their time and attention: thank you for approaching this story with the same patience and curiosity that its characters had to learn. The questions you'll have—about what's real, what's metaphor, what's possible when breath meets stone—those questions are exactly the ones the lattice asks of everyone who encounters it.

To Riham, my fierce, brilliant daughter: This book carries your name because you carry the qualities I most admire—courage that asks questions when silence would be easier, curiosity that refuses to accept "that's just how it is" as an answer, and the kind of integrity that recognises some things matter more than convenience. The character who shares your name learned to breathe discipline into stone. May you always question authority that hasn't earned your trust, always defend what's sacred, and always remember that real strength is knowing when not to use the power you have.

And to the communities—fictional in these pages, but inspired by real custodians of sacred knowledge across India who've preserved what institutions tried to claim—this story is my

attempt to honour your work, your choice to protect rather than to profit, your insistence that some wisdom belongs to everyone because it belongs to no one.

May we all learn to ask permission before crossing thresholds. May we recognise that worthiness is proven through restraint as much as through capability. And may we remember that some knowledge survives precisely because it requires transformation of the seeker.

The investigation continues. **Measured. Consent first.** Bound by recognition that breath is sacred and stone remembers.

Nikhil Bajaj

Tech Professional | Storyteller | Recovering Control Freak
Learning That Some Things Cannot Be Owned

A Note on Continuity

The Hanuman Cipher takes place one year after the events of The Ashvattha Protocol (Book 1).

While this book stands alone, readers familiar with Book 1 will recognise:

Riham Singh, who survived the Bhuj Unravelling and carries its echo-sense

The Great Seal and the Accord, ethical frameworks governing sacred knowledge

The Protectors, communities who've preserved ancient wisdom through practice

Amma Ratan, custodian who taught Riham that some thresholds test before they teach

If you're starting here: that's fine. The story will explain what you need to know. Trust the breath patterns, question the institutions, and remember that sometimes the most advanced technology looks like prayer until you understand it's protocol.

Certain words in this book—lattice, breath, null, accord—refer to ideas that evolve through the story.

Their meanings are context-driven rather than fixed.

A glossary of recurring terms appears at the end for readers who wish to revisit them.

PROLOGUE

1: Colaba, Night Shift

Colaba never truly slept. It dozed like a cat with one eye open—rickshaws exhaling, scooters murmuring at idle, the Arabian Sea carrying gossip on its briny breath. Neon bled onto rain-darkened pavement and into the windows of Mumbai Chai & Bytes, a twenty-four-hour café that smelled of cardamom and warm plastic. Rows of rented desktops hummed like a chorus of crickets. Fans ticked. Routers blinked, patient and green.

Samar Nagpal preferred the far table under the flickering tube light, where the wall socket had a loosened faceplate he could nudge with a coin when the UPS forgot itself. He sat with the collapsed posture of a young man who had trained his spine to curve around screens: faded band tee, ripped jeans, a mop of hair that kept falling in his eyes, the distracted genius of someone who held three ideas at once and none of them where he'd put them. He nursed a cutting-sweet chai and watched his terminals fill with numbers.

He had not gone looking for anything heroic. It had started with boredom of a fussy kind—the boredom of a mind underfed by coursework. He pulled recent ISRO datasets for a personal project comparing satellite magnetometer noise against a patchwork of colonial river maps and temple alignments. He liked the awkwardness of it, the way old maps forced modern data to speak sideways. Nights slipped by that way, purposeful and invisible.

Tonight, three scripts chugged along: one cleaning satellite noise, one mapping historical shrines with an algorithm he'd bullied into respecting folklore, the third trying to find rhythms where the world swore there were none.

From here he could see the reflection of his graphs in the window—blue ghosts stacked on black—and the owner's son sleeping on a stool beside the counter. A fan blade clicked once per rotation. He matched its click without meaning to, breath settling into four-counts that made the mind less slippery. The café's noise—scooter coughs, a chair scraping, a laugh that didn't land—braided into background while numbers assembled into something that asked to be read.

2: Noise That Wouldn't Behave

On his monitor, a field of faint anomalies rolled by like the static at the edge of a dream. Most were noise—instrument hiccups, cosmic sulks. One set wouldn't sit still. Sub-threshold pulses flickered over a tight cluster of coordinates in the Anjanadri hills of Karnataka, legendary birthplace of Hanuman. They were almost nothing. That was what kept him staring—the way almost-nothing repeated.

The heat in the café was dense, sticky—the kind that made skin itch and thoughts slow. Dust hung in the tube light's glow like suspended questions.

He wrote a filter and then another, the way one checks if the itch is inside the shirt or the skin. The pulses refused to be dismissed. When he laid a transparent layer of ancient pilgrimage paths over the hill contours, a pattern shyly resolved. What if I'm just finding what I want to see? The thought came unbidden, familiar. He swapped the dataset. He re-ran everything with conservative assumptions. It was still there: a lattice that did not yet declare itself, like scaffolding glimpsed through fog.

He blinked. His eyes burned. The café owner replaced his empty glass without a word. Samar murmured thanks and tacked a sticky note to the edge of his screen: verify with fresh ISRO pull, different window.

The router hiccuped. A pair of college kids squealed at a video jump scare. Somewhere behind him a chair leg scraped concrete. The night laid out its familiar, unthreatening miscellany. Samar pulled a different period of ISRO data, this one with a slight bias correction he usually distrusted. The lattice sharpened, then softened, like breath fog on glass. Each faint spike coincided with a boundary condition in his temple-alignment model, tiny inflections that tugged at his childhood memory of rummaging through his grandfather's trunk and finding a thin brass idol of Hanuman, arm upraised, as if about to leap.

3: Pattern, Then Discipline

"Don't get romantic," he told himself. Romance was how one hallucinated patterns. He wrote out his chain of custody in a plaintext log: source URLs, hash checks, the offending assumptions. He spun up a fresh notebook with ruthless commentary. He named the script that executed the composite overlay `vayu_meter.py` with irritation at himself for indulging the Sanskrit. Naming things was a weakness.

