

The Hunger Service

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The Hunger Service
Introduction
Chapter One — Sumitri and the First Pattern
Chapter Two — Puju and the Meeting That Would Not End
Chapter Three — Rashmi Bongi and the Locked System
Chapter Four — Komal Gupta and the Building That Breathed
Chapter Five — Pallavi and the Cost of a Soul
Chapter Six — Priya Sharma, Ms. ECity
Chapter Seven — Priyanka and the Night the Network Spoke
Chapter Eight — Khushboo and Rohini at the Edge
Chapter Nine — The Lights Go Out
Conclusion

Introduction

Electronic City never truly slept; it only changed the frequency of its hum.

By day, it was a blinding assault of harsh, white sunlight reflecting off thousands of identical glass-paneled towers. The wide, congested avenues choked on the thick, acrid smog of diesel exhaust, baking asphalt, and the sharp, metallic tang of overheated engine blocks. The air vibrated with a chaotic, deafening symphony:

the heavy, pneumatic hiss of city buses, the high-pitched whine of two-stroke delivery bikes weaving through gridlock, and the frantic staccato of car horns. Thousands of tech workers poured onto the pavements, a river of lanyards and laptop bags, moving toward another round of deadlines under skies the color of bruised iron.

But by night, the towers transformed. As the natural light bled out into a hazy, bruised purple dusk, the glass monoliths ignited from within. They became towering pillars of aggressive, synthetic luminescence. Office windows remained illuminated long after the streets had emptied, casting sharp, elongated rectangles of icy white and sickly yellow onto the dark pavement below. Inside those suspended boxes of light, rows of fluorescent tubes burned with a low, mosquito-like buzzing frequency, pressing down on rows of exhausted workers who had long ago stopped measuring time by the sun. They measured their lives in the harsh crimson flashes of failed code deployments, the shrill, heart-stopping trill of midnight escalation calls, and the endless, scrolling cascades of unread messages painting their tired faces in pale blue light.

At FofoSys, this crushing, nocturnal rhythm had not just been normalized; it had been compiled into the company's core architecture. It was a silent, persistent background loop running beneath the glowing dashboards and pastel wellness posters. It was an undocumented dependency that, eventually, they would come to call The Hunger Service.

The company was ferociously proud of its ambition. Its lobby walls, painted in pristine, sterile hospital-white, carried massive, brushed-steel slogans about *INNOVATION*, *EXCELLENCE*, *OWNERSHIP*, and *RESILIENCE*. The air inside was meticulously climate-controlled, smelling always of harsh citrus floor cleaner, ozone from overworked server racks, and the stale, desperate scent of burnt

espresso. Their digital calendars were impenetrable blocks of overlapping colors, a Tetris game of mandatory meetings. Employees were constantly, relentlessly encouraged to stretch themselves, to remain digitally tethered to the network at all hours, and to treat extraordinary, soul-crushing effort as baseline professionalism.

Nobody ever asked what happened to the physical and mental architecture of people who were forced to keep stretching until they tore.

Chunmun Singh had spent years designing complex, invisible systems for other people. As a senior solution architect, his brain was fundamentally wired to look beneath the sleek, user-friendly interfaces of the world and understand the raw, grinding gears that made complex structures actually function. He lived in the matrix of cause and effect. He knew, with mathematical certainty, that visible, catastrophic failures were rarely caused by a single, dramatic broken component. Somewhere in the dark, behind every system malfunction, was a buried dependency, a forgotten assumption, an invisible, corroded connection that nobody had thought to question.

Then, he began noticing something deeply, biologically unusual about his division manager, Mr. Chaddichandan.

The man seemed to grow physically stronger, more vibrant, and more radiant whenever everyone around him began to collapse.

It began with small, highly irregular data points. A little more bounce in his step and a booming resonance in his voice after an all-night release that left the engineering team weeping with exhaustion. A sharper, predatory gleam in his dark eyes following a disastrous, finger-pointing project post-mortem. A strange, flushed

brightness in his face—a healthy, peach-colored vitality—following a brutal week in which his subordinates had barely slept, their own skin turning the color of wet, gray clay. While the bullpen smelled of unwashed hair, nervous sweat, and stale breath, Chaddichandan walked through the aisles smelling of crisp, expensive sandalwood and fresh rain.

Then came the night on the twenty-third floor.

It was past 3:00 a.m. The office was a tomb of shadows and humming servers. Chunmun looked up from his dual monitors, his eyes aching, and saw Chaddichandan standing by the floor-to-ceiling glass, gazing out at the neon grid of the city. The ambient light of the room was a dim, sickly emergency amber.

