



The Echo Chamber

A Story Beyond Virtuality

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LIFE is too restless for Ana amidst her parents' divorce proceedings and parental claim. All she wants is silence, peace, and endless happiness. Going to school and attending extracurriculars never gave her that fulfilment, neither as a child nor as a student. This might be due to her parents' negligence, who never sat by her and asked her to say anything and everything. That doesn't mean she is not happy at all. Her eyes used to glow and her cheeks shine when she looks back on the third row, right-most corner; yes, it's Dhriti, her best friend. Dhriti, being a special child, could not speak. The purplish patches and blisters on her skin made her different from other students of her class, whom they fear and hate too. Kaposi Sarcoma had made Dhriti's life a burden and an unending sorrow for her single father, Mr Roy. Though it is rare for a schoolgirl to get this cancer, doctors diagnosed it as congenital. Mr Roy always missed the presence of her beloved wife, Dr Indu, who met with an accident during her post-doctoral research project; Dhriti was just two then. Along with his job as a senior data scientist, Mr Roy has always been a good father and left no stone unturned to cure Dhriti.

Coming back to Ana, who neither wants to be with her father nor her mother. Her parents are the well-renowned bureaucrats who managed the administration well, but could never be good parents. To her mom, Ana was just an unruly girl who never followed her words, and to her father, she was just an accidental child. Ana always wanted parents who would be with her and spend quality time, enjoying weekends together, and going on vacations. Both Ana and Dhriti were incomplete in their lives, and this thing might have made them the closest friends.

Beyond school timings, they used to go to parks and the beach, where Ana goes on talking, and Dhriti, being a good listener, hears everything and smiles. Their life was going well. Dhriti was not regular at school due to her health issues, which Mr Roy described to the school authority as the routine clinical checkups of Dhriti. At those times, Ana found herself in more loneliness. It was 25 March, the last day of their annual exams. After the exam, both friends escaped to their hideout on the beach. Ana had a mouth organ, and Dhriti quietly listened to her playful music. All of a sudden, Mr Roy came and murmured something to Dhriti, and she started to walk with her dad. Puzzled, Ana said her goodbye and also added to come to her on the summer vacations, to which

Mr Roy replied that they won't be in the town for a month. This made Ana sad and silent.

After a couple of days, Ana found Dhriti's project notebook in her school bag, and in no time, she took her bicycle and headed to her home. After 5 minutes, she could recollect that Dhriti was not in town and decided to leave the copy in the letterbox. Thinking this, she nears Dhriti's house and sees their kitchen window open. She thinks the window might have been left open accidentally, and she puts the copy in the letterbox with a note in it. That note was in an envelope titled "My only happiness". She was heading back home and just noticed some unusual sounds from Dhriti's home. She managed to enter the house. That was not looking abandoned, and she again made herself convinced that it had just remained open while they were in a hurry. She followed that unusual sound, which could have been from a running machine. Though a little frightened, she slowly approached Dhriti's room and was shocked to see her friend cabled with many wires. That room was dark, and the only light was just over Dhriti's bed. She was unconscious, and seeing her in this state, curious and caring, Ana approached her slowly. It's not her friend that she said good bye a couple of days back. Her skin is glowing with no more blisters on it. Though she appeared to be lively, she is in a comatose state. Confused and frightened, Ana looked around and could find nothing, and soon discovered that it was a glass chamber that she had already entered. That chamber had very little air and an open door that Ana unknowingly and accidentally stepped into. That chamber had Dhriti on the bed, wired and numb. Ana felt almost unconscious as she could find nothing but a glass engraved phrase, "The echo chamber". She collapsed.

Just a few minutes later, Ana blinked as she was feeling choked in that vacuum room and crawled towards the door, but in vain. The door has already closed. She saw a timer-like thing on Dhriti's right arm, which was showing 10:10:10, that was beyond her understanding, but the green button close to it was the last hope she could have tried to go out. She pressed it. Just like any video game, a panel opened on that glass wall which asked Ana to choose between two options; one is the default and the other is customised. Ana, who had almost anoxic, just touched the first option and collapsed.

It might have been a one-to two-hour sleep or a deep slumber. Getting back to consciousness, Ana found herself