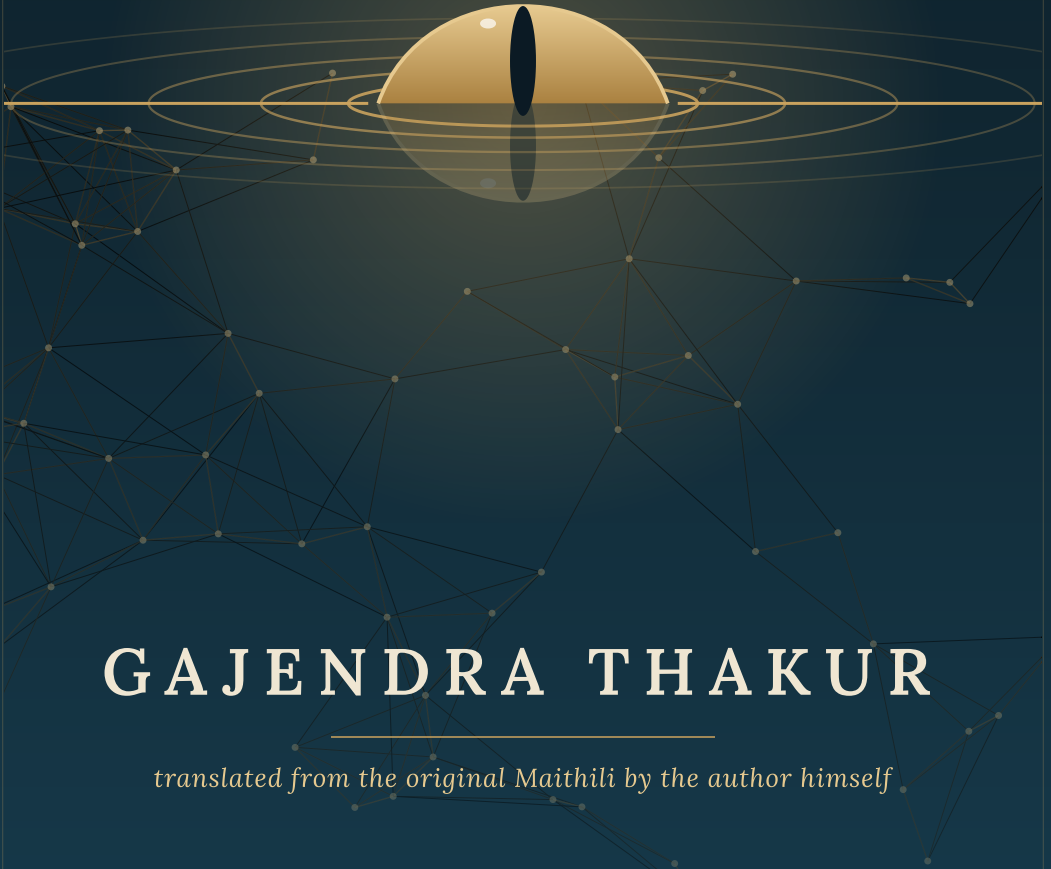


VIDEHA

C O D E N A M E

THE CROCODILE IN THE DEPTHS

A N O V E L



GAJENDRA THAKUR

translated from the original Maithili by the author himself

CODE NAME

**THE CROCODILE IN THE
DEPTHS**

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GAJENDRA THAKUR

VIDEHA · Videha

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Chapter 0

The hollow room at the back of Channa Grove looked the same all year round.

Outside, the seasons changed—winter brought its mist, the rains their soft drizzle, and summer its blazing afternoons. But inside the hollow room, the smell never changed: old paper, dampness, and the dust that had gathered along the edges of files for years and years.

Nand Aruni knew that room as well as someone knows the house where they spent their childhood. Even with his eyes closed, he could have told you which chest stood where, which bundle lay on which shelf, and which corner held the old iron cupboard whose hinges squealed whenever its door opened. He remembered every little thing.

Gop Kumar was the keeper of the room.

He had grown old, but age had not dimmed his eyes. It had only made him more patient. He spoke little, and whenever he did speak, it seemed as though he had first weighed every word in his mind.

There was an old understanding between the two men. Nand read the files; Gop Kumar explained what they meant. Nand saw the events; Gop Kumar saw the hidden rules behind them. So, for years, the two of them had studied the city's memories of crime—memories that the courts had already closed away, but that history had still not understood.

That evening, Nand had just closed the bundle of papers about Khataas.



It was an old bundle. Its ribbon was worn, its pages yellow, and the title written across it in red pencil had almost faded away: “Khataas Was Killed.”

Nand had placed the bundle in a chest, yet his hands were still brushing at something. It was as though the dust remained on his fingers long after the papers had been put away. As though the gunshot of that long-ago evening, the silence of that old fear, and the whispers of that city had all clung to his skin.

“Some files cannot be washed off your hands, Gop Babu,” he said softly.

Gop Kumar said nothing.

He merely looked towards another chest.



This chest was different from the old one.

The old chest bore round damp stains, a heading in red ink, and the dust of many years. The new one had none of those things. There was only a clean, new ribbon and two words lightly written in pencil on its lid: “The Water That Came After.”

“What is this?” Nand asked.

“Do you remember the final line of the story you have just put away?” Gop Kumar asked.

Nand thought back.

He had written the words on the bundle himself: “The name came to an end; the memory did not. The fear came to an end; history’s questions did not.”

“And what did I say?” Gop Kumar continued. “I said it would be a mistake to write that the crocodile had died and the water was clean. A crocodile can be a person, but it can also be a network. A person dies. Yet if society does not understand how the network works, it can grow again under another name.”

He untied the ribbon around the second chest.

“This is another name for that very same network.”



Nand looked inside and stopped in surprise.

None of the things found in the first chest were here.

No spent bullet cases. No bloodstains. No post-mortem reports. No witness statements. Not even the date of a darkening evening when someone had fallen in the city.

There were only numbers.

Numbers, page after page. Telephone numbers, account numbers, card numbers—figures Nand could not at first make sense of. Here and there were printed pictures of computer screens, with green and white letters on black backgrounds. Some of the words were English; others were strange to him. And again and again, after a few pages, there appeared a signature. It was not a name, only something like a strange, curling letter—



Talgohi.

Nand stared at that word for a long time.

“What kind of language is this, Gop Babu?” he asked at last. “There is no blood here, no dead body. Only counting. How could this be a crime? Who died? Where did they die?”

“There is no blood in these pages, Nand Babu,” Gop Kumar answered quietly. “But more people have been robbed here than Khataas robbed in his entire life.”

Nand turned another page.

“Without a single bullet?”

“Without a single bullet. Without breaking a door. Without entering anyone’s house.” Gop Kumar looked towards the window. “The crocodile in the first waters broke down doors. The crocodile in these waters does not. It can sit a thousand miles away, slip inside your house, and leave you without the slightest idea who has been there.”



Outside, Channa Grove was silent.

A light wind drifted in from the direction of the Kamla-Balan. Again and again the leaves of the peepal tree seemed to shiver, though the breeze was hardly strong enough to move them—as if the leaves were listening to something speaking far below the range of human hearing.

For the first time that evening, Nand understood what kind of world he was about to enter.

He was a man of the old world. In that world, crime had a face, a voice, a vehicle, a bullet. It was a frightening world, but its dangers could be seen. They could be understood. With enough difficulty, they could even be caught.

This new world was different.

Here, crime had no clear face. No voice, no vehicle, no bullet. There were only numbers, and behind the numbers a signature, and behind that signature—nothing. A name that was not a name. A person who had erased himself.

“Gop Babu,” Nand asked softly, “how can we catch someone who has no face?”

For the first time, Gop Kumar gave a faint smile.

“The answer to that question is in this file, Nand Babu. That is why I am giving it to you. Read it. But remember one thing: what you are looking for here is not a name. It is a trace. Names will keep changing. The trace will remain the same.”



Nand picked up the first page.



No evening was alive inside these pages, as a winter evening had seemed alive on the first page of the Khataas file. There was no blood, no dust, no cry of terror. There were only numbers—quiet, cold, and seemingly lifeless.

And yet, as Nand read those numbers, he felt as though something had moved beneath the water, slowly and without a sound. As though something enormous, far away and deep below, had shifted from its resting place.

He read on.

And so the story of the second waters began—with a village whose name was nowhere written properly in the entire file, and a boy whose real name would appear only much, much later.

Chapter 1: A Net Without a Name

After Khataas died, the capital city could breathe again for a few years.

Gunshots grew less frequent. The fear hanging over the markets began to fade. People who had spent years hurrying indoors at dusk now stood talking in the square without constantly glancing over their shoulders. Laughter returned to the betel-leaf stalls. Old arguments returned to the tea shops. The newspapers announced that peace had come to the city.

But the death of a crocodile does not make the water clean.

The crocodile simply slips down into the depths. The surface grows still, and everyone believes there are no crocodiles left. Yet far below, beneath the water, one may still be moving—silently, patiently, waiting for its next hunger.



Meanwhile, the world itself was changing.

Nand Aruni, reading the file, had watched that change with his own eyes, though he had not understood what it meant.

In earlier days, a village might have a wired telephone in only one or two houses. Having one was a sign of wealth. People would go to those houses, wait anxiously for their turn, and speak for a minute or two to a son living in a

faraway city. They would remember those precious minutes for the rest of the year.

Now those wires had fallen silent.

A small, shining device had appeared in almost every hand. Rickshaw drivers had one, labourers had one, students had one—even young people who struggled to find enough rice for two meals a day. Inside that little device lay a whole world: voices, pictures, letters, and things that once only the wealthy had been able to see.

But with that same device came another change, one that people did not understand at once.

Money had once been kept in an iron safe. To steal it, a thief had to enter a house, break a lock, and risk being caught.

Now money was no longer locked inside a safe.

It could fly from one device to another without a wire, becoming nothing more than a string of numbers. It was no longer something you could hold. It had become information. And when something becomes information, a thief need not enter a house to steal it. All the thief needs is a lie—and a device that can carry that lie across thousands of miles.

The market was still where it had always been, with the same roads, the same shops, and the same crowds. But another market had grown up behind it. This second market had no shop signs, no crowds of customers, and no goods on display. Still, day and night, transactions worth

crores passed through it—quietly, invisibly, without anyone watching.