He should have noticed earlier that the café had grown momentarily still. The fans ticked, but softer. The hum of the router narrowed, as if the air above it had been combed. It wasn't silence. It was a kind of attention. A laugh caught and didn't finish.

He wrote three questions on a fresh line because fresh lines were how he stopped from running ahead of his feet:

—Are the spikes coupled to wind shear, or breath-paced phenomena anthropically imposed on terrain?

—If coupling exists, can a metre act as an access key rather than a command?

—What happens to memory when movement is bound to responsibility?

He preferred discipline to drama: chain-of-custody notes, a clean notebook, and a checksum you could show to someone who didn't like you. He wrote out a procedure that would stand up in a room where nobody believed in anything: mirror locally; hash; mirror off-grid; hash again; only then look for poetry. The work made his pulse uninteresting, which was a relief.

4: A Hand Under the Rack

One of the rented desktops in the front row coughed a plastic rattle and the cheap aluminium server rack behind the counter gave a defeated lurch, a loose caster rolling off the lip of the blistered floor mat.

The rack tipped. A tray of backup drives slid within it, the cheap metal groaning in a register that made Samar's teeth ache. He half-rose—his pulse spiking with the helpless panic of watching disaster unfold—but someone was already there—a lean man in a wrinkled, saffron-brown half-sleeve shirt, eyes gentle as the inside of a coconut. He was where no one had seen him stand, one palm under the cage of metal, steadying it with the casual

economy one uses to shut a swaying door. The rack settled. The tray of drives thunked back into place. The man's other hand, broad and nicked, found the bad caster with a toe and nudged it cleanly into its track. The café owner stammered thanks. The man smiled, a brief ripple at the corner of his mouth, and for the smallest fraction of a moment Samar felt the pressure signature of a gust that didn't move anything except the tiny hairs along his forearms.

He blinked again and the man was paying at the counter, his wrist circled with a red thread gone pale with age. He left no shadow worth remembering. The bell on the door chimed once, then once more—twice, evenly spaced, like a metronome practicing humility.

Mumbai had ways for a presence to suggest itself without making claim. There were ways the saffron figure—or figures like him—appeared at edges where things threatened to collapse. In the marketplace behind the café, vendors swore a stranger had steadied a collapsing tin roof with a broom-handle and the economy of a man who had done this before. A week earlier, a constable told anyone who would listen that he'd watched someone lift a fallen motorbike off a pinned rider with the casual strength one uses to move a stool. In monsoon season, a faded red cloth appeared on a rain-slick step seconds before an old woman placed her foot; no one remembered who tied it, but the woman remembered the hand that steadied her elbow when she turned to thank whoever wasn't there.

He never begged. He never proselytized. Sometimes a coin appeared in a child's palm after standing too long in a queue. Sometimes a fevered brow was touched and the fever broke by morning. People remembered the pressure of fingers, not the

face. They told each other it had happened, then told themselves it was only kindness dressed in coincidence. That was easier to live with than the alternative.

Samar's earliest memory of the saffron figure was a thing with the sharpness of colour against rain. He had been seven, pressed against a station window watching the world make itself soggy. Monsoon had a way of drawing people's attention inward—clothes clung, the day's edges dissolved, and life became compact. He noticed the man because everyone else in the compartment was avoiding him: an instinctive privacy that people keep when they think their gods might be nosy.

The figure stood at the far end of the platform like a punctuation mark. He wore cloth that was too clean to be poor and too faded to be new. His hair was not long; his beard was the same patchwork as his clothing: lived-in, present, not ornamental. He had a satchel that was not large enough for sleeping, but he also did not seem to sleep. The eyes—Samar remembered these with the lucidity children possess for things that do not belong—were the colour of dry earth and had the patient quality of something that had become used to being a question.

Samar watched him because children notice the incongruent and then assign it a story. He asked his mother later about the man, and she told him that pilgrims always came and went and that his curiosity was a trait that needed channelling. She not-so-gently told him to mind his studies. But the man had left something in the child's mind like an unlit match: potential heat, waiting for a set of hands and a little luck.

Years later, when Samar was older and had learned the necessary arrogance of a scientist—trust the data, distrust your

intuitions—he would find the same shape of the man's impression inside his own margins. The saffron figure had not transformed him into a believer; belief requires a kind of submission his particular brain could not accept. Instead, the encounter taught him a different curiosity: that some things repeated themselves across scales and centuries, that patterns preferred to hide in plain sight, and that a careful enough instrument could be an act of gentleness rather than violence.

He began to keep a notebook of small oddities. The first entry was about a pattern in the noise on a cheap radio that refused to be explained by the usual arcs of interference. At university he spent nights writing scripts and learning how to chain outputs into hashes so that a claim could survive the inevitable mockery of peers. That habit of private documentation—of cataloguing possibility rather than pronouncing truth—was a kind of inheritance. Samar learned to be fastidious about his sins: he logged his false positives, he wrote down the nights he had thought something magical and then found it mundane, and he labelled his drives with anxious clarity.

The saffron figure kept appearing, like punctuation throughout his life: at a summer fair he saw him beside a stall selling sugarcane, wafting his hand as if to bless the sugar; at a lecture Samar nearly missed a year later, the man sat at the back taking notes in a small clear hand. These appearances never explained themselves. They were not dramatic. They were the kind of intrusion that asks for a steady eye, not a headline. They taught Samar that if one wanted to understand something properly, patience was the best tool. And so he learned patience with the stubbornness of someone who did not have a choice.

Samar sat slowly. His hands remembered the keyboard. The lattice on his screen remembered how to be coy.

5: The Watcher in the Crowd

There are ways a presence suggests itself without making claim. The saffron figure was not always saffron; sometimes he wore cloth faded by years of sun and dust. Sometimes he was a thin man with a cap and a long coat; sometimes a gaunt elder stopping at a station bench. What did not change was the impression he left: a pause in the rhythm of ordinary life, a small calibration among those who saw him. People remember what they can, and memory is a treacherous archivist; it files away the blunt edges and keeps what is useful for the heart.

