

Is Nobody Innocent?

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Introduction

The room hums with a low, electric tension, the sound of servers breathing somewhere deep within the granite and steel walls of Baba Bank Tower. The air itself feels charged, vibrating with the silent, ceaseless flow of data that is the lifeblood of the modern world. It is a sound one feels more than hears, a deep, foundational thrum that speaks of immense power held in sterile, climate-controlled stasis. Outside, Sydney might be basking in the golden light of a late afternoon, but within this sealed chamber, time is measured only by the cool, artificial glow of progress.

Twenty-five of the bank's brightest software engineers sit in a sleek, minimalist auditorium, their faces bathed in the cool, clinical blue glow of a monolithic screen. The light leaches the warmth from their skin, painting them in shades of cobalt and slate, a congregation of ghosts waiting for a sermon. They are the chosen, the elite coders and architects of digital worlds, yet here they are reduced to mere subjects, their collective brilliance muted by the stark simplicity of the challenge before them. The seating is arranged in a perfect, tiered arc, the plush fabric of the chairs a deep, sound-absorbing charcoal that adds to the room's hushed, almost reverential atmosphere.

The screen dominates the stage, a slab of perfect, obsidian black from which a single, pulsating ring of white light emerges, hypnotic and vaguely celestial. It breathes, this ring of light, contracting and expanding in a slow, silent rhythm that seems to sync with the collective, shallow breathing of the contestants. This is the only sign of the intelligence that resides behind the screen, the only physical manifestation of the judge they have all willingly submitted to. This

is Lumina, the advanced AI that will serve as their confessor, their historian, and their judge. Her name, whispered in the corridors for weeks, evokes a sense of both enlightenment and terrifying, unblinking scrutiny.

The air is sterile, smelling faintly of ozone and the ghost of expensive cleaning products—a scent that fails to mask the metallic tang of collective anxiety. The ozone has a sharp, almost electric quality, a scent of pure, unbridled power that prickles the inside of the nose. Underneath it, the more human smell of fear is unmistakable—a coppery, adrenalized scent that rises from the skin of twenty-five brilliant minds facing a test they cannot study for. They are accustomed to logic, to systems with rules that can be learned and exploited. But this is different. This system is designed to understand the illogical, messy truth of their own lives.

This is "The Lumina Test," a voluntary social experiment conceived in the ambitious, data-driven corridors of the bank's innovation hub. It was sold to them as a game, a challenge, a unique opportunity for self-discovery. The goal, stated in a glossy internal memo printed on heavy, cream-colored cardstock, is simple: to find the most innocent person among them. The word 'innocence' itself seems alien in this environment of cold calculation, a relic from a less complicated time. What could it possibly mean to a machine?

The rules are a study in brutal simplicity, laid out in the same memo with chilling clarity. One by one, each participant will walk from the hushed auditorium to the "Testing Chamber"—a stark white cube furnished with a single chair and a microphone suspended from the ceiling like a silver teardrop. The path is marked by a single, glowing blue line on the floor, a path to judgment from which there is no deviation. There, isolated from the world, they will answer ten descriptive questions about their life, their voice the only data point.

Lumina, its algorithms woven from linguistics, psychology, and a vast, ever-growing library of human expression, will analyze their every word, inflection, hesitation, and micro-tremor. Her memory is perfect and infinite, a digital ocean of data against which their small, personal histories will be compared. Honest, detailed answers, cross-referenced in real-time against the digital shadow each of them has cast throughout their lives, will score +1 point. Their every email, social media post, credit card transaction, and location ping has contributed to this shadow, an indelible digital tattoo they can neither erase nor deny.

A detected lie, no matter how small or well-intentioned, scores -1 and means immediate, unceremonious elimination. There are no appeals, no mitigating circumstances. The judgment is binary, absolute, and final. As the contestants wait, the atmosphere is a strange cocktail of nervous excitement and the fierce, quiet pride of engineers who believe any system can be understood, if not beaten. They are gamers at heart, problem-solvers who see this as the ultimate logic puzzle. Reputations are on the line, alongside a modest 5,000 AUD prize, a sum that is almost insultingly small, making it clear that the true prize is the title itself.

But as the first name echoes through the auditorium's perfect acoustics and the pulsating light on the screen fixes on the chamber door, the game-show veneer peels away. The sound of the name, amplified and disembodied, hangs in the air for a moment too long. The single, hypnotic ring of light on the black screen contracts to a sharp point, a focused beam of pure white that seems to pierce the very soul of the chosen contestant. The playful chatter ceases. The nervous laughter dies. In its place, a profound and unsettling silence descends, a silence filled with the dawning realization of what they have agreed to. What began as a corporate curiosity soon

spirals into a profound, and at times uncomfortable, examination of what "innocence" truly means in an age of total information, and whether a machine, with its perfect memory and unforgiving binary logic, can ever be its ultimate judge.

Chapter 1: Kriyanshi

The name "Kriyanshi" reverberates through the auditorium, the disembodied voice of Lumina somehow both perfectly modulated and utterly devoid of warmth. In the third row, a woman rises, a splash of defiant sapphire blue against the room's cool, monochromatic palette. Her silk sari shimmers under the recessed lighting, the intricate gold threadwork catching the ambient blue glow and reflecting it in tiny, glittering fragments. For a moment, she is a jewel, a vibrant anomaly in this sterile, controlled environment. Then she begins to walk, and the illusion of effortless grace is shattered by the rigid set of her shoulders and the careful, almost hesitant placement of her feet on the plush charcoal carpet.

The walk to the Testing Chamber feels impossibly long, a journey across a silent, watchful desert. The glowing blue line on the floor seems to mock her with its cool certainty, a path from which she cannot stray. With each step, the low, electric hum of the servers seems to grow louder, a predatory thrum that vibrates up through the soles of her elegant sandals. The air grows colder, and the ozone smell is sharp, making her mouth dry and her tongue feel thick and clumsy. She resists the urge to smooth down her sari or touch her hair, knowing that every gesture is being observed, if not by Lumina, then by the twenty-four pairs of eyes she has left behind, all of them now focused on her back.