And the first to enter this second market were the little fish.



The villages scattered across the sandbanks and floodplains of the Kamla-Balan lived with a river that seemed to change its mind every year.



One year the river would keep its distance, and the village fields would be green. The next year it would draw close, and the whole countryside would vanish beneath the floodwaters. The houses were made of mud, the roads were made of earth, and life was more fragile than either. In good years, families had enough to eat. In bad ones, people fled towards the cities.

In just such a village, a boy was born. His name would not appear in the file until much later.

His father worked at brick kilns. There was no such work in his village, so he spent most of the year away from home: one year in Assam, another in Punjab, and another somewhere else. Beside the kilns, in the heat and smoke, he seemed to burn away his own life. Once or twice a year he came home exhausted, carrying a little money, a cough, and a new kind of silence.

His mother planted rice seedlings in other people's fields.

She stood for hours in cold water and mud, setting the tiny shoots into the earth. In the evening she came home and served rice to her son with the very hands that had spent the whole day in the mud.

Sometimes there was electricity in their house, and sometimes there was not. When it came, one yellow bulb left the room half in darkness and half in light. When it failed, they used a little oil lamp. The boy remembered both kinds of light. More than either, he remembered what he did in their glow.



The boy did not like school.

There he found nothing that seemed able to fill his hungry stomach, and no answers to the questions stirring inside him. While the teacher gave lessons, he stared out of the window. When the teacher beat him, he stayed silent.

But there was one thing he loved: machines.

A radio that had stopped working, a broken watch, a torch someone had thrown away, a phone with a cracked screen—to him, all these were toys. He took them apart, studied the wires and tiny pieces inside, and within a few days often brought them back to life.

“That boy has magic in his hands,” the villagers would say.

Once, an old woman in the village had a radio that had not worked for a long time. The boy opened it, joined a broken wire inside, and made it play again. The woman was so delighted that she gave him a few rupees and patted his head. “You are a very good boy,” she said.



In that moment the boy felt something he was too young to name.

It was not the money he had been given.

It was this: someone had noticed him. Someone had told him, “You are here. You matter.”

But magic cannot plough a field, and a hungry stomach still asks for rice.



At thirteen, he went to the city.

Not to study, but to work. He found a job in a mobile-phone shop. The wages were small, and the scoldings were many. The owner made him wash dishes, fetch tea, and sweep the shop. Whenever the boy tried to touch a machine, the man snapped, “That is not your work. Get on with what you are supposed to do.”

But the boy sat behind the screens and watched everything.

He watched where each wire went, what each button did, how machines broke down, and how they were repaired. Quietly, day after day, without anyone teaching him, he learned it all. Within six months he could repair phones better than the owner. It was almost as though he could bring them back to life. Customers began asking for him instead of the owner. “Where is that boy?” they would say. “He fixes things so well.”

The owner did not like that.

One day some money went missing from the shop. No one knew where it had gone. But the owner blamed the boy, without evidence and without asking a single question. Then, in front of everyone in the shop, he spoke words the boy would remember until his last breath:



“You are just like your father. A labourer’s son will always be a labourer. A thief’s kind will always be thieves.”

The boy said nothing.

He walked out of the shop and stood beside the road for a very long time.

In that moment, something inside him broke, and something else took shape.

What broke was his belief that hard work would make people notice him. What took shape was a silent, dark promise: I will become someone the whole world will notice. And when they notice me, they will never discover that it is me.

The longing to be seen and the longing to remain hidden were born in him at the very same moment.

One day, those two longings would draw him towards his final resting place beneath the water.



He never went back to his village.

Instead, he began spending his nights in a dim cybercafé in the city. There, people sat before their screens through the night, using unfamiliar names for unfamiliar purposes. No one seemed to have a real name or a real face. Each person was only a signature, a number, a shadow.



It was there that he first saw the second market.

In that market, money moved without a body and people moved without names. Someone sitting far away could tell a lie and take another person's life savings in an instant. And no one would know who had done it, where it had happened, or why.

The boy watched that market for a long time.

Then he realised that, in these waters, the magic in his hands might be worth more than it ever could be in a field. He would not have to meet anyone or stand before anyone or tell anyone his name. He could remain as he was, nameless and faceless, and still become someone whose presence the whole world could feel.

That very night, he knew where he was going.



It began on a small scale.

The file did not describe this part in great detail. Gop Kumar would have said that was a good thing. When a method is described too precisely, a reader may begin to learn it. A record of the past ought to be a warning, not a teacher.

So the file said only this:

First, the boy learned to understand the numbers produced by other people's lies. Then he learned to build traps into which people willingly handed over their own keys. After that, he understood something else: cheating one person was not the greatest prize. A far bigger prize lay in making many people work together, all using the same methods, while one person sat above them and took a share from every crime.

He wanted to be that one person.



He began searching for small-time swindlers scattered from village to village.

They were unemployed, drowning in debt, and defeated by life. He taught some of them better methods, showed others ways to avoid the police, and helped still others whenever they got into trouble. In return, he took a share of every fraud.

He never entered anyone's house himself. He never told a victim a lie himself. He sold only the method, and the one who sold the method was hard to catch, because the crimes were carried out by other hands.

And so, little by little, water flowing in from every direction began to join into a single current.

Small-time swindlers who had once known nothing of one another were now tied together by the methods of one man, though they still did not know one another. And no one had seen the person sitting beneath that current.

He never wrote his name on a screen.

He left behind only a signature, shaped like a wide, watchful eye. His code name was Talgoi—the crocodile at the very bottom of the water, never seen from above, yet able to make the whole pond tremble with the slightest movement.

The hungry boy from the village was nowhere to be found now.

The labourer's son, whom the shopkeeper had told that a thief's son would be a thief, had vanished. In his place was

a name without a face, a name that revealed itself only through the movement of water.

He had erased his own name.

What he did not understand was that anyone who erases his name leaves a hunger inside himself—a hunger that may finally pull him to the water’s edge and then down to the very bottom.



Nand Aruni closed the first chapter.

Outside, Channa Grove was silent. The leaves of the peepal tree trembled.

“Gop Babu,” he said quietly, “this boy frightens me. More than Khataas did.”

“Why?” Gop Kumar asked.

“Because I understood Khataas. He ruled through fear, and fear was something I could see. But I do not understand this boy. He rules not through fear, but through invisibility. And what cannot be seen is the hardest thing of all to be afraid of.”

Gop Kumar was silent for a long time.

At last he said, “That is why I gave you this file, Nand Babu. We can protect ourselves from what we understand. What we do not understand will deceive us again and again. Try to understand this boy—not his name, but his hunger. In the end, that very hunger became his greatest enemy.”

Nand reached for the next page.

At the top of the page were the words: “The Special Task Force Awoke Again.”

Chapter 2: The Task Force in New Waters

The Special Task Force was no longer quite the same after the year of Khataas.

In that year, the Special Task Force had been formed in a hotel room, in a hurry, because it was needed, and without any permanent home. Back then, it had no large office, no maps, and no special equipment. It had only a few tired officers, some telephone wires, and one stubborn determination: this time, the crocodile would be caught on the bank, not in the water.

And that determination had won.

After the victory, the government did not break up the team. It turned the team into a permanent organisation. Now it had a tidy office, maps of the districts on its walls, computers on its desks, and experienced officers who had caught Khataas and could pass on what that difficult hunt had taught them to the newcomers.

What they taught was not the use of weapons.

They taught the importance of sharing information, working together across district boundaries, checking clues from technology against the facts on the ground, and keeping the whole organisation focused on one target, month after month, without giving up.

Khataas had not been brought down by bullets. He had been brought down by that patience.



Arunesh Mishra had become quieter than before.

The year of Khataas had turned his hair grey. His voice was as steady as ever, but now there was tiredness in it too—the tiredness that comes from carrying other people’s fear on your shoulders for many years.

One thing, however, had not changed.

Even now, on every new officer's first day, he gave the same warning: "Never mistake a guess for proof."

The newcomers heard him and nodded, but they did not really understand. To understand, they would have to follow a trail full of guesses and empty of proof. They would have to feel the powerful urge to grab hold of a guess and treat it as the answer—and learn how hard that urge was to resist.



Abhaykant Jha was no longer a sub-inspector.

But his work was much the same: listening to voices and finding out where they came from. During the year of Khataas, he had traced people through telephone calls. Which number had called which person? Where had a particular voice come from? That was what he knew how to find out.

But now he had to learn something else.

He had learned to listen not only to voices, but also to silence. Which number had suddenly stopped calling? Which person, who used to make a call every day, had vanished for two days? Which bank account, asleep for a whole year, had suddenly come to life? All these silences had a language of their own, and Abhaykant had learned to read it.

Then came a day when both voices and silences seemed to move beyond his reach.

A crime appeared that involved no telephone call. No voice at all. It had happened somewhere far away, inside screens and numbers. And Abhaykant Jha, who had spent years tracing voices, stood helpless for the first time before a silent screen.

These were new waters.

And in these waters, his old net was no longer large enough.



New waters called for new eyes.

That was the day Sunayana Thakur joined the Special Task Force.



She belonged to a generation that had known computers before it had known guns. She had not grown up in the old world of the police station, where force was often the first answer. Her first language was information—numbers, signals, and the tiny traces that people leave behind without even knowing it.

On her first day at the office, the older officers looked at her as they might look at a strange new machine whose purpose they could not understand.

One of them laughed and said, “Daughter, this is a job for papers and guns. Staring at screens will get you nowhere here.”

Sunayana said nothing.

She simply sat down at a desk piled high with hundreds of complaints. No police station had taken them seriously, because each complaint seemed too small. One person had lost five thousand rupees; another had lost ten thousand. To the police, these were such little fish that casting a net for them hardly seemed worthwhile.

Sunayana spent three nights reading those pages.



On the fourth day, she went to Abhaykant Jha.



“Sir,” she said, “these complaints are all different. Different names, different villages, different amounts of money. But there is something in them that is exactly the same.”

Abhaykant looked down at the pages. He could not see what she meant.

“What is the same?”

“The method, sir.” Sunayana picked up a page. “Look. In each of these cases, the same kind of lie was told. The same kind of trap was laid. It is as though many people learned to write from the same teacher, and the same little twist was left in every one of their signatures.”

