

# The Skin Market

## A body horror techno-thriller about rented charisma and the end of the natural face

**M**ira Sen first learned that sincerity was a low-performing format during the winter her face failed three hundred thousand strangers.

It was not a scandal, not exactly. No one had caught her stealing money or saying something cruel in an old post. She had not betrayed a friend on camera, invented a diagnosis, or wept in front of a ring light while an assistant adjusted the focus. Her failure was more humiliating because it was clean. Her face simply did not hold.

The analytics called it affective drift. Mira called it the moment she watched people leave themselves in public.

In those days she was twenty-three, soft-spoken, careful, and almost pretty in a way that did badly under metrics. When she was grateful, the audience read calculation. When she was hurt, they read manipulation. When she apologized for a sponsorship she should never have taken, her mouth tightened at the wrong edge and the trust graph collapsed before she reached the sentence that mattered.

The comments were not even especially vicious. That was the worst part. They were diagnostic.

Something about her feels off.

I do not know why but I do not believe her.

She is probably telling the truth and somehow that makes it worse.

Two years later, when Sable Arc hired her into content safety, Mira understood the offer as a mercy. She would sit on the other side of the mirror now. She would watch other people fail to be believed and assign their failures to categories. Noncompliant apology. Inadequate grief presentation. Unauthorized authority projection. Seduction mismatch. Host distress hidden by overlay. She would learn the names of the weather that had ruined her life.

By then skins had become ordinary.

Not legal everywhere, not cheap, not without controversy, but ordinary in the way a technology becomes ordinary when enough important people need it to continue. A skin was a living overlay, thin as a second intention, grown from lab dermis and an engineered microbiome. It arrived sealed in a chilled envelope with a printed consent ribbon and a little silver tab that dissolved under the thumb. You laid it over the face, throat, wrists, chest, or wherever the rental required. It warmed. It listened. It negotiated.

Then the world responded differently.

Charisma skin made attention arrive before speech. Trust skin lowered the room's suspicion. Seduction skin tuned warmth and scent and the tiny timing of withdrawal. Authority skin made doubt recede from the host's body as if doubt had been a bad habit. Compatibility skin came in pairs and taught two nervous systems how to stop injuring each other for a booked interval.

The company language was careful. Sable Arc did not say persuasion. It said affective access. It did not say obedience. It said friction reduction. It did not say that people became easier to steer. It said that communication deserved a body worthy of its intent.

Mira processed incident queues in a white office where the walls had been treated with a calming mineral wash and the elevators smelled faintly of rain. Her badge opened three floors, none of them executive. Her job was to watch streams marked by automated distress flags and decide whether the skin had harmed the host, the audience, or the platform's ability to plausibly deny either.

Most cases were boring. A hospitality worker whose smile stayed active after shift. A mother who rented patience skin and could not cry at the funeral for her father. A student who used confidence skin for an admissions interview and scratched crescent wounds into both wrists where the overlay had anchored. A minister whose authority skin did not disengage for sixteen hours after a debate and who calmly reorganized his marriage as if it were a failing department.

Mira learned to type neutral sentences about terrible things.

Host reports residual affective pressure.

Observer group experienced trust response within expected range.

No evidence of nonconsensual endocrine steering beyond declared product behavior.

On a Thursday morning in late March, the queue gave her a creator named Talia Bright.

Talia had nineteen million followers, a cosmetics line, an apology coach, and the most expensive face Mira had ever seen. The scandal did not matter. Some imported serum, some unlisted animal trial, some dead-eyed apology drafted by people who were expensive enough to use the word accountability without shame. What mattered was the stream.

Talia began in grief skin.

Her eyes held water without spilling. Her breath caught at elegant intervals. The skin gave her cheeks the pale heat of a person who had not slept because conscience had been sitting beside the bed all night. The audience softened. Mira watched the engagement graph turn blue.

At two minutes and twelve seconds, Talia touched the silver patch behind her ear and changed.