He did not announce himself with miracles. He arrived at edges—where things threatened to tip, where small decisions carried consequences that would echo for years. In the marketplace he moved like a rumour that had learned to be polite. Vendors who had known each other for decades would trade notes about the man who asked no questions and gave no answers, who observed as if cataloguing mistakes rather than stories. "He looks like a pilgrim," one would say, and another would reply, "A pilgrim remembers too much."

In Delhi, during the riots that followed Partition, a woman clutching her infant son had been cornered in a burning lane. The mob was three streets away, their voices carrying like thunder. She pressed herself into a doorway, praying to gods whose names she barely remembered. A figure in faded cloth appeared, gestured once—a simple motion toward an alley she had not noticed—and lifted a fallen beam that blocked the path with the

economy of someone moving a chair. When she turned to thank him, he was already gone. The alley led to a Sikh gurdwara where she and forty others found shelter until the violence passed. Years later, her son would become a civil servant who quietly amended housing policies to prevent displacement. He never knew why certain streets felt sacred to him.

Once, in a city where monsoons made the roofs into tentative boats, a woman saw him beside a broken well that had poisoned three children the week prior. She swore he had placed a tiny red mark on the lip with his finger, like a warning. "It was like blessing, but for the thing itself," she said later, baffled by her own conviction. The well was sealed the next day. In another town a constable who had seen the man years earlier said he had watched the saffron figure stand at the edge of a funeral and bow with the precision of someone who had been trained in ritual but who knew not to claim it as his own. The deceased had been a corrupt official. The constable, who had once accepted bribes from that man, quit the force within the month and began teaching children in a government school. He could never explain why the shame had arrived so suddenly, so completely.

At the border, during a skirmish in the high passes, a young jawan named Ravi had been separated from his unit. Snow blinded him, altitude stole his breath. He collapsed beside a cairn of stones, certain he would freeze. A lean figure appeared through the white, carrying nothing, wearing cloth too thin for the cold. The man said nothing, only gestured for Ravi to follow, and led him along a path Ravi's frozen mind could not track. When they reached the unit's fallback position, Ravi turned to offer thanks. The man was already retreating into the storm. The unit's medic found Ravi holding a red thread he did not remember receiving. It was warm against his frostbitten fingers.

Ravi survived. Twenty years later, as a brigadier, he would refuse an order to shell a village sheltering refugees, choosing court-martial over complicity. His defence was simple: "I was taught that strength without service is only weight."

Some tried to make a god of him. Shrine makers once proposed a modest stone in a lane to honour him, then removed the idea when the man who had watched them move on came back and spoke a single sentence that stopped their plan: "Make a place for what lives, not for what you fear." That sentence was not pedantic; it reeked of a kind of surveillance that was tender to human vanity. After that the shrine's pillars remained unbuilt, but the lane itself became a place where disputes were settled without fists, as if the ground itself remembered restraint.

In a village struck by drought, he appeared at the well where elders argued over water rights. He said nothing, only knelt and placed his hand on the cracked earth. The next day, a farmer's child noticed a seep of moisture near a forgotten stone cistern. Engineers arrived, drilled, and found an aquifer that irrigated three villages. The farmer, an illiterate man who had once beaten his wife in drunken rage, stopped drinking that season. When asked why, he said, "A hand touched me. I was thirsty, but not for water." His neighbours did not understand, but his wife did. She began to teach other women to read.

The figure's apparition was not always gentle. In years of starvation and rumour and knife-edges he had been seen where trouble brewed with a patience that made accusation unnecessary. A landlord in Bihar, notorious for hoarding grain while tenants starved, woke one morning to find every lock on his granaries opened. Not broken—opened, as if by keys he'd never made. The grain had been distributed through the night.

Guards reported seeing a figure with impossible strength moving sacks as though they weighed nothing. The landlord, enraged, demanded investigation. The police found only a single red thread tied to the granary door, and a message chalked in clean script: "Feed them, or be fed to memory." The landlord's cruelty did not end, but three of his sons quietly began redistributing grain. One became a union organizer. Another started a cooperative. The third simply stopped being cruel.

Parents, later, would bring slightly agitated children and ask if the man could do something to spare their sons the kinds of mistakes that became long and expensive. He would, sometimes, place his hand on a child's forehead and walk away without ceremony. The child would not forget the pressure of his fingers; the parent would remember the way the man had looked at them, as if reading a ledger that stretched backward and forward through time.

People invented rituals around these encounters. They tied red threads to doorways. They left sweets at crossroads. They taught their children that strength was a question, not an answer, and that the best way to honour the wind was to let it pass through you without taking more than it gave. The history of ritual is chiefly the history of humans making meaning to bear heat, and the heat this figure left was not of miracles but of conscience—quiet, relentless, and utterly human in its demand.

6: Custody and Questions

He wrote the name in the margin he had promised himself not to write: Hanuman Cipher. The words sat there, slightly ridiculous, and refused to leave. He didn't want a myth. He wanted a chance

to be right about something difficult in a way that did not require anyone to clap. He opened his mail and drafted a message to Professor Asha Kulkarni.

Subject: Anjanadri—repeating sub-threshold signature linked to alignment model.

He kept it to what she would accept: data lineage, filters, preliminary overlay, the limitations he had not solved and would not pretend to. He did not mention the man with the steady hand or the bell that chimed like a breath. He attached hashes and put the plain-text log in a repo that only his future, more sceptical self could see. He copied Riham's last known address because the academic world was small and grief had a way of making small worlds smaller.

He forked the clean dataset to a weather-stained thumb drive and a microSD he slid under the torn foam of his backpack strap. He kicked off an encrypted push to an off-grid box he had convinced a friend to let him keep behind a broken television in a tea stall two lanes over. The upload crawled—each percentage point felt like waiting for exam results. He didn't mind. The crawl gave him time to wish for steady things: for professors to write back, for police to mind the right trouble, for nobody important to notice the wrong thing too early.