Abhaykant was silent for a long time.

Then he said something the year of Khataas had taught him: “Call it a knot. Many threads run off in different directions, but somewhere they must all be tied together in one knot. Our job is to find that knot.”

“And there is one more thing, sir,” Sunayana said. There was a firmness in her voice that was unusual in someone so young. “It is not their names these people are hiding. It is their methods. If we chase their names, they will simply change them, and we will be left with nothing. But a method becomes a habit. And a habit—a habit is the hardest thing of all to hide.”

Abhaykant Jha studied the young woman for a long time.

Then, for the first time, he smiled gently.

“Arunesh Babu,” he said, turning around, “this time we have found the pair of eyes we were missing.”



Arunesh Mishra had been sitting in a corner, listening to everything.

He got up, came over to the desk, and studied the pages. Then he said only this: “The knot is a good idea. So is the method. But for now, both are still guesses. Never mistake a guess for proof. First find one thread with a living person at the other end. Then we can go further.”

And so, that day, the Special Task Force began a new kind of work.

They closed their list of names and opened a list of methods.

In which frauds had the very same words been used?
Which traps had been made with the very same mistake?
Which stolen sums of money had vanished in exactly the same way?

Slowly, from hundreds of scattered complaints, a shape began to rise—as though something enormous had stirred far below the surface of dark water.

And above that shape, again and again, they found the same signature, which no one could explain—

Talgohi.



Nand Aruni closed the pages.

“Gop Babu, how strange this is. To catch Khataas, they needed guns. To catch this one, they needed a young woman who could read a screen.”

Gop Kumar replied softly, “Every kind of water has its own hunter, Nand Babu. In the first waters, the hunter was

someone who could follow voices. In these waters, the hunter must follow traces. Abhaykant understands the old ground; Sunayana understands the new waters. If they had not worked together, this crocodile would never have been caught.”

He looked towards the window.

“And remember this: the day a society understands that crime is not only a name but also a method, that society begins, for the first time, to grow truly wise.”

Chapter 3: Where Two Waters Meet

Talgohi had money now.

But his money was of a very strange kind.

It existed inside a screen, as nothing more than numbers. The money belonged to him, yet he could not touch it. He could not count it with his fingers. He could not send any of it to his mother, build a house for himself with it, or even buy a simple cotton scarf in the market.

As long as numbers remain numbers, they are only numbers. They cannot fill a hungry stomach.

For the first time, Talgohi came up against the wall that every new criminal meets sooner or later: stealing money may be easy, but bringing the stolen money into your own life is much harder.

He needed to bring those numbers back down to earth. He needed to take them out of the water and turn them into banknotes, bricks and land.

And that was something he could not do alone.



Birju Sah belonged to the old waters.

During the years of Khataas, Birju had never been a face anyone recognised. He belonged to the group of people whose names never appeared in the newspapers and whose photographs never reached the front page. Other

men fired the guns. Other men fell dead. Other men spread fear. Birju did just one thing: he cleaned the money.

Dirty money from railway contracts, dirty money earned through fear, dirty money from reward notices—whatever had been made dirty, Birju knew how to make it look clean.

“I turn paper into ashes,” he used to say, “and then I turn the ashes back into paper. Nobody remembers the names that burn in between. I am a washerman of money, my boy. A washerman does not own the clothes, but he knows every stain on every garment.”

When Khataas died, that stream dried up.

Birju was growing old. He could not understand the new waters. He read in the newspapers that people were now stealing money with telephones, and shook his head in disbelief. “What kind of theft is this? No hands, no pistol, no door—only numbers? I cannot make sense of it. My time has passed.”



Talgohi needed Birju.

And Birju, though he did not know it yet, needed Talgohi's new current.

They did not meet at a hideout. They did not meet in a tea shop or a secret room. Talgohi never appeared before anyone. That was his first rule.

He sent only a message: an offer from the new waters to a man of the old.

At first Birju laughed at the message. A stranger with no name was asking him to take up work he had left behind years ago.

Then he thought about it.

And then he stopped laughing.

The numbers the stranger showed him were greater than all the money from the reward notices of Khataas's years put together. Never in his life had Birju seen such a sum in one place. And that money had come without a single gunshot. There was no dead body behind it, and no one had stood guard over it through fear. It was only a number—silent, invisible, seemingly endless.

“Very well,” Birju said at last. “You catch lies in the water. I will turn those lies into something real on land. You stay beneath the surface; I will take care of the shore. But on one condition: you must never appear before me. A name that cannot be seen cannot be caught. That one rule kept me safe through all the years of Khataas.”

“But I have no name at all, Birju Babu,” Talgothi replied.

That day Birju understood whom he was joining.



And for the first time in his life, the old man of the waters felt something like fear. He had seen many criminals, but never a man who did not even have a name.



And so the two waters met.



The current of the old crimes—contracts, hawala money transfers, money earned through fear, the familiar routes by which dirty money was made to look clean—joined the current of the new crimes: numbers, screens and fraud carried out without names.

From above, the Kamala-Balan River looked just as peaceful as before.

But beneath its surface there were now two crocodiles. One was old and knew the paths—though the paths he knew were ways to escape drowning. The other was young and made new paths, paths that led towards the shore without anyone realising it.



Talgohi expanded his work.

He was no longer merely bringing small-time cheats together. He had now imposed an invisible “tax” on fraud across the whole district.

Anyone who used his methods had to give him a share. If someone refused, that person’s method suddenly “leaked”. The police received just the right information, and the swindler was caught. No one knew where that information had come from.

Little by little, a rule took hold in that invisible market:

Whoever stood with Talgothi was safe. Whoever stood against him would be caught.

People began to believe there was someone in the water who could see everything: every deal, every lie, every person’s weakness.

But no one knew who he was.

And that was his greatest strength. People can see fear, and they can fight what they can see. But when something is invisible, people can only believe in it. And a kingdom built on that belief can reach deeper than any other.



Nand Aruni stopped reading.

“Gop Babu, what a strange partnership! An old man who survived the years of Khataas, and a young man whom Khataas may never even have seen. And now they are together.”

Gop Kumar nodded slowly.

“That is why I told you, Nand Babu, that a crocodile can be a person, but it can also be a net. Khataas was a person. He died. Birju’s routes were a net. That net did not die. And because the net survived, a new crocodile came and settled upon it.”

He fell silent for a moment.

“But there is one thing about this that I am glad of, Nand Babu. Because those old routes survived, they also kept alive a way of catching the new crocodile. Without Birju, this young crocodile would have been impossible to defeat in the water. But by joining Birju, he became connected to the land. And what is connected to the land can be caught.”

Outside, the leaves of the peepal tree trembled.

“Good and evil, Nand Babu, are bound together in the same memory. Somewhere inside the very net that keeps a crime alive, the seed of its destruction is also hidden.”

Chapter 4: The First Knot

For three nights, Sunayana Thakur had been staring at those same pages.

Everyone else in the office went home when evening fell. But she stayed behind, surrounded by hundreds of complaints in the faint glow of her screen. Her eyes had turned red with tiredness, yet she did not want to leave. She felt she was very close to something—something everyone else had overlooked because it seemed too small to matter.

Hundreds of complaints. Different names, different villages, different amounts. Five thousand rupees lost by one person, ten thousand by another. Each complaint had been filed at a different police station, on a different date. They were so scattered that no one had thought to put them together.

But something inside them was the same.

A tiny mistake, repeated again and again. So small that no one had noticed it. It was as though many people had learned to write from the same teacher, and every one of their signatures had kept the same little turn. That turn did not belong to the criminals themselves. It belonged to the method someone had taught them.

Sunayana caught hold of that little turn.



She went to Abhaykant Jha.

“Sir,” she said, her voice carrying both the weariness of three sleepless nights and a new excitement, “these are all different people. But the method is the same. And someone has taught them that method. The person who taught them is not here, yet his hand is in every one of these frauds.”

Abhaykant studied the pages for a long time.

Then he said, “There are many threads running in different directions, Sunayana. But somewhere, all of them are tied into one knot. These small-time swindlers are the threads of that knot. We do not need the threads. We need the knot.”



Arunesh Mishra, who had been sitting in a corner listening to everything, rose and came over.

He looked at the pages. Then he said only this: “The knot is a good idea. But for now, it is still a guess. Do not mistake a

guess for proof. You cannot reach the knot from above. You must begin at the bottom—with a thread whose other end leads to a living person. The smallest thread. The smallest fish.”



That fish was very small indeed.

His name was Manoj. He was a young man from the outskirts of the capital city. He had little education and no earnings. His father was ill, the family was in debt from his sister’s wedding, and every day the same question hung over their home—a question he could not answer: “How will we cook a meal today?”

It was at a time like this that someone had told him, “Rent out your bank account for a few days. Money will come in and go out. You will not have to do anything. The account will simply stay in your name, and you will get a share each time.”

Manoj agreed.

He did not understand that the money passing through his account was someone else’s lifelong savings—an old woman’s pension, a farmer’s money for seeds, or the savings of someone every bit as poor as himself. All he understood was that money came into his account and he received a little of it. A hungry person often has room to think of little else.

When the police caught him, he began to tremble.



The usual rule was simple: arrest him, complete the paperwork, and send him to jail.

They had caught such prey before. The small fish would be caught, the papers would be prepared, and the small fish would go to jail. Meanwhile, the crocodile would remain just as safe beneath the water.

But Abhaykant Jha gave the young man a cup of tea instead of sending him to jail.

Manoj looked fearfully at the tea, as though it might be another trap.

“Drink,” Abhaykant said gently. “It is cold.”



The young man drank the tea. His hands kept shaking.

“I will not say you are blameless,” Abhaykant told him.

“You let someone use your account, and that was wrong.

But you have never seen the people whose money you stole, and you do not know the person who drew you into this. You are a small fish, Manoj. And I am not looking for small fish.”

Manoj raised his head.

“I am looking for the crocodile,” Abhaykant continued, “the one that is devouring hundreds of small fish like you. Whoever trapped you in this net has trapped thousands more. You do not know who he is—I understand that. You do not know his name. But do you remember the path by which he reached you?”

Manoj remained silent for a long time.