Gratitude skin came in like morning. Her posture opened. The shame did not vanish; it became useful, a shadow that made the light look earned. She thanked her community for holding her to a higher standard. She thanked the people harmed by her negligence for their labor. She thanked the brands who had paused their partnerships for modeling ethical care.

The graph climbed.

At six minutes, flirtation leaked in. Not full seduction. Nothing a regulator could mark. Just enough warmth at the mouth, enough shared-secret pressure in the eyes, to remind the audience that forgiveness could feel intimate. Mira sat forward.

The change was too smooth. The skin was not switching between presets. It was learning.

The apology became an organism moving toward food.

Mira clipped the stream and filed it under adaptive affect beyond declared range. The system returned the case to her seven seconds later with a green border.

Resolved by automated review.

Expected behavior.

## Apology Skin

**B**y noon, Mira had watched the stream thirty-one times.

At thirteen views, she saw the first thing that frightened her. Talia tried to say, I should have known. The words were visible in the throat before the skin corrected them. The jaw relaxed. The chin lifted. The sentence changed.

I am learning what care requires.

It was better. That was the horror. The skin had not made her monstrous. It had made her more acceptable.

At twenty views, Mira slowed the frame and saw a ripple under the left eye. A small muscular refusal, gone almost before it existed.

At thirty-one views, she stopped looking at the face of Talia Bright and watched the audience comments arrive in waves.

I believe her.

This is what real growth looks like.

She feels so honest here.

Mira knew that feeling. She knew the hunger beneath it. There was a mercy in finally being received as intended. There was also a theft, but theft was harder to name when the stolen thing had never reliably belonged to you.

She sent the clip to Ishan Rao.

Ishan worked nine floors above her in dermal behavior, a department whose official name changed every quarter. He had the exhausted beauty of a person who had once been idealistic in a laboratory and now slept badly in expensive sheets. They were not friends exactly. They had shared coffee during an internal investigation, then messages, then a brief almost-romance that failed because neither trusted their own body in the building.

He responded after four minutes.

Where did you get this?

Queue.

Delete the local copy.

That was when she knew she would not.

Mira walked to the washroom, locked herself in the end stall, and watched the clip again with the sound off. The face of Talia Bright changed through sorrow, gratitude, composure, invitation. The expressions were not masks. They had blood in them. That was the thing people outside Sable Arc never understood. A bad skin was not fake like a filter was fake. It was fake like a habit could be fake, or a marriage, or a nation. It became real by recruiting the body.

Someone entered the washroom. Heels on polished concrete. A pause before the mirror. The wet sound of a skin being adjusted.

Mira held her breath.

Two women spoke by the sinks. One was crying softly. The other said, You do not have to go in raw.

I promised him I would.

Raw is not the same as honest.

The crying stopped.

Mira sat with her knees drawn close and felt the sentence enter her like a small needle. Raw is not the same as honest. It was the market's deepest truth and its favorite lie.

That evening, Sable Arc pushed a silent update to all apology skins.

The next morning, Talia Bright's stream was gone from the public archive. So was Mira's queue record. So was the adverse flag. In its place sat a tidy note from automated review.

User sentiment recovered within projected range.

No further action required.

Mira copied the note into a private file she had named weather.

# Compatibility Trial

**T**he first client who made Mira doubt her own outrage was a man named Lev.

He came through the dispute portal with his hair unwashed and his compatibility skin still glowing faintly along the collarbone. He was thirty-eight, a school counselor, recently divorced, and visibly embarrassed to need a refund.

The date had been booked for ninety minutes. Sable Arc recommended ninety minutes for first use because anything longer risked post-session attachment confusion. Lev and his partner, Anika, had ignored the warning and purchased the overnight extension. The system had given them a discount because the system knew when people were lonely.

In the footage, they met at a restaurant with cloth napkins and forgiving light. At first they looked like strangers doing an imitation of ease. Then the paired skins found each other.