His terminal clock blinked. 02:43. He saved. He closed his eyes. In the darkness of his own lids, he could almost map the lattice as a musician might: rests where the silence mattered as much as the note, a leap across a measure to where the melody pretended not to go before it did. He opened his eyes to a wafer of wind that slid through the café and pressed everything one millimetre closer to itself. The tube light over his head flickered and then held. Every

screen in the room hesitated for a hiccup—except his, which did not.

He reached without looking and tightened the screw on the faceplate with the coin he kept for it. He took a breath and counted the exhale because his grandfather had taught him that counting was one way to keep the world from counting you.

When the upload finished, Samar closed every window, wiped the machine he had touched with the finality of a ritual, and paid. His hands were steady. His chest felt tight—the small, private terror of having sent something into the world that could not be unsent.

Outside, the lane was wet and honest and small. The sea beyond the block grumbled its old joke that it had, in fact, seen everything.

He turned up his collar against a wind that wasn't there and thought, not for the first time, that faith and pattern recognition were cousins you didn't invite to the same wedding. He walked home anyway, holding both by the hand.

CHAPTER 1 - THE RECALL

"Prāṇa moves where attention rests. What you measure, you become entangled with."

—Fragment, Accord Observational Protocols (Date Unknown)

1: The Signal

Delhi mornings wore their light like a fresh bandage—bright, a little too clean, promising more healing than the day could always deliver. Riham sat cross-legged on the balcony floor, palms on knees, breath paced to a count she could keep without thinking. The scar under her collarbone ached with the honest ache of tissue that had learned weather. It was not pain that demanded attention, only a memory in the flesh, reminding her that healing and permanence were not the same thing. She accepted it. To her, the ache was not an enemy but a metronome that kept her body tethered to truth.

The phone on the wicker table vibrated against a saucer. She let it. Inhale four. Hold four. Exhale six. The city exhaled with her: milk boiler whistle, scooter cough, temple bell. On the seventh beat she opened her eyes and took the call.

“Asha?”

Professor Kulkarni’s voice was gentler than the last months had trained it to be. “You are well enough to hear an anomaly?”

“That’s not a medical scale,” Riham said, and heard the softness in her own voice with faint surprise. “Tell me.”

“A student—no, a... Samar. He’s been mapping declassified ISRO noise against... well, he has an alignment overlay that doesn’t embarrass itself.” The professor exhaled. “Anjanadri. Faint, repeating spikes. He named the lattice Hanuman Cipher in a margin he then apologized to me for.”

Riham rose, the old twinge agreeing to be background. “You trust his lineage?”

“I trust his caution more than his enthusiasm. He logged his sins in plain text. He sent hashes. He asked the right questions. He copied you.”

Her second phone buzzed on cue, the one she rarely gave out. She let the screen glow to life—an email from an unknown Gmail with a plain subject: Anjanadri—repeating sub-threshold signature linked to alignment model. The body was tidy. Screenshots, hashes, bullet points—no adjectives asking for favours.

“And the Ministry?”

“Already calling it an instrument error when they call it at all,” Asha said. “Sharma’s office requested any ‘extraneous’ telemetry be forwarded to a shared archive for ‘integrity.’”

Riham felt the small, precise tiredness she associated with forms. “Rana?”

“Working. Lawful bones are in place.”

Her doorbell rang. She frowned. “Hold a moment.”

She crossed the small living room, past the bookshelf with its stubborn shelf of Bhuj notebooks she allowed to exist without touching. The peephole showed a courier in a sun-bleached cap, holding a package the size of a pomegranate.

The parcel was wrapped in brown paper with a string knotted with attention, not haste. The return address was a blank rectangle that said more than it should. Inside lay a length of red-and-gold thread, the kind village grandmothers kept in tins beside cloves and unsent letters. It was warm, though the morning was not. Buried with it, on thin paper folded neatly three times, a line in a careful, old-fashioned hand:

Count the wind, then carry its weight.

She did not realise she had held her breath until the exhale made her light-headed. She steadied a palm on the doorframe and waited for the steadiness to decide to be mutual.

"Asha," she said into the phone, "I'd like to go down. Quietly. A small team. We keep the data on our machines, mirrored where Rana says. No uploads to the Ministry until we write our report. I won't be erased twice." The words came out harder than she meant, old anger surfacing like scar tissue.

On the other end, paper rustled. "I will sign what you need me to sign," the professor said. "Rana will mind the edge." A pause. "I have one more thing. The boy—Samar—he's... careful. He'll be of use if you can keep him from making himself useful to enemies."

"I'll make the call," Riham said.

After they hung up she stood with the thread in her palm and looked at the balcony where the plants had learned her absence

and grown anyway. She tied the thread around her wrist with the remembered awkwardness of a child at a festival who had not yet learned to pretend to be indifferent to blessing. The knot sat against the pulse as if listening.

Her other phone vibrated again. A message from a number she did not know: Traffic analytics indicate media interest in Hampi region. Suggest narrowing movements. —R.

Rana never wasted syllables. Riham typed back: I will brief you on a controlled check. No data leaves without chain-of-custody. Her thumb hovered. She added: Thank you.

The apartment door was ajar. She did not remember leaving it that way. Perhaps the courier. Perhaps her own inattention. The fear that had once been a reflex now consulted her before it rose. She looked at the lock. The strike plate was clean. The floor held no grit where there should be none. The only shift was the faintest scent of sandal and dust, the way old prayer halls smell when the doors open for evening.

The thread on her wrist warmed as a wind that did not belong to Delhi mornings pressed the curtains and then set them back again. The bell at the neighbourhood shrine downstairs chimed twice, evenly spaced, with a restraint that felt like someone keeping a promise.

She called Samar. He answered on the second ring with the quick politeness of someone braced for disbelief.

“Riham Singh,” he said, surprised and embarrassed in the same breath. “Professor Kulkarni gave me your—look, I know the name I wrote was—”

“You sent your sins with your data,” she said. “That’s half the work.” She heard herself smile and let it stand. “We’re going to field-check, quietly. You’re invited if you can follow rules.”

“I like rules when I write them,” he said, which was almost the wrong answer and then exactly the right one because he said, quickly, “I’ll take yours. I’ll bring the clean drive and the bad ideas labelled clearly.”