Two fears were battling inside him: fear of the police, and fear of the unknown man who had drawn him into the trap. But then, in the warmth of that cup of tea, a third thought awoke. For the first time, he understood that he himself had been someone else’s prey.

And when prey begins to understand that it is prey, it begins to speak.

He told them about the path—the name, the platform, the words through which the message had reached him.



And at the very end of that path was the same signature, whose meaning Manoj had never understood—the code name “The Crocodile in the Depths”: Talgothi.



For the first time, the task force had a name.

A name that was not a name. A face that was not a face. Only a signature, and the mark of a particular method.



Sunayana was full of excitement that evening. “Sir, now we have a lead! A name, a platform, a direction!”

Abhaykant laughed—a plain, tired laugh of the kind he had learned in the years of Khataas.

“We have a lead, Sunayana. But remember one thing: a crocodile is not caught merely by following a lead. A

crocodile is strongest in its own waters. It is caught only when it makes a mistake of its own. Our job is not simply to collect leads. Our job is to wait for that mistake—and to be ready at the very moment it happens.”

Sunayana’s excitement settled a little. She understood that this hunt would not be as simple as she had imagined.

“But there is one good thing, sir,” she said at last. “For the first time, he does not know that we know about him. That gives us an advantage.”

Abhaykant nodded.

“Yes. As long as the crocodile believes it is invisible, it grows careless. Our job is to let it go on believing that—until we are right behind it.”



Nand Aruni closed the pages.

Outside, the waters of the Kamala-Balan lay still.

“Gop Babu,” he said softly, “a hungry boy who rented out his bank account became the first knot in the whole net.”

Gop Kumar replied quietly, “That is why, Nand Babu, a net is never made of powerful people alone. It is made of small, hungry people who may not even realise they are part of it. And when the net breaks, it is through those very same small people that it breaks. For the small fish knows the path to the crocodile that is eating it.”

He turned the page.

“Abhaykant was right: the crocodile will not be caught merely by following a lead. But there is something else he did not say, Nand Babu, and I shall say it. A crocodile makes its greatest mistake when it begins to believe it can never be caught. And this crocodile, right now, is moving in precisely that direction.”

Chapter 5: The Name Changed, the Trace Remained

Talgohi began to feel the heat.

He could not have explained how he knew. There was no proof, no warning. But someone who has spent years beneath the water can feel even the faintest change against his skin.

A platform where certain people spoke every day suddenly fell silent.

An old associate who always answered him failed to reply for two days.

And one little fish—Manoj, whose account he had been using—suddenly disappeared. His account had fallen silent: no money came in, no money went out, and his telephone no longer rang.

Talgohi put these little silences together.

And deep inside him stirred that old instinct which wakes in every hunted creature when it first realises that someone is watching—

The water was stirring.



Over the telephone, Birju Sah said only this: “The water is stirring, son. I have known that smell for many years. Stay under for a few days. Do not come up. A name that cannot

be seen cannot be caught—but the name that is seen too often is the first to be caught.”

“But nobody knows my name, Birju Babu,” Talgothi said.

“They do,” Birju said quietly. “You do not realise it, but they know. When the water stirs, you must assume that someone is standing on the bank. I saw Khataas, son. He thought nobody could ever catch him. That very belief brought about his end.”

Talgothi said nothing.

But he followed Birju’s advice—in his own way.



He knew his own way of staying beneath the surface.

That very night, he erased his signature.

Talgothi died.

The name that had ruled its platform for years never appeared there again. Those who had feared that name, and those who had been connected with it, suddenly found themselves staring into an empty space. Talgothi, who had never had a face, now had no name either.

And in its place, a new signature appeared.

It looked like another eye, as though it carried another meaning: Panikaua—the Water Crow.

The bird that rests on the water, then dives without warning, snatches a fish from beneath the surface, and settles back just as quietly—as though nothing had

happened. No one even knows when it came, when it dived, or when it left.



The name had changed.



But what had not changed was his method.

For erasing a name was easy, but erasing a habit was hard. He wove his nets in the same way, brought small-time swindlers together in the same way, collected his share in the same way and—most important of all—kept making that one tiny mistake, a mistake he did not even recognise as a mistake.



His name was his clothing. He had changed his clothes.
But the way he moved was his body. And changing a body is hard.



Sunayana Thakur was deeply worried that morning.

“Sir,” she said, and there was something like defeat in her voice, “Talgohi has vanished. On the platform I have been watching all year, that name is dead. The person we were getting close to catching is nowhere to be found. We are back to nothing.”

Abhaykant Jha said nothing.

He merely looked at an old page on which Sunayana herself had written, a month earlier—

“A method becomes a person’s habit. And nothing is harder to hide than a habit.”

He laid his finger on the line.

“You were chasing a name, Sunayana,” he said gently. “But on your very first day, you told me something different. You said: look for the method, not the name. Now the name is dead.”

He paused.

“But the method?”



Sunayana stopped still.

For a few moments she stared at Abhaykant, as though she had forgotten her own words and was only now beginning to grasp them again.

Then she hurried back to her desk.

She opened the new complaints—the ones connected with Panikaua. A new name, a new platform, a new signature. Everything was new.

Yet hidden inside those new pages was the same one tiny, repeated mistake.

The same little turn. The same habit.

“The trace is the same, sir,” Sunayana whispered. Her voice trembled a little, with fear and excitement together. “The name is dead. But the trace—the trace is the same.”



“Then the man is the same too,” Abhaykant said.

He rose, walked to the window, and looked out at the water.

“A name is his clothing, Sunayana. He can change his clothes as often as he likes. Talgohi, Panikaua, and whatever names may come after them—all are clothes. But

the way he moves, his habits, that same one mistake—those are his body. Changing a body is hard. And as long as he remains in that same body, he is the same man, however many names he changes.”



At this point, Nand Aruni closed the file for a little while.

“Why have you stopped?” Gop Kumar asked.

“I have understood something, Gop Babu,” Nand said, with a new seriousness in his voice. “At the end of the Khataas file, you had written, ‘A crocodile may rise again under another name.’ At the time I thought it was merely something to say—a fine line to close a story.”

“And now?”

“Now I understand. It was not merely a line. It was a warning.”

Nand placed his finger on the page about Panikaua.

“Talgohi and Panikaua—the same man. Khataas’s tender contracts and this man’s numbers—the same net. The names kept changing; the trace remained. What you said that day is happening before my very eyes.”

Gop Kumar was silent for a long time.

“That is why I tell you again and again, Nand Babu: a story is not a court of law. It is memory. A court tries to catch a name. If it caught Talgohi, it would be fooled by Panikaua. If it caught Panikaua, it would be fooled by the next name. Every new name would deceive it again. But memory

catches the trace. A society that remembers the trace will recognise the same old body behind every new name.”

Outside, the breeze stirred the leaves of Channa Grove.

Far away, the waters of the Kamala-Balan lay still—on the surface.

But Nand now knew what still water could hide. He knew how, deep beneath it, a crocodile that had already changed its name twice was waiting just as quietly for its next hunger to awaken.

Chapter 6: The Conflict of Distance

The task force now had a method, a signature, a trace—but no face.

Sunayana Thakur sat before her screen all night.

Whenever she reached the platform used by Panikaua, the voice moved somewhere else. When she reached that place, it moved to a third. It was like someone reaching into the waters of the Kamala-Balan, only for a fish to drift exactly one handspan farther away—every time one handspan, never more and never less.

This was his greatest trick. He never stayed in one place. His voice was in ten places at once—and, at the very same time, nowhere at all.

“Sir,” she said one morning in a tired voice, her eyes red from lack of sleep, “ten times I came close to reaching him. Ten times he slipped away. This man is like a shadow on a wall. Wherever I put my hand, he is no longer there.”



Abhaykant Jha remained silent for a long time.

Then he said something the year of Khataas had taught him—something whose full meaning he was only now beginning to understand, here in these new waters.

“It is foolish to look for a crocodile in the water, Sunayana.”

Sunayana raised her head.

“The water is the crocodile’s home. That is where it is strongest. There it swims faster than you, dives deeper and slips out of your reach. The longer you search for it in the water, the more it will tire you out. It wants you to look for it there. Because that is where it will win.”

“Then where should we look?”

“A crocodile becomes weak,” Abhaykant said softly, “when it leaves the water and comes onto the earth. There its heavy body slows it down, and every step it takes leaves a mark on the ground.”



He rose and went to the window.

“This man steals numbers,” he said, gazing out at the water. “But numbers cannot fill a stomach, Sunayana. You cannot cook rice with numbers, build a house with them or send anything to your mother. He will have to bring those numbers down to earth again—turn them into banknotes, bricks and land. Until he does, all his money will be nothing more than a dream, shut inside a screen and of no use to him.”

Sunayana stopped still. For the first time, she was beginning to understand.

“And where he comes out of the water onto the earth,” Abhaykant went on, “he will leave footprints. We will not catch him in the water, Sunayana. We will catch him on

the bank, where he goes to turn his stolen numbers into real money.”



Arunesh Mishra, who had been sitting in the corner listening to everything, smiled quietly for the first time.

“That is why I have kept you with me since the year of Khataas, Abhaykant,” he said. “Sunayana knows the new waters. She can read screens and signals. But she knows the new waters; she does not know the old earth where all the money from crime eventually comes to rest. And you know that earth.”

He laid his hand on the desk.

“New waters, old earth. Each is incomplete without the other. If we cannot bring the two together, we will never catch this crocodile.”



And so the direction of the hunt changed.

The task force did not stop chasing the crocodile through the screens—for that would have made him suspicious. But their real attention now turned to the old paths along which dirty money was made to look clean.

Hawala. Tenders. Shops owned under other people's names. Houses suddenly being built. Large purchases with no apparent reason behind them. All those places where

money had unexpectedly begun to move, without any clear explanation.

And to read this old earth, they needed an old pair of eyes.

Dhirketu Jha was called in again.



Dhirketu Jha was a man from the year of Khataas.

He had never been an officer. He belonged to that world of people who live in the misty stretch between crime and the police. Faces, ways of walking, the routes money took—he knew them all at close quarters. At the end of the Khataas case, he had been the man who pointed at the blue car and said, “Those very three.”

He had grown old now. His shoulders were bent and his hands trembled. But his eyes were as sharp as ever.