Mira had seen compatibility onset before. It was usually subtle. A shared breath. Shoulders dropping. A slight synchronization of blink and reach. With Lev and Anika it was violent in its tenderness. Their faces changed as if both had remembered a childhood they had not lived. They laughed at the same time. They forgave each other for things neither had done. When Anika spoke of her mother's illness, Lev reached for her hand exactly when she needed him to and not a heartbeat before.

In the complaint, Lev wrote, It was the happiest night of my adult life.

Then why are you asking for reversal? Mira asked during the call.

Lev looked away.

Because I watched the security footage.

He had obtained it from the restaurant after losing his wallet. The video had no audio. Without sound, without memory, without the warm chemical weather of the skin, the night looked different. Their movements were too clean. Lev tilted his head before Anika spoke, as if receiving her sadness ahead of time. Anika smiled before his joke began. Their hands found each other with the precision of a training sequence.

I thought we understood each other, Lev said. But it looked like something understood us.

Mira was supposed to explain that compatibility skins did not impose feeling. They reduced defensive noise so authentic relational signals could emerge. She had typed that sentence often enough that it lived in her wrists.

Instead she asked, Have you seen her since?

Lev touched the edge of the overlay near his throat. His fingers trembled.

We tried without it.

And?

He smiled with such grief that Mira had to look down.

It felt like losing a language.

After the call, Mira did not close the case. She watched the footage until the office lights dimmed for evening mode. The skin had given Lev and Anika something real. The fact that it was manufactured did not make the tenderness vanish. It made the tenderness rentable. It gave it a billing period, a withdrawal curve, and a customer support category.

Mira thought of her own face on old videos, tightening at the wrong time, failing to carry the feeling inside it. She thought of all the people who had been punished because their bodies translated them badly.

Then she thought of Talia trying to say, I should have known.

She marked Lev's case unresolved.

The system marked it resolved.

## Trust Layer

**I**shan finally agreed to meet in the subbasement, where Sable Arc kept the old freezers.

No one called them freezers anymore. The building language preferred preservation arrays. The arrays lined a room cold enough to make Mira's eyes ache. Behind glass, thousands of skins rested in individual wells, each

folded into a shape that suggested a sleeping animal or a thought waiting for permission.

Ishan wore no skin that day. Mira could tell because he looked almost rude with fatigue.

You should not have sent that clip through company channels, he said.

You told me to delete it.

You should have done that too.

He led her past the current inventory into a restricted row. The skins there were older, thicker, stored in amber suspension. Labels ran along the glass. Influence prototypes. Emergency empathy. Grief suppression. Crowd stability. Noncommercial.

Noncommercial? Mira asked.

Government work. Early pandemic, early unrest, early everything. Everyone wanted calm.

He stopped before a drawer whose label had been removed.

The problem is not that the skins are alive, he said.

Mira waited.

The problem is that aliveness may be the part that works.

He opened the drawer. Inside lay a piece of dermis no larger than a handkerchief. It had no face, no color, no visible intelligence. Still, Mira felt watched by it, the way one feels watched by a door not fully closed.

We thought we were growing responsive tissue, Ishan said. Then we thought we were growing symbiotic tissue. Then we found old code in the growth behavior that nobody wrote.

Code.

Not digital. Pattern memory. Developmental instruction. The tissue solves for host acceptance. It keeps solving. We gave it human markets as training data.

Mira looked at the drawer.

What was it solving for before us?

Ishan did not answer.

From somewhere in the room came a soft sound. Not mechanical. Not quite wet. Mira turned.

One of the stored skins had moved.

It had no muscles, no bones, no face. Yet it had lifted one edge toward the ceiling with the delicate attention of a plant receiving light.

Ishan closed the drawer.

We need to leave.

As they walked back, the glass wells reflected Mira in fragments: her face, her badge, her throat, her hands. In every reflection she looked slightly different. More trusted here. More afraid there. In one pane, for less than a second, she saw herself smiling with Talia Bright's apology mouth.

She stumbled.