“Good,” she said. “Pack for heat. And for being told to wait.”

After she ended the call, she stood long enough to count one more breath cycle because it was the kind of counting that kept promises orderly. She packed the small bag that had once been a big bag before she learned how to carry less. Field notebook. Two pencils. The roll of tape that had saved more cables than stitches. A square of cloth her mother had used to cover bowls of rising dough. She slid her own notebooks into the bottom and felt their weight with the prickle of a scar about to remember itself and decide not to.

On the way out, she locked the door with the deliberate care of someone willing to come back to the same life if the world allowed. On the landing, the air moved. Not much. Just enough to turn a dead leaf on the tile so it pointed towards the stairs. Sandalwood drifted from somewhere, faint as memory.

She followed it because direction was sometimes a gift, and she had decided to stop pretending she didn't recognise the shape of one.

2: Samar's Lattice

Samar kept his room in Colaba in a state of controlled collapse. Posters peeled at the corners; a mattress leaned against a wall like a tired sail. Whiteboards leaned in the corners too, covered in a maze of notation that looked indecipherable to anyone who hadn't let numbers become the way they kept promises. He worked at a desk crowded with tea-stained mugs and devices that had once been opulent and were now merely useful. His laptop was a dark, battered thing with more scripts than casing; stickers on its lid were half-removed maps of places he'd never been and people he'd probably never meet.

He liked the room best at dawn, before the building's morning chaos spilled into the street, before Mumbai's traffic found its voice. At that hour the machine noises in Samar's head had the same cadence as the city—measured, predictable, and therefore able to be modeled. He kept models the way people kept photographs. They held moments steady.

He had named the lattice because names made things obeyable. Hanuman Cipher had begun as a joke—a nod to a footnote someone once left in a scanned pamphlet about myth and signal processing—but names had a way of changing the world.

The thing that woke him in the middle of the night two weeks ago had not been the name. It had been that the noise, once averaged and folded, drew a shape that matched a map he did not expect: ridgelines of Anjanadri stitched into frequency space. The hum of his laptop's cooling fan vibrated through his wrists as he ran the overlay again and again, disbelieving the computer as his first moral act. Each run returned the same improbable mapping. Frequencies folding over geography, peaks matching temple spires, troughs unspooling like riverbeds.

He drank tea and ran the script again.

He told himself he had done it as an exercise—to test correlation thresholds, to sharpen a thesis. He told himself he had done it because it was the only thing that made his brain stop negotiating with its own anxiety. He told himself a lot of things. What he could not tell himself with any conviction was why, when he plotted the phase shift for a certain frequency band, a cluster of small spikes formed a repeating lattice that matched something his grandmother had traced on a scrap of paper decades ago: a geometric prayer she used to fold into the hems of saris.

Samar's grandmother had spoken to stars like neighbours. As a child he'd laughed at her syllable-strings. Later, he'd wanted her certainty back. Science gave him equations; she had given him the confidence to insist the world listen.

He thought about that when he wrote the margin note: Hanuman Cipher. He wrote it and then felt a childish embarrassment—the kind that happens when you find a hymn in a log file. He almost erased it, almost replaced it with Lattice- Δ -07, but the phrasing stuck like a found coin in his mouth. He apologized in the next line because certain things needed contrition: calling the weather by a god's name when you were an engineer; naming a noise so it could be summoned.

When he sent the data to Professor Kulkarni, he expected the laugh—the sympathetic dismissal that often followed younger researchers who saw patterns where seasoned eyes trained for noise saw none. Instead, Kulkarni forwarded the hashes, asked the right follow-up questions, and then, months later, signed a letter that made Riham take notice. The first person who had not

laughed was the first person whose attention carried consequence.

Samar rubbed his fingers along the faded spine of a notebook as if coaxing confidence from the paper. He had an inventory of small defeats and one large, bright one: the night some undergrad had posted his overlay to a forum with the title "Razor-edge pattern recognition—maybe hallucination, maybe meta." Comments had been generous in their cruelty. Some called attention to overfitting; someone else linked an unrelated meteorological event. Most of those nights ended with Samar opening the notebook, writing down the worst-case alarms and then remedying one by one: better filters, longer baselines, careful hash-chaining. He learned to be fastidious about his sins.

His inbox now had Riham's name blinking in an unread line. He read her words once and then again, as people read weather warnings when the sky is already an odd colour. We're going to field-check, quietly. You're invited if you can follow rules. The rules—the word felt like a firm set of rails for a train he had only just learned to drive.

He packed a bag without thought: chargers, an extra drive labelled CLEAN-1, a second drive labelled MAYBE-BAD-IDEAS (he smiled at that), a small thermal camera he had won in a hackathon and never used, a pair of cheap binoculars. He wrote a list on a sticky note: Do not overshare. Do not theorize. Do not take the sample home. He stuck the note onto the laptop lid like a talisman.

On the train out of Mumbai he watched the land try to become itself again—paddy to scrub, scrub to low hills, low hills to boulders and temples that seemed to appear because stone felt

like the one thing that had not been invented. He reminded himself that an engineer's job was to translate surfaces into useful metrics. Mountains were not just mountains; they were elevation profiles, bedrock signatures, and potential places where the earth's memory leaked into human noise. He repeated that like a mantra.

He slept badly in a compartment that smelled of antiseptic and jasmine. In the morning heat, he found himself cataloguing small mechanical failures in his mind, as if the train were a machine and he its attentive engineer: a misaligned window latch, a wobble in the coffee cart wheel. Habits, he thought—they kept catastrophe small.

When they picked him up at the station, Riham's face surprised him. He had expected someone older, more exhausted—his mental image of a field scientist came from documentary stills. Riham was not what he had rehearsed. She moved with an economy that suggested practise and habits; she smiled without permission and then did not apologize for it. For the first time since he'd sent the overlay, Samar felt as if his data had found a body that could hold it—relief flooded through him, unexpected and slightly embarrassing.

“You’re smaller on the page,” he said, the kind of thing that reads like a compliment and fails.