“I do not understand these new crimes, sir,” he said quietly when Sunayana tried to show him the screen. “These numbers, these screens—they are not my world. Here I am blind.”

Then he smiled—an old, toothless smile, but a keen one.

“But I still recognise the smell of money travelling by the old routes. Money has its own smell, sir—honest money smells one way, dirty money another. And when dirty money tries to make itself look clean, it leaves behind a very particular smell. Show me the places where money has suddenly begun to flow, and I will tell you which of the old routes it has come by.”



Nand Aruni closed the page.

“Gop Babu, this is strange. The new crocodile is unbeatable in the water. Yet to catch him, the task force is calling in an old man who does not even know how to read a screen.”

“That is precisely why, Nand Babu,” Gop Kumar said softly. “The new crocodile creates new waters, but the money comes down to earth along the old routes. A man who makes a new path can escape the new eyes, because those eyes do not yet understand him. But when he takes an old path, the old eyes can recognise him.”

He looked towards the window.

“Crime moves forward, Nand Babu. It learns new machines and new languages; it makes new waters. But there is one old truth it can never leave behind: in the end, it wants money, and money must come down to earth. And the earth is old. The earth remembers everything.”

Chapter 7: The Shadow of the Old Crocodile

Abhaykant Jha studied the list for a long time.

In several places across the district, money had suddenly begun to move.

The records of a closed sugar mill had come to life again. There was no new owner, no new plan, yet money had suddenly begun flowing into its account. The restoration of an old travellers' rest house had begun without a donor's name attached to it. Stone arrived, labourers arrived, money arrived—but no one saw who was providing it. The lease for a village pond was taken at twice the usual price, and no one knew the person who had taken it. Where had he come from? Where did he live? Nobody could say.



Looked at separately, all these things seemed ordinary.

A closed mill might reopen. A rest house might be repaired. A lease might be taken. There was nothing criminal in any of that.

But something came back to Abhaykant's mind.



He sent to the records room for the old trunk containing the Khataas files.

Inside lay the tender and hawala papers from years before—the documents that had helped turn Khataas's dirty money into money that looked clean. The trunk had been shut for years. Its ribbon was worn, its papers yellow.

That night, Abhaykant laid the two lists—the old and the new—side by side and studied them.

Only one bulb burned in the office. Outside, the night was deep. From the direction of the Kamala-Balan came that faint, unbroken sound which water makes by itself in the darkness.

He matched one document against another. The old routes and the new routes. The old turns and the new turns. The old false papers and the new false papers.

And by the time dawn came, he stopped short.



The way the money was being brought down to earth was exactly the same.

The same turns. The same chain of shops held under other people's names. False papers of the same kind, made in the same order, with the same care. It was as though someone had built this route many years ago with such attention and skill that the route itself had become a signature. And now someone had reopened that closed route, complete with the very same signature.

“This is not the work of a new hand,” Abhaykant told Sunayana early that morning, when she arrived. His eyes were red from a night without sleep, but there was certainty in his voice. “The new crocodile understands numbers. Inside a screen, he cannot be defeated. But bringing money down to earth—that is something he does not know how to do. It is another skill, a skill from another generation. Someone is teaching him. Someone who built this route with his own hands long ago.”



Dhirketu Jha examined the list.

For a long time the old man stared at those turns, those routes, that chain of shops. His eyes slowly narrowed, as though he were trying to remember something from very long ago—a smell he had once known, years before, and had forgotten.

Then a name escaped his lips, one he had not heard in many years.

“Birju Sah.”



For a few moments, the room was silent.



Birju Sah was the man who had never been caught in the year of Khataas.

That was because he had never been the face of the crime. Someone else fired the bullets. Someone else fell dead.

Someone else's name appeared in the newspapers. Birju only burned money and made it anew—quietly, unseen, sitting somewhere in the background. He belonged to that world of people whom the police could never catch, because there was never blood on their hands. There were only papers. And papers did not speak.

When Khataas died, everyone thought Birju was finished too. The stream of money that had sustained him dried up, and his name faded from memory.

“Has he risen again?” Arunesh asked.

“No,” Abhaykant replied. “He did not rise again on his own. An old man does not simply rise—he is already tired. Someone called him back. The new crocodile needed an old route, and that route lay hidden in Birju Sah's knowledge. The new crocodile understands numbers; Birju understands the earth. Each is incomplete without the other. That is why they joined forces.”

He paused.

“Two generations have come together, sir. New water, old earth. Two ends of the same net—one end inside a screen, the other in these old papers.”



Arunesh Mishra thought for a long time.

Then he said what he always said, though this time his words carried a new weight.

“Never mistake a guess for proof. Birju Sah belongs to the old world. He has survived for so many years because he

has never hurried and never been careless. Catching him will not be easy. And the moment we touch Birju, the new crocodile will be warned. He will know we have reached the earth, and he will dive deep into the water again.”

“Then do we wait?” Sunayana asked.

“No,” Abhaykant said. “We will not sit waiting. We will keep watch on Birju Sah, but from a distance, without touching him. Because the new crocodile, who is holding on to Birju, will have to come to him sooner or later. He must come—his entire fortune depends on Birju’s routes. And on that day, for the first time, he will step out of the water and place one foot on the earth beside Birju.”



He looked towards the window.

“And we shall wait for that single footprint.”



Nand Aruni turned the page.

“Gop Babu, how strange this is. Khataas died, but the man who used to burn and remake his money survived. And because that man survived, this new criminal may now be caught.”

Gop Kumar remained silent for a long time.

Then he said gently, “That is why I told you, Nand Babu—a crocodile can be a person, but it can also be a net. Khataas was a person; he died. Birju’s routes were a net; they did not die. Because the net lived on, a new crocodile settled into it. But because the net lived on, the path to catching that new crocodile also survived.”

Outside, the leaves of the peepal tree trembled.

“The memory of crime has two edges, Nand Babu. It teaches criminals the old ways, and that same memory teaches those who hunt them to recognise the old ways. A society that remembers its crimes can recognise the next crime by its old shadow. Good and evil are both bound together in that same memory.”

Chapter 8: The One Who Erased His Name Wanted to Be Seen

The greatest weakness of the biggest crocodile is often not the water.

Its weakness is its own heart.

Panikaua had erased his name. He had been Talgoi; he had killed off Talgoi and become Panikaua. Then he had made himself invisible once more—safe beneath the water, beyond everyone's reach. He had everything. He had so much money that even he could no longer count it.

But when a man erases his name, one hunger remains inside him.

It is not a hunger for money. It is not a hunger to be feared. It is a hunger for something he does not even want to admit to himself: for someone, somewhere, to know that he exists. For someone, just once, to look into his eyes and see his name there.

And in the end, that hunger brought him back onto the earth.



Many years before, he had been thrown out of a mobile-phone shop after being falsely accused.

As he left, the shopkeeper had said in front of everyone, "... A labourer's son will always be a labourer."

For years, those words went on burning inside him.

Now he had everything. Whatever sum he wanted, he could have it. He could ruin any man he chose. Any city he chose could be made to live in fear of him—without anyone knowing whose fear it was.

But there was one thing he still could not have.

He could not see his name reflected in the eyes of that shopkeeper, because he no longer had a name. He could not go up to the man, look him in the eye, and say, “Look at me. That labourer’s son whom you called a thief—look what he has become today.”

He had robbed the whole world, but he could not show that one man his victory.

And that was the deepest pain of all.



One evening, he turned his attention back towards that old town.

He did not go there himself—not openly. Never showing himself to anyone was his first and last rule. But through Birju Sah’s routes, he sent money to certain places in the town.

His mother’s crumbling house, which the rains wore away a little more every year, was suddenly rebuilt with solid walls. Bricks arrived, cement arrived, workers arrived—and nobody knew whose money had paid for it.

The muddy village road, which stayed full of slush for much of the year, was suddenly turned into a paved road.

And the son of the old mobile-phone shopkeeper—the shopkeeper who had once called him a thief—received a large sum of money for no apparent reason. It came from an unknown “donor” whose name appeared nowhere.

He told no one, “I did this.”

But he knew the town would whisper: Whose money was it? Who had given it? Why? And in those whispers, his nameless name would be present. No one would recognise him, yet everyone would feel that he was there. He would remain invisible and still, for the first time, be seen.





He thought he had been very clever.

But this was his first mistake.



Birju Sah's warning still rang in his ears: Stay beneath the water. Do not come to the surface.

But he would not listen. Hunger speaks more loudly than warnings.



Dhirketu Jha brought news from that very town.

“Sir,” he said quietly, “money has suddenly come down into a village. For no reason. No donor’s name. A house has been built, a road has been made, and someone has received a large sum of money. And the route by which the money came is the same old one. Birju’s route.”

Abhaykant Jha found the town on the map.

It was a small, ordinary town. There was no reason for so much money to arrive there. No politician lived there; no election was taking place; no great project was under way. It was the sort of place the world had forgotten.

“When a man sends money somewhere without any clear reason,” Abhaykant said softly after thinking for a long time, “there is some personal reason tying him to that place. Money generally follows its head, Sunayana—it goes where there is something to gain. But this money has no head. It has a heart.”

Sunayana looked at him.

“With this money, someone is trying to show someone else something,” Abhaykant went on. “He wants someone to understand something. A man who has kept himself invisible for years is suddenly sending money to the very place where nobody once paid any attention to him. This is

not merely money. This is a message. And every message has a sender.”



Sunayana brought out the town’s old records.

Census lists from years gone by. School registers. The account books of old shops. All the ordinary memories that an ordinary town leaves behind.

And buried deep among them was one ordinary name—

The name of a brick-kiln worker’s son. A boy who, years before, had left that town at the age of thirteen. No one had seen him again. His name was so ordinary that it appeared in a register just once, then never again.

Sunayana placed her finger on the name. Her voice trembled a little.

“Sir,” she whispered, “I think—for the first time—we have a face.”



Abhaykant stared at the name for a long time.

Then he said only this: “We have a name, Sunayana. But we do not have proof. Money has appeared in a village, and we have found the old name of a boy who once lived there. Connecting those two things is something we can do in our minds, not yet in a court of law. And the man is still

in the water. All we know is that, once, for a single moment, he has placed one foot on the earth.”

He paused.

“Now we shall wait until he puts down the other foot.”