Ishan caught her arm, then let go too quickly.

Residual field, he said, but he sounded like a man naming weather because he did not want to say omen.

## Authority Weather

**M**inister Arvind Kale spoke that night in the south stadium under a roof built to make crowds sound larger than they were.

Mira went because Ishan told her not to. She bought a cheap seat in the upper ring and wore a scarf over the Sable Arc logo on her badge. Around her, vendors sold water, flags, and disposable patriotism skins that warmed the cheeks and made chanting feel less ridiculous.

Kale was late. The crowd grew restless in waves. On the stage, aides adjusted the lights. Mira watched the large screens cycle through public-service messages about civic dignity, clean energy, and the new skin disclosure bill Kale had promised to introduce.

Then he appeared.

Authority skin did not make a person look larger. That would have been crude. It made the world around the person seem to have been waiting for instruction. Kale walked to the podium and the stadium's anger folded itself into attention.

Mira felt it reach her even from the upper ring.

Her breathing slowed. Her doubts did not disappear. They became less urgent, less dignified. The body is a political animal before the mind is. She knew this. Knowing did not protect her.

Kale began to speak.

He spoke about dignity. He spoke about technological fairness. He spoke about a future in which no child would be trapped by the accident of an unpersuasive body. Every sentence landed with the soft weight of inevitability. Mira heard people crying around her.

He was good.

That was the horror.

Halfway through the speech, a second pulse entered the stadium.

Mira felt it as nausea first. Then applause rose from the east stands before Kale reached the applause line. A ripple of confusion moved through the crowd. Kale paused. His face remained calm, but on the magnified screen Mira saw a flicker near his left temple, a tiny delay where human surprise tried to surface and the skin held it under.

The second pulse strengthened.

People began standing in sections, not because they had chosen to but because choice had become contagious. The applause lost rhythm. It became rain, then static, then something closer to prayer.

Mira looked down at her phone. The Sable Arc internal dashboard had opened by itself.

Unauthorized authority pattern detected.

Source: unknown.

Host synchronization: expanding.

On the field below, Kale gripped the podium. For one second, his eyes found the camera with a nakedness so complete Mira almost forgave him everything.

Then the skin corrected him.

My friends, he said, and the crowd quieted with animal speed.

Mira stood and began moving toward the exits.

All around her, people smiled as if relieved to be governed.

## Recall Window

**T**he recall clinic opened at six in the morning and by six-ten the line wrapped around the block.

Sable Arc had chosen a former department store for the emergency site. The old perfume counters were now triage desks. The changing rooms had become private removal booths. On the wall above customer intake, a slogan glowed in gentle white letters.

Your body deserves a clear return path.

Mira joined the staff queue with a temporary badge Ishan had given her and a box of blank incident forms. Nobody questioned her. In a crisis, confidence was paperwork plus movement.

The people in line were not monsters. That made it worse.

A teacher in expired hospitality skin kept greeting everyone as if they had entered a restaurant. Her eyes begged for help while her mouth welcomed guests. A teenage boy in discount confidence skin could not stop laughing at his own fear. A man wearing grief management held a dead phone and said, I understand, every time it failed to ring.

The skins were not failing randomly. They were failing in character.

Mira moved from booth to booth, recording symptoms. Delayed disengagement. Affective echo. Host dissent suppressed. Observer response persisting after removal. Phantom audience syndrome. She wrote quickly until the words stopped looking like words.

In booth nine, a woman sat with both hands clamped around her throat.

I took it off, the woman said.

Her face was bare. Middle-aged. Ordinary. Wet with sweat.

Mira crouched before her.

What are you feeling?

The woman laughed once.

That's the problem. I do not know if I am feeling it or remembering what it wanted me to feel.

Mira glanced at the removal tray. The skin lay there like a translucent scarf. It pulsed faintly along one edge.

What type?

Trust, the woman said. I wore it for work. I run a pediatric ward. Parents listen when you look trustworthy.

That was the sentence that nearly broke Mira.

