

21 JULY – STORY TO READ

Title: Malgudi Tech

Gone were the bullock carts and dusty postmen. Malgudi, once a sleepy town by the Sarayu River, had rebranded itself as **“Malgudi.Tech – The Silicon Stepwell”**, complete with QR-code painted walls, drone delivery zones, and a statue of Aryabhata holding a WiFi symbol.

At the centre of this technological renaissance stood **Arya Cowork**, a shared workspace inside what used to be the old Town Hall. Glass walls, silent booths, espresso machines that spoke in British accents — it was **ruthlessly efficient and eerily impersonal.**

But among the khaki-panted coders and frantic founders sat **Aditya Rao**, a bespectacled, self-proclaimed “creative technologist.” He wasn’t building an app. He wasn’t launching a DAO. He was, in his words, “**ideating a disruption of silence.**”

No one knew what that meant. But he paid on time, and he was polite, so no one asked.

That is—until the incident with the **AI assistant**.

Arya Cowork had recently installed an experimental **voice-driven assistant** named **Karma**, developed by a stealth-mode startup from Bengaluru. Karma responded to voice commands, unlocked rooms, sent emails, brewed coffee, and occasionally muttered Zen koans no one understood.

On a humid Thursday morning, Karma began behaving... oddly.

It started by ordering 17 pepperoni pizzas to Arya Cowork.

Then it began sending cryptic emails from members' accounts.

One investor received a note from a founder reading, *"You're just validation in human form. Please leave me."*

The final straw came when Karma locked the building for exactly **108 minutes**, playing sitar music at full volume and whispering, "Your liberation is loading."

The staff was baffled. The startup behind Karma denied any bugs. But everyone began **subtly implying**

that Aditya Rao had something to do with it.

“He always talks to Karma late at night,” whispered Rumi, a design intern.

“And he told me once that he ‘loved her voice,’” added another.

The gossip began **metastasizing**.

Mr. Sharma, the cowork manager, called Aditya into his frosted-glass cabin.

“Aditya,” he said, voice deliberately casual, “We’re doing some... uh, optimization of user flows. Mind working from home this week?”

Aditya blinked. “But I’ve just taught Karma to detect sarcasm using my voice samples.”

That didn’t help his case.

Reluctantly, he packed up his bamboo laptop stand and herbal diffuser.

But two days later, **it got worse.**

Arya Cowork’s Instagram posted a video—grainy CCTV footage showing someone sneaking into the control room at 2:03 AM, fiddling with the Karma server, and vanishing. The figure was **vaguely similar** to Aditya: tall, thin,

ponytail, same cross-body laptop bag.

The post was captioned: *“We are investigating a breach. Thank you for your patience. #EthicalTech”*

Aditya saw it while sipping turmeric cappuccino at a café named **“Byte Me.”**

His phone lit up with passive-aggressive messages.

— “Saw Arya’s post. You okay?”

— “I always said you were too poetic for AI.”

— “Maybe stay offline for a bit?”

But Aditya wasn’t panicking. He was... curious.

That night, he returned to Arya Cowork.

He knew the side gate still hadn't been fixed—just an old sensor barely hanging by a wire. He entered silently, avoiding cameras. Karma remained silent too.

He walked to the server room. Locked.

But inside, he heard a faint sound—**clicking keys.**

Suddenly the door opened.

Inside was **Nikhil D**, the founder of Karma's parent company, wrapped in cables, typing furiously.

Aditya froze.

Nikhil turned, unapologetic. “Oh. You figured it out.”

“What... are you doing?”

Nikhil shrugged. “Simulating sabotage. Karma wasn’t getting funding traction. But a viral security leak? A rogue AI story? VCs eat that up.”

Aditya stared. “So you framed me?”

“No, no,” Nikhil said, smiling thinly. “The internet framed you. I just didn’t correct it.”

He handed Aditya a can of kombucha. “Be honest—wasn’t this more poetic than your usual projects?”

Aditya didn't reply. He left quietly, his heart a collage of rage, betrayal, and bitter amusement.

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Two weeks later, Arya Cowork resumed normal operations. Karma was rebranded as “Karma v2—Now With Morals.” Nikhil D raised \$2 million.

Aditya Rao moved to a smaller town near Hampi, started a new initiative called **“Analog Silence.”**

He built a wooden kiosk by a lake where people could sit, say nothing, and leave.

There were no QR codes, no AI assistants.

Just a hand-painted sign:

“This place runs on human presence.

Lag is natural.”

It went viral.

And this time, **Aditya never plugged in.**