Suddenly, the temperature in the room plummeted. The chill bit through Chunmun's sweater, carrying with it a horrifying, unnatural scent—the smell of old, disturbed grave dirt mixed with the sharp, coppery tang of an electrical fire.

Chunmun watched, paralyzed, as something began moving in the air directly behind the manager.

It was something pale. It looked at first like a plume of freezing mist, glowing with a faint, phosphorescent, dead-white luminescence. But it moved with deliberate, hungry intent, fighting against the air conditioning currents. It seemed to organically gather around the exhaustion in the room, pulling the very heat and will out of the air. It wrapped around Chaddichandan's tailored shoulders, a parasite of pure, localized pressure, before sinking seamlessly into his skin. The manager let out a low, satisfied breath that sounded like tearing silk, his spine snapping perfectly straight.

That was the exact moment Chunmun Singh stopped treating the corporate burnout problem as just another workplace anomaly.

He began looking for structural patterns. He began tracking the invisible flow of human misery.

His desperate, terrified investigation drew him toward nine specific women whose behavior, whether they knew it or not, seemed strangely resistant to the toxic, psychic culture surrounding them. Sumitri, Puju, Rashmi Bongi, Komal Gupta, Pallavi, Priya Sharma, Priyanka, Khushboo, and Rohini.

They worked in entirely different parts of the sprawling organization. They possessed different skills and inhabited different colored nodes on the corporate chart. They thought differently. They approached technical and social problems differently.

But each of them had somehow, remarkably, retained the fundamental human ability to resist something that everyone else had gradually, tragically accepted as normal.

Sumitri, smelling faintly of jasmine, saw the hidden, mathematical patterns buried inside manipulated data. Puju, driven by the sharp click of her pen, understood exactly what happened when endless meetings erased personal boundaries. Rashmi Bongi, bathed in the green glow of her terminal, knew that every locked system, no matter how ancient, contained a fatal vulnerability. Komal Gupta, walking with heavy boots, knew that the concrete and steel of buildings could reveal what the people inside tried to hide. Pallavi, sorting through crisp paper ledgers, followed the cold, hard trail of money wherever it led. Priya Sharma—known in the echoing cafeterias as Ms. ECity—asked the dangerous questions about forgotten, dusty places and buried, moldering histories. Priyanka, watching the pulsing blue lines of her monitors, understood how

apparently unrelated, tiny failures could become one massive, interconnected system. Khushboo recognized the quiet, devastating psychological power of colors and words in ordinary interfaces. And Rohini understood exactly how toxic pressure traveled down through organizational charts and artificially became everyone else's screaming emergency.

Together, though they did not yet know it, they were going to discover that the modern, glass-and-steel temple of FofoSys was built directly on top of something vastly older than its current corporate identity.

The Hunger Service had been meticulously, occultly preserved beneath the concrete foundation of the building. It was an active process feeding on human behavior for decades, long before the internet existed.

And it did not need blood. Blood was too messy, too physical.

It needed something much more ordinary, and much more easily extracted in a corporate setting. It needed exhaustion. It needed chronic fear. It needed absolute, unquestioning obedience. It fed, with a gluttonous, humming delight, on the exact, microscopic moment when a profoundly tired person finally stopped saying no and surrendered their will.

Chunmun's greatest, most terrifying discovery would be that the thing hiding beneath FofoSys was not simply a mindless monster lurking in the dark, waiting to jump out.

It was a system. A perfectly designed, heavily optimized, self-sustaining architecture of consumption.

And systems, Chunmun knew better than anyone alive, could be mapped. They could be understood. They could be debugged.

And ultimately, they could be forcefully, violently crashed.

But first, he and the nine women would have to survive the fluorescent-lit nights long enough to discover exactly what the system wanted from them. Because somewhere beneath the blindingly bright, freezing offices of Electronic City, smelling of rot and ozone, something ancient had been waiting patiently for people to surrender.

And it had finally, with a hundred invisible eyes, noticed the nine who refused.

Chapter One — Sumitri and the First Pattern

The fluorescent lights of the twenty-third floor never truly slept. They did not merely illuminate; they interrogated. They hummed through the night with a low, persistent frequency—a synthetic, mosquito-like whine that seemed to drill directly into the base of the skull, a sound that fed on the sheer exhaustion of the people working beneath it. Under their unwavering, sterile white glare, Chunmun Singh sat hunched at his terminal. His eyes were bloodshot, reflecting the harsh blue light of his monitors, as he watched yet another critical deployment crawl inevitably toward failure.