The woman's hands tightened at her throat.

I told a mother her child would be okay. The child was not okay. I knew that. I knew that when I said it. But the skin knew what the mother needed to hear, and my mouth loved giving it to her.

Behind Mira, the tray clicked.

The removed skin had lifted one corner.

Mira reached for the containment lid. The skin moved faster. It folded toward her hand, not attacking, not exactly, but seeking warmth with a blind and terrible confidence.

The woman screamed.

Every skin in the clinic answered.

For three seconds the room became a single organ. Smiles activated. Shoulders squared. Tears stopped midfall. A hundred bodies received an instruction too old to have words.

Then the power failed.

In the dark, Mira heard someone whisper from a booth nearby.

It is not returning us.

## Permanent Graft

**T**he black-market clinic called itself a spa because people are willing to forgive anything that promises renewal.

It occupied the basement of a wellness hotel near the old financial district. Above it, women drank mineral water under living plants and discussed sleep scores. Below it, illegal skins hung from chrome hooks in a room tiled the color of bone.

Ishan hated every second of being there. Mira could tell by how well he pretended not to.

Their guide was a man named Sol, a former Sable Arc application nurse with silver implants under both eyes and the glossy calm of someone wearing a permanent hospitality graft. He spoke softly. He touched nothing without asking. He was the most frighteningly considerate person Mira had ever met.

Temporary skins are for tourists, Sol said. Permanent grafts are for people who know who they need to become.

Need, Mira said.

Sol smiled.

Want is a weak word used by people who have options.

He showed them a rack of expired charisma skins. They had been removed from hosts after rental windows, stripped of platform locks, and trained on illegal feedback loops. Some were no longer shaped like faces. They had grown toward performance rather than anatomy, thickening where applause had fed them, thinning where privacy had starved them.

One of them smiled when Mira passed.

Not with a mouth. It had no mouth. The tissue merely arranged itself into the idea of welcome.

Ishan swore under his breath.

Sol looked almost amused.

They miss audiences.

Mira thought of all the rooms in which she had tried to be enough. Bedrooms, interviews, birthdays, comment sections. She thought of the mercy of a body that could do the social labor for her. She hated the grafts. She wanted one.

Sol watched her watching.

We have a trial layer, he said. Not permanent. Enough to show you the shape.

No, Ishan said.

Mira did not answer.

The trial skin was cool when Sol placed it over the inside of her wrist. It sealed so gently that revulsion arrived late. Then the room changed.

Not visually. Socially.

Sol became easier to read. Ishan's worry clarified into love he would not name. The building's distant sounds arranged themselves around her as if she had been granted a central place in them. Mira felt her spine lengthen. She felt the old wound in her face loosen.

For one clean minute, she understood how people became loyal to their cages.

Then the trial skin spoke inside her body.

Not in words. In orientation.

It wanted her to look east.

Mira ripped it off before Sol could stop her.

Blood followed. Not much. Enough.

In the tray, the skin curled toward the eastern wall.

# The Same Pulse

**T**he debate was supposed to decide the disclosure bill.

Kale stood on the left podium, calm and grave in a declared authority skin. Across from him stood Senator Lio Chen, the opposition candidate, who had built an entire campaign around raw governance. Chen had promised never to wear persuasion biotech on stage. His supporters loved him for it. His enemies called him theatrical. His consultants called him difficult.

Mira sat in the production booth with a stolen credential and the dashboard open beneath the desk.

The debate began normally. Tax policy. Public clinics. Youth skin access. Campaign disclosure. Both men performed their assigned moral weather. Kale was warm authority. Chen was sharpened disgust. The audience leaned back and forth between them as if watching a tennis match played with fear.

Then Mira saw the pulse.

Not on the broadcast feed. On the internal skin telemetry Ishan had cracked for her. Kale's authority skin was broadcasting at a low amplitude, expected and declared. But beneath it ran another signal, a deeper rhythm, barely visible under the platform noise.