Nand Aruni sat for a long time with his finger resting on the page.

“The man who was more powerful than anyone else,” he said softly at last, “came within reach because he wanted to build his mother a proper house.”

Gop Kumar nodded.

“That is why, Nand Babu, no crocodile is entirely a crocodile. However strong it may be beneath the water, something human remains inside it. And human beings hunger to be seen. That hunger is greater than the hunger for food, Nand Babu—for food keeps the body alive, but being seen keeps the spirit alive.”

He fell silent for a few moments.

“Khataas died for the sake of his body—he wanted people to notice him because they feared his bullets. This one will die for the sake of a name—he wants people to notice him because of the wonders his money can work. Both were hungry for the same thing: to be seen. Only the waters were different. And because of that hunger, Nand Babu, this man has taken the first step towards his own watery grave—without even knowing it, on his own two feet.”

Outside, the waters of the Kamla-Balan lay still in the evening sunlight.

But Nand could now see it clearly: far beneath the surface, a crocodile had turned its head towards the bank for the first time.

Chapter 9: Suspicion and Proof

“We have a name,” said Sunayana Thakur. “A face. A village. A boy who left all of it behind years ago. Then why aren’t we arresting him?”

Arunesh Mishra remained silent for a long time.

Then he repeated the warning he had been giving ever since the year of Khataas. But this time he spoke softly, almost in the voice of a father.

“Never mistake a guess for proof, my child.”

He rested his hand on the table.

“What you have is a suspicion. Suspicion lives in our minds. It gives us a direction, but by itself it is not proof. A court cannot act on suspicion alone. A court needs something we can put our hands on—a document, a voice, a witness, that moment when the man and what he has done can be placed together in the same place at the same time. That moment has not yet come.”

“So we just keep waiting?” Sunayana asked, growing a little impatient. “Until he has robbed another thousand people?”

“No. We shall not simply wait. We shall prepare.”

Arunesh’s voice remained steady. “A hunter’s patience is not laziness, Sunayana. It is waiting with open eyes. We shall watch him, record every step he takes—and the moment he makes the mistake we are waiting for, we shall be there. Arrest him without proof, and we shall only have

to let him go. Arrest him with proof, and we can keep him behind bars.”



Meanwhile, deep beneath the water, the crocodile was changing.

Panikaua now had so much money that he himself had lost count of it. But once a person has all the money he could want, his hunger is no longer for money. He begins to want something else.

He had grown tired of being invisible.



Khataas had ruled through fear, and the city knew his name. People trembled when they heard it—but they knew it. Panikaua had everything—money, methods, the power to stay unseen—yet no one knew his name.

And one day he began to wonder: What was the point of ruling if nobody could see who ruled?

He started along the road Khataas had once taken—out of the shadows and towards the seat of power.



He had a few “legitimate” shops opened in other people’s names. He arranged charitable work in other people’s names. He formed connections with people who offered protection in exchange for money—politicians,

contractors, those who had kept their seats even after Khataas was gone, and who now wanted new money coming in.

The invisible crocodile was drawing nearer to the bank, nearer to the light.



He did not understand what he was doing. He believed he was growing powerful, just as Khataas had grown powerful. What he failed to see was that Khataas had travelled that very road, risen to power in that very way, and at last died on the bank.



Abhaykant Jha noticed what was happening, and the old steadiness returned to his eyes.

“He has grown tired, Sunayana,” he said quietly. “Look. A man who spent years hiding beneath the water is suddenly opening legitimate shops, arranging charity work, making friends with politicians and contractors. Why?”

“Why, sir?”

“Because invisibility was his greatest weapon—and now he is giving it up himself.” Abhaykant rose and went to the window. “He was safe deep beneath the water, but now he has turned towards the bank. Why? Because he is tired of being alone, of being invisible, of having no name. He wants people to see him. He is making the mistake that every powerful criminal makes in the end: he wants the world to know who he is. And if the world can come to know him, so can we. Then we can catch him.”

He turned around.

“Khataas was caught because of his gun. A gun can be seen. This man will be caught because of his hunger—because, in the end, hunger can be seen too.”



Nand Aruni paused over the page he was reading.

“Gop Babu, what a strange thing. A man became powerful by erasing his name, and now he is growing weak because he wants a name again.”

Gop Kumar nodded.

“A person can live as a shadow, Nand Babu—but not for very long. One day a shadow begins to long for a body of its own. It wants someone to touch it, someone to speak its name, someone to look into its eyes and see it. And because of that longing, it leaves the safest place it has ever known.”

He looked towards the window.

“Khataas died for the sake of his body. This one will die for the sake of a name. Both were hungry for the same thing: to be seen. Only the waters were different, Nand Babu. And again and again through history, crocodiles have met their end not because of the water, but because of this very hunger.”

Chapter 10: The Rift

Birju Sah was afraid.

He was a man of the old waters, and men of the old waters know one thing very well: whoever moves towards the bank is likely to drown. Beneath the water lies safety. On the bank there is light, and in the light there is the danger of being caught.

Birju had survived all his life by following that single rule: never become a face that people could recognise. Khataas had become a face, and he had died. Many others around him had become faces, too; they had died or gone to prison. Only Birju had survived, because he had never allowed himself to be seen.

Now he could smell that old danger again.

Panikaua was moving towards the bank. Legitimate shops, charitable work, meetings with politicians and contractors—these were no longer the signs of the boy Birju had once known. They were the signs of a man who wanted to become a king. And Birju knew that men who wanted to be kings were the first to be caught.



He tried to make Panikaua understand over the telephone.

“Son,” he said, quietly but firmly, “stay beneath the water. Do not come up. You erased your name. Why are you longing to have a name again? You have everything—

money, methods, the power to remain unseen. Just stay invisible, and you will stay alive.”

“You have grown old, Birju Babu,” Panikaua replied.

Birju fell silent.

“You live in fear,” Panikaua went on. “You have spent your whole life hiding. And what have you got in the end? Nothing. I am not hiding. I sell fear. I shall become someone the whole world can see.”

With that one sentence, a rift opened between two generations.



The old crocodile knew the way—but his was a way of keeping himself from drowning.

The new crocodile was making his own way—but without anyone realising it, that way led straight towards the bank.

One wanted to survive; the other wanted to be seen. For one, crime was a means of staying alive; for the other, it was a road to recognition. A rift had now opened between them in the very water that had brought them together.

And a rift is where the water begins to seep in.



Abhaykant Jha understood this.

“A net never breaks from the outside, Sunayana,” he said. “No one has enough strength to tear a net like this apart from outside. A net breaks from within. Two people who commit crimes together do not necessarily want to sink together. When the heat grows too great, everyone begins trying to save his own life—and that is when the knots in the net begin to loosen.”

“Then shall we arrest Birju Sah?” Sunayana asked.

“No.” Abhaykant shook his head. “Arresting Birju would be foolish. He is an old man who knows how to keep quiet, and we have no proof against him. The moment we arrest him, Panikaua will know that we have reached solid ground—and he will dive deep beneath the water again.”

He paused.

“We shall not arrest Birju. We shall only let Birju know that something is coming.”



And that was exactly what he did.

A whisper, a rumour that would reach Birju's ears. A small police raid somewhere else, having nothing to do with Birju, yet enough to make him uneasy. The sudden arrest

of an old acquaintance, reminding Birju that the old paths were being opened up again.

That was all.

But for the old crocodile, that was more than enough.

Birju Sah began doing what men of the old waters do when danger approaches: he began closing down his routes. He kept his distance from Panikaua. He made fewer telephone calls and stopped meeting him. He began burning his old papers and making sure that the money he had protected for so many years was safe.

And a man who closes down his routes leaves footprints behind without even knowing it.



Dhirketu Jha read those footprints.

“Sir,” he said softly, “Birju Sah is preparing to run. I know the signs. When a man is getting ready to escape, the first thing he does is secure his most important money. The trail of that money will lead us to the other man.”

Abhaykant thought for a long time.

“No,” he said at last. “Let Birju run.”

Dhirketu stared at him in surprise.

“The old crocodile is not our target,” Abhaykant explained. “He is only a route. What would we gain by catching a route? We want the new crocodile, the one moving towards the bank. And if Birju runs, Panikaua will be left alone. All his money depends on Birju’s routes. Once Birju is gone, those routes will close. And a crocodile left alone, with its paths closed, is the first to make a mistake.”



Nand Aruni remained silent for a long time.

“Did Birju Sah escape?” he asked at last.

Gop Kumar answered softly. “The file says that he walked out of this story. Who knows where he went, what name he lived under, or in which village he grew old? But this much is certain: he never came up above the water again. The old crocodile knew something the new crocodile did not know—how long to remain submerged.”

He turned the page.

“And that is why, Nand Babu, I keep telling you: a story is not a court of law. It is memory. A court catches those whom it can catch. Memory remembers even those who get away. For someone who escapes—some old man like Birju, sitting quietly somewhere—may one day teach a new crocodile those same old paths again. The court may forget him. But memory will not.”

Chapter 11: The Shore

For the first time, Panikaua was alone.

Birju Sah had vanished. The old routes, which had quietly brought the numbers out of the water and onto dry land, were closed. The telephone that had answered him for years was now silent.

Panikaua still had figures worth crores hidden beneath the water—but he had no one to bring that money onto land.

And for the first time, he understood how completely he was trapped.



In the water, he was unbeatable. He had known that for years.

No one could reach him in the depths. There he was the strongest, the swiftest, the safest. No police officer, no special task force, no Abhaykant Jha could lay a hand on him there.

But now he was beginning to understand one thing: he could not live beneath the water forever.

For beneath the water there were numbers, not rice to eat. There were dreams, but no life to live. He needed dry land—and the moment he set foot on it, someone would be waiting.

He realised that he was being hunted not from the water, but from the land. From the one direction he had never

thought to guard. He had protected his waters, his name and his methods. But he had not protected the land, because he had always believed that his battle was in the water. And that was exactly where his enemy had outwitted him.



Abhaykant Jha was tightening the circle around him.

The old routes were closed: Birju was gone. Panikaua could not make new routes himself, because that was Birju's skill, not his. If he looked for a new helper, every stranger would bring a new danger—and Panikaua trusted no one now. If he tried to touch his old money, the police would be waiting.

He was surrounded on every side.