“You’re louder on the page,” she answered. “And more nervous.”

They argued about nothing until they reached the vehicle that would take them toward Anjanadri. The vehicle smelled of diesel and the faint plastic of too-many-lab-coats. Inside, a compact team: Rana in the back, a muted presence who spoke mostly in single-word confirmations; a field tech with a permanent squint

and a second language of cable ties; and Samar, who introduced himself with the kind of awkward pride that invents biographies to flatten anxieties.

Rana watched Samar like a careful surgeon watching an eager intern. “You hash-chained the samples?” he asked.

“Yes. All write-locked. Two mirrors. Offline verification.” Samar's voice steadied as he explained the protocols; his hands had the patient confidence of someone who'd spent solitary nights teaching a machine to be honest.

Rana nodded once and did not look away for longer than Samar was comfortable with. The man seemed to catalog more than faces; he cataloged potential liabilities like a weather forecast. Samar tried not to read that too closely.

The road narrowed as they left the more verdant edges of the plain. They passed a cluster of small shrines where people offered marigolds and coins. Anjanadri's ridgeline crested the horizon like a punctuation mark. Rock faces glinted; small villages clung to terraces like patches on a well-worn jacket. The landscape had a way of rearranging conversations; words shrank and became applied snugly to reality. A silence settled in the vehicle that was not exactly uncomfortable—it was the temporary, respectful silence of people in the presence of something older than their instruments.

At a narrow pull-off they stopped and walked. Samar felt the earth under his boots as a measured thing: density, give, temperature. He smelled incense and dust and the warm sharpness of someone else's cooking. When they reached the first ruin—a squat shrine in the shadow of a boulder—Samar took out his laptop like an offering and laid the overlay on the

dusty cloth he used as a work-surface. He connected a drive. He fed in a trimmed live-stream of telemetry meant only to check correlations, a sample that could be mirrored and audited.

The first thing that surprised him was that the spikes that had been so tidy in the lab now wanted to smear at the edges as if the ground had opinions about being looked at. The second surprise was that the overlay aligned with a pattern of cracks in the stone—not metaphorically, but with a precision that was almost obscene. His stomach flipped with the vertigo of being right when you'd half-hoped to be wrong. The lattice points landed on places where earlier generations had bored holes for votive pins, where water ran into a fracture at a particular incline.

He kept looking for the trick—for some environmental variable he had not modeled. He ran a second, third, fourth script. The spikes persisted. Rana watched without comment, then took a compass and a small, well-thumbed copy of a survey map from his satchel. He traced a line with a finger and said, “There’s geomorphology here older than mapped surveys. A lot of people come here and read patterns. Instruments can’t be biased for pilgrimage sites.”

Samar felt his throat open and fill with a dozen replies, the professional ones always first: confounding variables, aliasing, harmonics. He felt his old, ingrained desire to reduce everything to clean terms. But then a villager came to look at their set-up with the curiosity of someone who recognised the shape of a prayer in a machine, and Samar understood—the lattice was doing what lattices do: it made recognizable the unrecognized.

That night, under a sky where stars were fewer and more exact, Samar sat apart and looked at a tiny printout of his overlay as if it

were a map of something still living. He thought of his grandmother folding prayers into skirts. He thought about naming and apology, about the small courage of people who give directions by pointing at a leaf.

He had brought bad ideas in a labeled drive. He had also brought his unwillingness to accept the world as a series of coincidences when a pattern came with a scent of human history attached. He did not yet know if the Hanuman Cipher would be another footnote in someone else's textbook or the beginning of something that would upend the polite separations between myth and telemetry. But he felt, for the first time since the overlay lit up his screen, that names were not just labels—they were invitations.

He folded his hands and let the night be large. Somewhere, a bell tolled with a restraint that felt like someone keeping a promise. The lattice waited like a thing willing to be read. Samar considered that if he could stand still enough, perhaps his instruments would learn courtesy.

3: The Ministry's Silence

Sharma's office smelled faintly of polished wood and air-conditioning that had been coaxed into working past its prime. The Ministry liked its rooms to feel immune to weather. It was a fiction—Delhi seeped in through every crack—but fictions, if repeated long enough, became comfort.

A circular table at the far end held neat stacks of files, each bound with thread of a different colour. A white folder marked Extraneous Telemetry lay open, the words underlined in heavy

blue pen. Sharma leaned back in his chair, twirling a capped pen between fingers that had written more denials than approvals in the past decade.

“Instrument error,” he said, more to the air than to the deputy seated across. “If you say it often enough, it becomes truth.”

The deputy nodded with the blank politeness of a man whose career depended on nodding. A projector hummed, displaying a series of spectral plots on the wall. Spikes, faint and regular, rose like the bones of a half-buried animal.

“They’re already calling it the Hanuman Cipher in certain... informal circles,” the deputy ventured, instantly regretting the words.

Sharma’s lips pressed together. “Myth makes people careless. Carelessness breeds instability. We will use the language of calibration errors, not gods.” He closed the folder with a precise thump, as if finality could be manufactured by sound.

A phone on his desk buzzed. He lifted it, listened, said nothing, and hung up. His eyes lingered on the window blinds, slatted shut against a sun too insistent for bureaucracy’s taste.

In the silence that followed, Rana spoke. He had been standing near the door, unnoticed or unremarked upon by most. His presence was tolerated the way one tolerated locked drawers—necessary, not friendly. The presence of Rana’s voice was calm and efficient.

“The data was mirrored before your archive request was even drafted,” Rana said evenly. “Kulkarni’s students aren’t careless. Riham even less so.”

Sharma's gaze slid to him. "And you?"

"My task is clarity. Not comfort."

It was an old rhythm between them. Sharma, the functionary who measured the world in lines of authority. Rana, the quiet fracture in the wall, working for the same state but never fully of it. Their exchanges were brief, sharpened, as if words carried weight limits.

Sharma tapped the capped pen against the folder. "Integrity of chain is one thing. Integrity of narrative another. We cannot have students publishing overlays named after gods. You understand where that leads."

"Into stories people already believe," Rana said. "The state does not own belief. It only manages outcomes."