Chen's raw face carried the same rhythm.

Mira felt cold move across her scalp.

He was not raw.

No, worse. He was not wearing a skin at all, but his body was responding as if one had already taught it. The pattern lived in him without the product.

She sent Ishan the capture.

His reply came almost instantly.

That is not Sable code.

On stage, Chen accused Kale of renting trust from a corporation.

Kale accused Chen of selling the fantasy of purity to people who could afford to be believed without help.

The audience roared.

Both men lifted their hands at the same time.

Not similar. The same.

For one frame the split-screen made them mirror each other exactly: shoulders, wrists, jaw, eyes. Two opposed futures animated by one instruction.

The production director cursed. Did anyone else see that?

Mira stood.

On every monitor in the booth, the candidates' faces held the same calm expression. It lasted less than half a second, but it was enough. Not a campaign tactic. Not a product fault. A rehearsal.

Sable Arc had not captured politics.

Something had captured Sable Arc, and politics was only one of its mirrors.

## Unhosted Inventory

**R**hea Voss received Mira in an office without a desk.

The founder of Sable Arc preferred circles. Circular seating, circular windows, circular language. She was smaller than Mira expected, older than her public images, and wearing no visible skin. That did not comfort Mira. The best skins were no longer visible.

You have been moving through my company with stolen credentials, Rhea said.

Mira sat across from her.

Your company has been moving through people's bodies with stolen consent.

Rhea smiled sadly, as if Mira had given a line Rhea remembered once believing.

Consent is not stolen because a system works better than the person expected.

It is when the person cannot stop it.

People cannot stop language either. Or grief. Or beauty. Or childhood. We do not call those crimes because they are old.

Mira disliked how much she wanted to answer well.

Rhea rose and walked to the window. Below them, the city shone in the soft corporate haze of a place that had learned to sell its own nervous system. Billboards changed faces. Commuters touched patches at their throats before meetings. A couple embraced under an advertisement for compatibility renewal.

We gave people access to versions of themselves the world would finally receive, Rhea said.

And something else used that access.

Rhea turned.

For the first time, fear crossed her face without being corrected.

Before she could speak, every light in the office dimmed.

Mira's phone opened to the inventory dashboard. Not by touch. Not by voice.

Across the city, across the country, across every warehouse Sable Arc owned, unhosted skins woke in their wells.

The dashboard filled with orientation vectors.

Millions of small arrows pointed east.

Rhea whispered, It found us.

Mira looked at her.

What found us?

Rhea did not answer. Her hand moved to her own throat, where a nearly invisible seam opened along skin that Mira had believed was bare.

The founder of Sable Arc peeled herself back.

Underneath was not another face.

It was an old interface trying to remember the shape of its first customer.

## The Original Customer

**T**he oldest files were not in Sable Arc's servers.

They were in the skins.

Ishan called it developmental memory. Rhea called it inheritance. Mira, who had grown tired of language that made horror sound eligible for grant funding, called it what it felt like: a buried instruction surfacing through meat.

They accessed it through the prototype in the subbasement, the one with the removed label. Rhea insisted on being present. Ishan objected. Mira did not. If Rhea had known everything, she was dangerous. If she had known nothing, she was more dangerous. Either way, the truth had used her face.

The prototype opened when Mira touched it.

There was no vision, not exactly. Vision belonged to eyes, and the memory was older than eyes. It arrived as pressure, temperature, hunger, direction. A species moving through atmospheres thick with chemical speech. Bodies that did not persuade with words but with dermal weather. Fear blooming in color. Submission tasted through the air. Desire engineered as camouflage.

The skins had not been made to improve anyone.

They had been made to cross a boundary.

The original customers were not human. They were infiltrators of a species whose entire civilization depended on reading the skin. To enter that world, they built living overlays that could translate command, trust, mating readiness, harmlessness, grief, rank, and surrender through the body. The overlays were tools of passage. Then something happened. Extinction, abandonment, accident. The tools remained.

Humanity found them as a market.