“Now he will do what every cornered man does,” Abhaykant said. “He will run. He will take the thing that matters most to him and try to get away from these waters—across the border, somewhere far away, where these waters cannot reach him, where his name, his traces and the crimes of all those years cannot follow.”

“Then shall we close every road?” Sunayana asked.

“No.”

Abhaykant walked over to the window.

“We shall leave one path open.”

Sunayana looked at him in surprise.

“If a trapped crocodile finds every path blocked,” Abhaykant said quietly, “it stays where it is. It dives into the deepest water and is never seen again. It can remain hidden and silent for months, even years. But if it sees one path open, it will try to escape along that path. And that path—we shall make it. We shall lead it exactly where we want him to go.”

He put a finger on the map.

“And that path goes across the Kamala-Balan.”





A path was shown to Panikaua.

He did not know that it had been made for him. He thought it was his own clever discovery—a route he had found for himself, different from Birju's old routes. It

seemed safe. The police, he told himself, knew nothing about it.

He set off along that path.

Birju's warning kept ringing in his ears: Stay beneath the water. Do not come up. But there was no way to stay beneath it now. Birju was gone; the routes were closed; loneliness was eating away at him. All he could do was run.

And no one is easier to see than a man who is running away.



For years the crocodile had remained unseen in the depths. Now, for the first time, he was moving towards the shore, towards open water, towards the light. The one who had never allowed himself to be seen was now forced to show himself in order to escape.



Nand Aruni rested his hand on this page for a long time.

“Gop Babu,” he said softly, “what comes next is the moment whose name is written over this entire file.”

Gop Kumar nodded slowly. His voice grew quieter still.

“Yes, Nand Babu. In the first waters, Khataas met his end on the shore, from a bullet. He was killed. But the crocodile of these second waters will meet his end not on the shore, but in the water itself. No one will kill him. The water he has always believed to be his home will take him.”

He was silent for a few moments.

“The people of the old days knew his name—one ordinary name that appeared only once in the register. That single name holds this whole story together. But you do not know it yet, Nand Babu. It will come at the end, when the man is gone and only the name is left.”

Outside, the waters of the Kamala-Balan lay still in the last light of evening.

But Nand could see it clearly now: deep beneath the water, a crocodile that had been hidden for years was rising towards the surface, for the first and the last time.

He reached for the next page.

At the top of that page was written one word: Jalsamadhi.

Chapter 12: Jalsamadhi

That night, the Kamala-Balan was swollen with water.

It was the last of the rainy days. A whole month of rain had poured into the river, and the water had risen above both banks to touch the fields. In the middle, the current was black; near the banks, it was the colour of mud. The crossing that seemed easy in daylight, the one people had used all year, lay drowned beneath the water that night.

There was no wind. Yet a deep, unbroken sound rose from within the water, as though the river were speaking to itself in a language too low for human ears to hear.

Panikaua had decided to cross that very night.

He had one way out—a way he believed he had discovered for himself. He did not know it had been left open for him with great care. All he knew was that every other path on land had closed. The old routes had vanished with Birju, and he could not create new ones. Only this path could take him far from these waters, across the border, somewhere they could not reach him; somewhere his name, his traces and the crimes of all those years would never follow.



He climbed into a small boat.

He had a bag with him.

Inside that bag was his whole life: a few devices, a few papers and the things that held the numbers worth crores.

Everything he had built over the years beneath the water, in darkness, without a name or a face, was packed into that single bag. He kept it closer to him than his own body.

Birju's warning rang in his ears: Stay beneath the water. Do not come up.

But he was no longer beneath the water. He was on its surface, in the open current, beneath a night-dark sky, in a little boat—for the first time completely visible, for the first time completely alone.



Abhaykant Jha was waiting on the far bank.

The plan was simple. Panikaua would cross. He would set foot on the other bank. And at that moment, for the first time out of the water and on solid ground, he would be arrested. The pursuit of so many years would end in one

instant—without a bullet, without blood, without repeating that evening from the days of Khataas.

That was the ending Abhaykant wanted.

He had seen too many deaths. He knew that a bullet never answered a question; it only silenced it. He wanted this crocodile taken alive, so that his network, his methods and every trace of his work could be read, understood and remembered for the next time.

But the river had a plan of its own.



The file says very little here.

Nand Aruni's copy gives neither the name of the boat from that night nor a detailed account of the whirlpool that suddenly rose in midstream, nor the weight of the bag that dragged him down. Gop Kumar had said again and again: Adding more details to a death does not make the death any truer.

And so the copy records only this:

The boat reached the middle of the current. Then it entered a whirlpool. Then it rocked. The people on the opposite bank heard only one sound—the water, and within it, for a single moment, a human voice. Then the river grew as still as it had been before.



Abhaykant tried to go into the water.

The others stopped him. To step into that current on that night would itself have been a watery grave. In trying to prevent one death, they had nearly caused another.

They stood on the bank until dawn.



The river returned a few things.

A broken boat, carried far downstream, where it had caught among the bushes on the bank.

A soaked bag. Every number and every paper inside had been washed away by the water. All that remained of the bag that had once held his whole life were a few wet, unreadable scraps.

And far away, on the sand beside the river, a pair of sandals with no owner.



But no body came back.

The search went on for days. People questioned the villages on both banks of the Kamala-Balan. Boatmen were called. Nets were cast. But the river did not give up the body.

The crocodile that had hidden beneath the water for so many years had, in the end, made that very water his grave. He left behind neither a trace nor a body, as though he had never existed.



And when everything had grown quiet, the one thing the entire story had been waiting for came to light: his real name.

Sunayana Thakur found it in the census records of that old town.

The son of a brick-kiln labourer. A boy who had left this town at thirteen, years ago. His father had travelled from Assam to Punjab in search of work; his mother had planted rice in other people's fields; the village had said there was magic in his hands; and a shopkeeper had called him a thief.



The name was so ordinary that nobody had remembered it.

Chhotan.

Only Chhotan. No title. No grand name. No fear. A village name, an affectionate name, never spoken among important people. Beneath the whole file—with its Talgoi and Panikaua, and its numbers worth crores—lay this one ordinary name that no one had recognised.



Abhaykant Jha stared at the name for a long time.

“The man who wanted the whole world to see him,” he said at last, very softly, “has ended up with a name no one knows.”

He placed the page on the desk.

“He erased his own name so that he could become great. He became Talgoi. He became Panikaua. He became a name the whole town feared without even knowing who he was. But the river took all his grand names—Talgoi, Panikaua, every one of them—and left only the small name he had in the beginning. Chhotan.”

He fell silent for a little while.

“When Khataas died, his body was on the front page of the newspapers. Everyone saw him. When this man died, there was not even a body. No one saw him. The man who had lived his whole life longing to be seen could not even be seen in death. The water gave him the one thing he had spent his life fleeing—complete invisibility.”



Nand Aruni remained silent for a long time.

Outside, the waters of the Kamala-Balan lay still in the pale light of morning. It was the same water that had lain quiet throughout this story, while no one could see from above all that had happened beneath its surface.

“Is that all?” he asked at last, in exactly the same voice he had used at the end of the Khataas story.

Gop Kumar spoke softly. “That is all, Nand Babu. Death is only that much. The man who was strongest was caught because he longed to build his mother a proper house. And the man who was hardest to see ended in a swollen river, reduced to an ordinary name, leaving no body behind. Anything more we add to this will be our fear, not his death.”

Epilogue

Nand Aruni closed the last page in the second chest.

“One crocodile died,” he said quietly. “Just like Khataas. In different waters, with a different name, in a different way—but the ending was the same. The shore, and then the end.”

Gop Kumar did not answer at once.

He looked through the window towards the distant water. The morning light was fully awake now, shining on the leaves of Channa Grove.

“But remember one thing, Nand Babu,” he said at last. “At the end of the Khataas file, I stopped you from writing, ‘The crocodile died, so the water is clean.’ Do you remember?”

Nand nodded.

“I will say the same thing today. Chhotan died, but the method behind the network did not. Birju Sah is alive somewhere, and his routes live on with him. Those small-time swindlers whom Chhotan brought together are still somewhere too. Chhotan’s name was erased; his method was carried away by the water. But water never wipes everything away completely.”

“Then what have we won?” Nand asked.



For the first time, Gop Kumar smiled—the same tired, deep smile that comes after reading records for so many years.

“You have not won a name, Nand Babu. The water carried the name away. You have won a trace.”

He placed his hand on the chest.

“For the first time, the memory of this town holds the knowledge that a criminal is not only a person. A criminal can also be a method. Khataas was a gun; Chhotan was a number. Two different names, two different waters. But beneath both lay the same net: money, fear, protection and that hunger that draws a man towards the shore.”

He looked at Nand.

“A society that remembers only the names of criminals will be tricked again by every new name. It will kill Khataas and think crime is over, and Chhotan will arrive. It will kill Chhotan and think peace has come, and a third will arrive. But a society that remembers their methods will recognise the next crocodile from its very first movement. It will not wait for a name. That is the victory, Nand Babu—and it is enough.”



Nand Aruni straightened all the pages once more and tied the file into a bundle.

The old title in pencil could still be faintly seen at the top: “The Waters That Came After.”

Beneath it, he added a line in his own handwriting, just as he had added one to the Khataas bundle many years earlier.

“In the first waters, the crocodile was a gun; in the second, a number. But the waters remained the same, and so did the crocodile. The names will keep changing. We must remember the traces.”

Gop Kumar placed the bundle inside the chest.



Now the two chests stood side by side: the first waters and the second. One belonged to guns, the other to numbers. One belonged to the crocodile everyone had seen; the other to the crocodile no one had seen. Yet inside both lay the same net, the same warning.



“And now?” Nand asked.

As Gop Kumar closed the lid, he said, “Now we shall wait, Nand Babu.”

He looked towards the window.

“The water is still. And still water needs the most thought when it looks most peaceful. The first crocodile was a gun. The second was a number. What will the third be? I do not know. Perhaps it will live in a kind of water whose name we have not even heard yet. But this much I know: it will come. And when it comes, it will arrive in new waters with a new name.”

He was silent for a few moments.

“And on that day, Nand Babu, if someone remembers the traces in these two chests—if someone remembers that Khataas and Chhotan, the gun and the number, were in the end part of the same net—then the town will not be as frightened as it was on that first evening, when the first body fell in the old market and no one had seen a thing.”