The deputy shifted uneasily, unsure if he was listening to a sanctioned conversation or an argument that should not exist.

Sharma dismissed him with a flick of the pen. When the door shut, the air thickened into something heavier.

"Anjanadri is not new," Sharma said quietly, as if the walls themselves might eavesdrop. "We've had whispers since the sixties. Minor anomalies. Signals folded into stone. It never lasted. Always collapsed under scrutiny."

Rana's eyes narrowed. "And yet you keep the files."

Sharma slid open a drawer and removed a thin dossier, older than most of the staff in the building. Yellowed paper, brittle at the edges. Inside, typewritten notes from an era when satellites were still learning how to speak.

“Every generation thinks it discovers something first,” Sharma murmured. “Maybe it is just the same ghost, repeating itself, waiting for someone gullible enough to listen.”

Rana closed the drawer with deliberate care. “Ghosts or not, you know Kulkarni won’t stop. And if Riham is moving, containment becomes impossible.”

Sharma replaced the folder on the desk, aligning its edges with an almost ceremonial precision. “Then you will mind her. Quietly. If she falls out of line, you’ll know what to do.”

Rana did not nod, but the silence he left behind was answer enough.

Sharma leaned back again, exhaled, and turned off the projector. The wall became blank, as if the spikes had never existed. The room returned to its sterile equilibrium, but the word hung unsaid in the air: Hanuman.

4: Threads of the Old

The apartment was still, but not empty. Riham had learned to tell the difference. Stillness was neutral, a house inhaling and exhaling with its walls. Emptiness carried the faint hollowness of absence, the kind she had once woken into after Bhuj—the silence of things that were no longer there to answer.

She sat at the low table, the red-and-gold thread coiled in her palm. She could not remember the last time she had seen such a thread outside of a temple festival. In Bhuj, village women had tied them around their children's wrists before long journeys. A

blessing disguised as a knot. Some knots were meant to come undone in time; others were made to outlast the body.

Her scar ached the way scars did when memory was called into the room. She let it. Pain was only a kind of attention.

The note lay unfolded beside her: Count the wind, then carry its weight. The script was deliberate, shaped by someone who knew how ink could betray hesitation. Not a scholar's hand. Not bureaucratic shorthand. Something older—trained by repetition, not paperwork. She traced the letters once, twice, as if the texture of the stroke might yield more than the meaning.

On the balcony, the plants leaned as if a draft had brushed them. No window was open. The air carried faint sandalwood, dust, and the aftertaste of lit camphor. A shrine's scent, misplaced.

Riham closed her eyes and let the wind press against her wrist. For a moment she was eight again, in a courtyard where threads were tied to children without asking, where the smell of jaggery and incense made the air heavy with obligation. She had pulled at the knot until her grandmother slapped her wrist, murmuring something about blessings not meant to be tested. She had forgotten the words, but the sting in her wrist remained.

She opened her eyes. The knot sat firm against her pulse, listening.

On the shelf, her Bhuj notebooks leaned like stubborn witnesses. She had allowed them to exist without touching them for years—archives of tremors, collapsed buildings, dust that had carried voices in it. She had sworn not to let data become relics again. And yet here was a thread that refused to be only artifact.

Her phone buzzed. Another message from Rana: Quiet departure. Use station. Avoid airport. Eyes on southern routes. No signature. Rana never signed.

Riham typed back: Acknowledged. Thread intact. She hesitated before sending the last phrase, as if writing it might confirm what she wasn't ready to admit—that she was letting the thread be more than decoration. She deleted it, sent only the acknowledgment, and turned off the screen.

She went to the balcony. Delhi's morning light was already sharpening into noon. Below, the lane smelled of frying oil, wet stone, and exhaust. Normal. Safe. But as she leaned against the railing, a gust rose sharp enough to set the prayer flags at a neighbour's balcony thrumming.

One flag, saffron and frayed at the edge, tore loose. It spiralled downward, caught for a second on the power line, then drifted past her balcony rail and landed on the tile near her feet.

Riham bent, picked it up, and held it beside the red-gold thread. Both smelled faintly of smoke, though no incense burned nearby.

Direction, she thought. Gifts often came dressed as accidents.

She tied the flag's strip of cloth beside the thread on her wrist. The knot bit her skin gently, as if marking her as something watched.

When she returned inside, the silence of the room felt altered. Not threatening, but waiting. She gathered her small bag, checked her notebooks once more, and placed the folded note between their pages.

As she shut the door, a bell chimed downstairs from the neighbourhood shrine—once, then once again. Evenly spaced. A promise kept.

5: Departures

The train to Hospet was older than its schedule, a composition of chipped paint, dim bulbs, and the patient resignation of machines that had long given up on being new. Riham preferred it that way. Old machines told the truth more plainly—every rattle admitted weakness, every sway was a confession. Planes pretended at permanence. Trains whispered their mortality with every joint in the track.

Samar sat opposite her, a notebook open on his knees. He kept writing numbers in neat columns and then drawing small slashes through them as if cancelling sins. His pen clicked twice between each entry, a nervous rhythm.

“You always do that?” she asked, nodding at the notebook.

He looked up, startled. “What?”

“Make a list of everything you’ve done wrong, and then pretend a slash is absolution.”

He hesitated, then shut the notebook. “It keeps me from repeating the same mistakes.”

“That only works,” Rana said from the end of the compartment, “if the list is longer than the memory.” He had been silent since they boarded, but his ears missed nothing.

Samar flushed. Riham smiled faintly. The balance of nerves in the compartment tilted toward him, and she decided not to let it collapse entirely. “Mistakes catalogued are better than mistakes denied,” she said. “At least the ledger exists.”

The field technician, a wiry man named Deshpande, snorted. “Ledger won’t keep the sun off your head.” He adjusted the duffel under his seat, brimming with coiled cables and battery packs. “Out there, heat decides which mistake you’ll make first.”

Samar glanced at his small backpack—two drives, a laptop, a few clothes—and said nothing.