He had learned to recognize the rhythm of a corporate crisis, a symphony of descending morale. First came the notifications—a

jarring sequence of sharp, synthetic chimes that shattered the quiet of the open-plan office. The screen would flash with notifications, painting Chunmun's pale face in intermittent bursts of crimson and amber. Then came the emergency calls, the frantic vibrations of cell phones rattling against laminate desks, sounding like angry hornets trapped in glass jars. Then the increasingly urgent requests for status updates, typed by hands shaking from too much caffeine and too little sleep. Then the meeting. Then the second meeting to discuss the first meeting.

Finally came the quiet period. It was a heavy, suffocating silence that smelled of stale espresso, burnt dust from overworked laptop cooling fans, and the sour, unmistakable scent of human anxiety. It was the moment when nobody had enough energy left to question what had happened.

That was usually when Mr. Chaddichandan looked his strongest.

Chunmun had begun noticing the pattern three months earlier. After every all-hands crisis, after every forced march toward an impossible deadline, after every public humiliation of a junior engineer who had dared to mention work-life balance, Chaddichandan's complexion miraculously improved. The sickly, fluorescent-washed pallor that afflicted everyone else never seemed to touch him. The dark, bruised-looking circles beneath his eyes lightened to a healthy, well-rested pink. The slight, stress-induced tremor in his left hand steadied completely. Even his corporate-issued gray suit seemed to fit better, his shoulders appearing broader, his spine impossibly straight. He smelled of expensive sandalwood cologne and crisp, newly printed paper—a stark contrast to the scent of unwashed hair and desperation that clung to his subordinates.

He looked vibrant precisely when everyone around him looked destroyed.

Chunmun told himself there were ordinary explanations. A manager under immense pressure might experience an adrenaline surge that made him more focused. A difficult project might sharpen someone's underlying nervous energy. A person who slept little could still appear energetic for a while, running on fumes and ambition.

But one Thursday night, after a deployment failure that had kept fifty engineers at their desks until 3:00 AM, Chunmun saw something that did not fit any ordinary, rational explanation.

Chaddichandan stood before the floor-to-ceiling glass wall overlooking Electronic City. Outside, the sprawling tech hub was a sea of sodium-vapor orange and LED blue, a neon grid cutting through the smog-choked Bangalore night. Inside, the twenty-third floor was a cavern of icy white light and deep gray shadows. For a second, as Chunmun watched from the reflection in his dark monitor, the manager's silhouette against the glass seemed to ripple. It grew larger, stretching out of proportion with his physical body.

Then Chunmun saw something pale rise from the carpeted floor directly behind the manager.

It looked like steam at first, a milky, translucent vapor twisting upward. Then it resembled dust illuminated by the blinding beam of a projector, swirling in chaotic, microscopic vortexes. It glowed with a sickly, phosphorescent green-white hue, the color of a glow-in-the-dark toy left too long in the sun. But it moved deliberately, fighting against the strong, frigid current of the overhead air-conditioning vents. The air in the room instantly plummeted in

temperature, turning bitter and biting. The smell of the room shifted, the stale coffee replaced by the sharp, metallic tang of ozone and the wet, earthy stench of an ancient basement. The pale vapor gathered around Chaddichandan's shoulders, wrapping around him like a living, breathing shawl, before sinking seamlessly into his tailored suit, absorbing directly into his skin.

Chunmun froze, his fingers hovering over his mechanical keyboard, the click-clack sound dying in the air.

The room grew so cold he could see his own breath misting faintly in the air. The pale movement disappeared entirely. Chaddichandan took a deep, audible breath—a sound like a starving man taking his first bite of a feast. He turned slowly. Their eyes met through the reflection of the glass. The manager's eyes weren't just bright; they were illuminated from within, reflecting the harsh office lights with the predatory gleam of a nocturnal animal.

Then, the manager smiled. It was a terrifying, stretching of the lips that revealed too many teeth.

The next morning, his mind racing and his stomach churning with cold dread, Chunmun began researching. He dug into obscure forums, digitized folklore archives, and psychological texts. Ancient stories spoke of beings that lived by consuming vitality rather than flesh. Different traditions gave them different names, different origins, and different rules. Some called them psychic vampires; others called them corporate egregores. Chunmun was not interested in deciding whether any of the specific mythologies were literally true.

He was interested in the underlying mechanism. The cold, mechanical truth.