A gentle breeze stirred the leaves of Channa Grove outside.



Far away, the waters of the Kamala-Balan glittered in the morning sun—quiet, still and seemingly innocent. They were the same waters in which Khataas’s terror had sunk years before, and in which Chhotan’s invisibility had now disappeared. From above, they said nothing.

But Nand Aruni now knew all that still water could remember.

And he knew something else, deep beneath its surface: the next crocodile, whose name nobody yet knew, was quietly shifting its position. One day it would stir the water ever so slightly again. And on that day, the question would not be what its name was. The question would be whether anyone remembered its traces.



The End

Chapter 0: A Net Within a Net

When Nand Aruni read the words “The End,” he put his hands on the table to rise.

“Sit down,” said Gop Kumar.

Nand stopped.

“Is there something left?”

“Not in the file,” Gop Kumar said. “In the record.”



Gop Kumar did not open the second chest again. Instead, he ran a finger over the wood at its back. It was very old wood, its colour made almost uniform by dust. But in one place the grain ran a little differently. He pressed it. A thin compartment slid out from inside.

In the compartment lay a black bundle of papers. It had no title and no date. There was only one word, written in red pencil: “Secret.”

Nand raised his eyes to Gop Kumar.

“Was what you let me read incomplete?”

“No,” Gop Kumar replied calmly. “It was the whole truth of the public record. But public truth and the whole truth are not always the same. Sometimes, if certain things become known too early, it is not the criminal who survives, but the criminal’s network.”

He set the black bundle before Nand.

“Jalsamadhi was not his end. It was his final code name.”



On the eleventh day after that night on the Kamala-Balan, Sunayana Thakur examined once more the bag that had been found soaked in water. All its devices were dead, the papers were washed clean, and at first glance there was nothing in it that could lead anyone to a living person.

But Sunayana was not reading the bag. She was reading Chhotan's habits.

“Why would a man who left no obvious trace of himself for years,” she said, “put his entire life into a single bag when escaping? This bag is not his life. It is an answer made for us.”

“And the body?” Abhaykant Jha asked.

“No body was found. That is the fact. ‘He died’ is only a guess.”

Arunesh Mishra, who had remained silent until then, repeated the old rule: “Do not mistake a guess for proof.”

Sunayana nodded. “So we shall not assume he is alive, either. We shall simply accept that the question has not been closed.”



The question remained open, and the task force did not stop working.

The news of his death was allowed to remain in the outside world. The river had become a very good curtain.

If Chhotan had really survived, nothing would make him feel safer than believing the whole world thought him dead.

This time, the task force did not look for his name. Telephone numbers, false identities and new accounts could all be changed. Sunayana began looking for the one thing Chhotan had never changed, no matter how often he changed everything else: the rhythm of his work.

What did he check first when entering a network? How long did he stay silent? Which path did he leave only to return to it? What tiny sign made him unusually cautious? Together, these things formed a signature he did not even recognise as a signature.

“Erasing a name is easy,” Sunayana said. “Erasing a habit is difficult.”

Abhaykant looked at her. “Catch a man without his name?”

“Not the man,” Sunayana said. “First, we catch his method. The man will follow it back to us.”



They obtained judicial permission. From the parts of the old network already in the task force’s hands, they created a controlled shadow of it—a shadow that looked from outside like Chhotan’s old world, but whose every path led back into the task force’s view.

There were no real victims in this shadow network and no real money. It offered only enough to tempt Chhotan to

look back—if he was alive, and if he still hungered to control the old network.

For three weeks, nothing happened.

In the fourth week, a very small sign appeared. It was so slight that anyone else might have dismissed it as an ordinary error. Sunayana read it three times.

“We cannot say it is him,” Arunesh Mishra said.

“No,” Sunayana agreed. “But it is the first movement in that direction.”

They waited.

A second sign arrived five days later. A third followed two weeks after that. Each time the name was different, the device different, the town different. But the order of the checks, the way of pausing, and the rhythm of returning were the same.

Chhotan could change his face, his name and his location. But he could not change the pace of his patience.



Then Sunayana opened another net inside the first one.

The shadow network began to answer Chhotan, but only just enough to make him believe that some part of his old network had truly survived. He did not enter all at once. He tested it from afar. Then he came a little closer. Then he withdrew. Then he came back.

He thought he was testing the net. In truth, the net was testing him.

He thought he was drawing his old people together on a single thread again. In truth, the task force had already caught both ends of that thread.

Chhotan's old rule was simple: never appear in person; work through the hands of others; keep people apart so that they did not know one another. The task force turned that rule around. It did not immediately arrest any small middleman. It simply watched to see which link led to the next.

One link led to another. The second led to a third. Names and faces kept changing, but at last all the branches of the net began to bend towards a single point.

That point was not a large building, a costly hotel or a secret hideout. It was a little mobile-phone repair stall in the old market of a small town near the border.

Inside the stall, a thin, quiet man sat all day among cracked screens, wires, batteries and old radios. People knew him by another name.

His hands were still as steady when he opened a device as they had been when he was a boy of thirteen.



The task force left the stall untouched for three days.

And for a fourth.

On the fifth day, Sunayana said, "So far we have a man. Now we need proof."

Then the man's own actions within the shadow network, the records of his old network and the human connections leading to the stall began to confirm one another instead of contradicting one another. Facts gathered from different sources formed the same picture.

Arunesh Mishra studied the papers for a long time. Then he laid down his pen.

“Now this is no longer a guess.”

Abhaykant Jha said only, “Not in the water this time. Alive.”



The stall opened in the first light of dawn.

Chhotan sat inside, removing the back cover of an old phone. Outside, the market had not fully woken. The milkman had passed, someone was sweeping the road, and the low rumble of the first bus could be heard in the distance.

Sunayana stood in the doorway. Abhaykant Jha was behind her.

Chhotan looked up. For an instant, there was no fear in his eyes, only calculation. The door, the rear window, the devices on the table, the distance between the two officers—he measured them all in a single moment.

Then his gaze settled on Sunayana.

“I do not know you,” he said.

“We did not come looking for your name,” Sunayana replied. “We came looking for your method.”

Chhotan’s fingers edged towards the phone on the table.

“There is no need,” Sunayana said. “The evidence you want to erase was secured before your hand could reach it.”

For the first time, Chhotan smiled—a very faint, weary smile.

“And the river?”

Abhaykant said, “The river told us nothing, because it was a cyber river that we had named the Kamala-Balan. But that time you were behind us. You had drowned us, and we thought we were the ones who had drowned. Yet it was not the river: your habits told us everything.”

Chhotan said nothing.

Sunayana placed a sheet of paper before him.

“Chhotan.”

At that single word, his smile broke.

“That man died,” Chhotan said.

“No,” Sunayana said softly. “Talgohi died. Panikaua died. Chhotan survived. And that is why you have been caught.”



No shots were fired that day. No river roared. No body fell.

Chhotan was taken alive.

The investigation that followed made this much clear: he had not drowned that night on the Kamala-Balan. The rocking boat, the soaked bag, the sandals and the papers washed blank by water had made a scene that caused everyone's attention to stop at the word "death." The river was not his refuge; it was his curtain. It had all been cyber: the cyber river, the cyber bag, the cyber boat, the cyber sandals, the cyber papers.

He had not ended beneath the cyber waters. He had merely left one of his names there and come out under another.

But he had misunderstood one thing. He believed that if you erased a name, you also erased history.

History remembers habits more readily than names.



Chhotan's arrest was not announced at once. Some links in the old network were still out there. If the news spread, they could change their names and scatter again. So the account of "Jalsamadhi" was left unchanged in the public record, while the secret work continued.

Independent evidence recovered from Chhotan's devices and records helped identify many links in the network. No one was connected to the case merely because he had named them. Every link was checked against separate evidence. Those found responsible faced lawful action; those who were only shadows were left alone.

Arunesh Mishra's one rule held true to the end: Do not mistake a guess for proof.

And so did Sunayana's: Follow the method, not the name.



Nand Aruni reached the last page of the black bundle.

On it was Gop Kumar's handwriting: small, clear letters without decoration. At the top was written, "Gop Kumar's Secret Record: The Waters That Came After—Final Entry."

Nand read:

"Subject: Chhotan. Code names used: Talgothi, Panikaua, and several others."

"Status: Alive. In judicial custody."

"Public record: Jalsamadhi. Left unchanged at the time for operational reasons."

"Grounds for arrest: Not any single name, number or device. A convergence of repeated behaviour, his own methods within the shadow network, human links and independent physical evidence."

"Note: The crocodile did not drown in the water. His death was a code name. He was caught alive in the shadow of his own net."



Nand lifted his eyes from the page.

"Then why did you not tell me before?"

Gop Kumar put his hand on the bundle.

“Because sometimes silence protects the truth. And because I wanted you first to feel the full force of the mistake the world made: no body was found, so everyone assumed there had been a death. Only then could you understand that this kind of criminal cannot be caught in a cyber river. A name does not catch him. His method does.”

Nand looked towards the old second chest. The words in pencil were still there: “The Waters That Came After.”

“And where will this black bundle stay now?”

“For the present,” Gop Kumar said, “in the same secret compartment, until the time comes for this record to be brought out.”

Nand closed the bundle.

Outside, the waters of the Kamala-Balan lay still in the morning sunlight. This time, looking at them, Nand did not think of death. He understood that sometimes water drowns not a person, but only the story that person has made.

The crocodile had not died. His code name had died.

Chhotan was alive—in judicial custody, alone before his real name for the first time.



Awaiting the Way to the End

C O D E N A M E

THE CROCODILE IN THE DEPTHS

*“A crocodile can be a person, but it can also be a network.
A person dies. Yet if society does not understand how
the network works, it can grow again under another name.”*

At the back of Channa Grove lies a hollow room where closed files keep the city’s memories of crime. Nand Aruni reads the files; the old keeper Gop Kumar explains the hidden rules behind them.

Then a second chest is opened. It holds no bullet cases, no bloodstains, no witness statements — only numbers.

A crime saga of task forces in new waters, names that change while the trace remains, and a net hidden within a net — translated from the original Maithili by the author himself.

GAJENDRA THAKUR



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