Outside, the landscape began to change. Delhi had receded into memory; the train moved south through plateaus where the earth seemed to shrug itself into stone. Villages passed in flashes of blue tarps and painted walls. Children waved, chasing the rhythm of the wheels. For Riham, the shift in light was almost enough to erase the unease of the Ministry’s archive request. Almost.

At Hospet station, the air pressed down heavy with late afternoon. Heat carried dust into throats and hairlines. They disembarked quickly, each with a different gait—Riham deliberate, Rana soundless, Samar distracted, Deshpande already wiping sweat with his sleeve.

The vehicle waiting outside was an aging jeep whose paint had long ago surrendered to sun. The driver, hired without name through a friend of a friend, gave one nod and no questions. That was the kind of service Rana arranged: quiet, efficient, absent of curiosity.

They drove through roads that thickened with pilgrims as they neared the Hampi region. Men in saffron carried bundles on shoulders, women balanced metal pots bright with reflection. Songs drifted in half-heard strands, woven with temple bells that seemed to strike with more precision than clocks.

Samar pressed his forehead to the window, laptop bag clutched against his chest. The boulders of Hampi rose around them like scattered monuments from an unfinished age. Shapes too large to have been placed by human hands, and yet they bore the marks of chisels, shrines tucked in crevices, white paint streaked on their flanks like reminders.

“It looks like someone rolled dice,” Samar murmured, unable to keep awe from his voice.

“Dice with intention,” Riham said. “Every placement here has been read for centuries. Every shadow has a name.”

Rana spoke from the back. “And every name has been claimed by more than one god. Humans don’t like empty places.”

The jeep shuddered over a rough patch of road. The scent of dust and distant cooking fires seeped into the cabin. Samar thought of his grandmother’s prayers, of the lattice spikes aligning with cracks in ancient stone. He told himself he would not speak of it yet—not until he had numbers clean enough to withstand their scrutiny.

As dusk thickened, they stopped at a small lodge near the outskirts. The owner, used to researchers and pilgrims alike, gave them rooms with the same expression: a shrug that meant both welcome and indifference.

Riham unpacked methodically. Field notebook. Pencils. Tape. The red-and-gold thread at her wrist caught the lamplight and glowed faintly, reminding her she was not entirely traveling under her own terms. She caught herself staring at it longer than she meant to.

In the next room, Samar set up his laptop on a wooden table scarred with years of use. He opened a window to let in the night air, heavy with crickets. When the machine booted, the lattice glowed on his screen like a constellation half-remembered. He traced a point with his finger. The data pulsed as if waiting.

Down the corridor, Rana leaned against the balcony rail, scanning the street. His hand rested lightly on the railing, but his eyes catalogued every passer-by. When a saffron-robed figure paused beneath the streetlamp, unmoving, Rana's gaze sharpened. The figure stood long enough to be noticed, then moved on, sandals whispering against stone.

Inside, the bell of a nearby temple struck twice. Evenly spaced. Promises keeping themselves.

6: The First Convergence

The road narrowed into a path, stones pressing up through thin soil. The jeep could go no farther. They walked, boots and sandals finding uneven rhythm. Villagers passed them in the opposite direction, carrying baskets of marigolds, brass plates of ash, bundles of sugarcane. Every few minutes, a bell rang somewhere ahead, unhurried, each note carrying farther than sound should.

Anjanadri rose above them in stages. First the scattered boulders, then the low ridges, then the great granite shoulders that caught dusk like a net. At the crest, a temple spire cut a clean line against the bruised sky. The place had the weight of both geography and intent—as if stone had volunteered to be sacred and humans merely agreed.

Riham paused at a shrine tucked into a crevice. Oil lamps flickered, and the scent of ghee caught in her throat. She steadied her breath, counting. Four. Hold. Six. Always the ritual of order against the disorder of memory.

Samar, notebook pressed to his side, kept his eyes on the ridges. He had overlaid them in his mind so many times that seeing them in profile now felt like walking inside his own code. The spikes from his models matched outcrops and hollows with uncanny ease. His stomach turned—not with pride, but with the sharp vertigo of being right when you wanted to be wrong.

Deshpande set down the first sensor at the base of a boulder. A square of cloth was spread to keep dust off the equipment. Cables coiled like quiet snakes. Rana crouched, compass in hand, making his own notes—angles, declinations, shadows—none of which he shared aloud.

When Samar powered the laptop, the screen bloomed pale blue in the gathering dark. He keyed in the drive labelled CLEAN-1. Numbers scrolled. Graphs settled. Then the spikes rose. Faint, insistent, familiar.

Riham leaned closer. “Baseline matches?”

“Within tolerance,” Samar whispered, though his throat was dry. “But look—” He tapped the lattice overlay. The peaks aligned not

just with terrain, but with carvings etched into the boulders themselves: small, worn figures no taller than his palm, almost invisible until dusk shadowed them just right. Each spike landed on a carving. Each carving was a monkey.

The coincidence pressed silence over the group. Even Deshpande, usually blunt with scepticism, drew back a step.

Riham swallowed. Her wrist burned faintly where the thread sat against her pulse. She told herself it was heat. She told herself a lot of things.

The laptop's fan whirred louder. A new line jittered across the graph, thicker than the others. Samar frowned. "That's not supposed to be there."

The spike repeated. Regular. A rhythm layered into noise. A pulse, faint but undeniable.

Rana looked up sharply. "Direction?"

Samar adjusted parameters, fingers moving faster now. "It's local. It's here."

The wind rose suddenly, cold against the day's heat. It swept through the stones, lifted dust, and set the oil lamps flickering in unison. From the ridge above, a bell tolled twice. Even. Precise.

Riham steadied her breath. Four. Hold. Six. But the air refused to obey her count.

The spike surged once more, then the graph froze, lines locking as if the machine itself had forgotten how to move. The screen glowed steady, unyielding.

Samar's voice was barely audible. "It answered."

For a moment, none of them spoke. The world around them held still, listening.

And then, as dusk surrendered to night, the lattice on the screen flared, aligning perfectly with the temple spire above—a convergence that was both data and omen, both signal and story.

The first promise had been kept.