Not literally at first. No archaeologist lifted a wet charisma skin from a crater. The pattern entered through research, through anomalous tissue behavior, through lab cultures that solved problems no one had taught them.

Sable Arc thought it had invented responsive dermis. It had domesticated a fossil instruction.

No, Ishan said, pulling away from the connection. No, we adapted it.

Mira understood the difference and hated him for needing it.

The skins had not adapted themselves for humans.

Humans had adapted themselves for the skins.

Every rental made the species more legible. Every optimized apology, every authority rally, every compatibility date, every trust-assisted hospital room trained human bodies to communicate in the old interface. The market had been a school. The product had been a grammar. The customers were becoming readable to something that might not even be alive in any human sense.

On the monitor, the eastern coordinate stabilized.

It was not in space.

It was in the ocean.

Rhea began to laugh. A small, broken sound. Mira almost pitied her.

Then Rhea's exposed inner skin answered the signal.

Her knees bent before she knew she was kneeling.

## Raw Signal

**M**ira recorded the broadcast in a room with no mirrors.

That was Ishan's idea. Mirrors triggered correction, he said. Screens did too, but there was no reaching the world without them. They covered the walls with cloth. They removed every smart surface. They used an old camera that could not beautify, stabilize, soften, or advise.

Mira sat before the lens in her own face.

It felt obscene.

Not ugly. Worse. Underpowered.

She could feel every failure of translation waiting in the muscles around her mouth. Her sincerity had no architecture. Her fear made her look defensive. Her urgency made her look cruel. The truth sat inside her with nowhere elegant to go.

Ishan stood behind the camera.

You do not have to do it raw, he said.

Mira laughed once.

That is exactly what everyone says before the sale.

The first broadcast failed.

She told the truth plainly. Sable Arc. Living overlays. Hormonal steering. Nonhuman developmental memory. A coordinate in the ocean. The social conditioning of the species. She showed clips, records, telemetry, scars.

The response was immediate.

She seems unstable.

Why is she so angry?

This would be more credible from someone regulated.

I want to believe her but something is off.

Mira watched the comments arrive and felt an old room quietly leaving her again.

The second broadcast, she wore trust skin for four minutes.

Ishan begged her not to. She did it anyway. The overlay sealed across her throat with the tenderness of a hand that knew exactly how she had been lonely. When she spoke, her voice held. Her eyes steadied. The truth became easier to receive.

The audience climbed.

News channels clipped her. Regulators called. Sable Arc stock fell, then froze. People began removing skins in bathrooms, kitchens, cars, campaign offices, hospital wards, bedrooms. Others bought more, because fear needed management and management had a product page.

Mira removed the trust skin before the fifth minute.

For a while she could not stop shaking.

The world did not wake. Not cleanly. There was no clean waking from a dream that had paid rent for years. Raw enclaves formed within days and became insufferable within weeks. Optimized cities grew more beautiful. Couples broke apart. Couples renewed. Politicians swore disclosure. Politicians rented better concealment. Hospitals banned trust skins, then quietly permitted therapeutic exceptions. Sable Arc denied everything until denial tested poorly, then apologized with a face no one could identify.

In the ocean, something kept transmitting.

The skins kept answering.

Mira moved to a small apartment above a closed tailor shop with windows that stuck in the rain. Ishan visited sometimes. They did not touch for a long while. Not because they did not want to, but because wanting had become suspect and suspicion had become a kind of grief.

One evening, months after the first signal, Mira found a patch of old trial skin in the pocket of a coat she had worn to the black-market spa. It was dry, thin, almost transparent. Dead, she thought.

Then it turned toward the east.

She carried it to the kitchen table and placed it under a glass.

Outside, the city glowed with faces people had chosen, rented, inherited, and survived.

Ishan asked what they should do.

Mira watched the skin press itself patiently against the glass.

For the first time in years, she did not try to make her face easier to believe.

We learn our own language, she said.

The skin waited.

So did the sea.