

Morning Star part 2 Draft 6

1.

The flames twist upwards, bright dancing forms leaving bitter trails. My nostrils clog with the smells of burnt wood and charred flesh. No one else has remained; I share the desert with the hungry fire that consumes the body of my mother.

The sky is brightening; I can see the smoke cutting a path across the heavens. Before me my mother's body is being reduced to nothing more than bone. I have sat here and watched first the hair, then the eyes and then the flesh slowly parted from her. The recognisable shape of her body caught and ripped away by a bright corona of flame. Her tendons, so hard and inflexible anyway in these last few years, shrivelled and snapped, dropping bright gobbets of fire. Vague and shining figures seemed to be sucking her into themselves as her innards blistered and split, were spat upwards as ash.

There's little enough left now. Her ribs cut an empty cage against the shifting blaze, hip bone jutting out its brutal little cradle. When the fire dies down I shall have to smash her skull to set her spirit free. It isn't her own tradition, but she lived here long enough to accept these ways. Whether she believed them, I do not know. For all the tales she told, she rarely talked about her own thoughts. These still remain mysteries to me now.

I know that she ran away, pregnant and possessing only the clothes that she wore. She made her way up a nameless river before riding out with a camel caravan deep into the desert. There she sold herself, or else was sold, or otherwise somehow found herself a member of the Tribe. "I've been a seamstress, a wife, a mother, a mistress and then a seamstress again," she once said to me, one day when I was humiliated by her lack of status, and by association my own. "Now I'm too old to be of any good, so I look after the goats. What else can I do? What else would you have me do?" Age had borne down hard upon her by then; her fingers were gnarled with rheumatism, her skin burnt black by the sun, her wiry and disobedient grey hair pulled back into a thick plait. I tried to remember her as a younger woman, as she must have been during my childhood, but I found that I could not. It is a thing that has slipped away from me forever, save in my imagination, and here before me even that threatens to become only dust and flames.

What little I know, she told me in childhood as she would squat over the cooking fire, or during long cold desert nights, the silence seeming to scream above the grumbling of camels and the quiet muttering from other tents. Sometimes we would all sit out, each in turn telling something, a tapestry of tales woven across the circle, staring up at the pattern of stars and lulled by the poetry of speech, so cool and liquid after the harsh dry toil of the day. "This all happened when I was young," she would always start, "it is scarcely important now, although of course it felt so at the time." She would not often talk about herself, but rather would tell stories of my father, and when she did mention herself I would feel the peculiar jolt of hearing her picture herself in the third person, as if she was watching a beetle climb a sand dune, a dispassionate note to her voice as she would describe herself from her husband's point of view.

I have never met my father, and don't know how true my mother's stories are. Their topography would change like the desert dunes after a storm. But it is all I have left

of my mother, so I start to whisper them out into the cold morning air, keeping her alive, recreating her as her body falls away.

This story happened when she was young. It is scarcely important now.

2.

Ayla stacked the shelves, lifting each crate of bottles with well practised efficiency. Jeysh admired the fluid strength of her body, her unthinking motions. Layer after layer, she built up a perfect stack, her eyes focused on the task in front of her, her breath escaping from her mouth in a series of little hisses. Zia was right; she would make an excellent recruit.

Ayla lived in one of the dormitories provided for Purana Shahar's homeless women. Jeysh didn't know Ayla's particular story, but most of the tales, when he heard them, were depressingly familiar. The same cycles of violence were repeated over and over again, as if they were an integral part of life, like breathing or eating. And somehow these women found the strength to carry on, to work through whatever menial job the organisation could find them, sweeping roads and stacking shelves, going back to the dormitories at night with whatever thoughts, whatever dreams. It made a fertile ground for recruitment.

And yet Jeysh found himself unwilling to recruit Ayla. There was something about her that he felt should not be mixed up in all this. He had talked to her on several occasions now, and each time his conviction had only grown. But Zia would see it differently. "Such women are the most loyal," she had once told him. "They are the best of us."

Ayla had finished stacking the crates, and set to rearranging the individually shelved bottles. She worked with dextrous intensity, forming a pleasing order from the mess. Each bottle shouted its name in vibrant colours splashed across labels, while more subtly embedded transmitters beamed out stock code and status, the location of the bottle and the condition of the contents. The same would be true of almost every product. It added up to a whole shop screaming out banal but hidden information, the radio frequencies from it bathing their bodies. He looked along the aisle: the boxes and bottles and packets and bags; bright colours and beautiful faces; toxic chemicals, trace elements, industrial flavourings, tranquillisers. It formed a whole other world behind the bright smiles and cheerful slogans of the labels.

What right do I have, he wondered, to push someone through from the one world into this other?

Ayla had noticed him watching. She flushed; stopping what she was doing and pulling her sari pallu further over her head. "You'll get me sacked," she said, nervously fingering the bottle tops.

"I don't think Jutta is such a harsh boss, do you?"

"He might hear!" she widened her eyes in a spasm of horror, putting a finger to her lips.

"So you like it here?"

“I am grateful.” she averted her eyes. “Without this I would have nothing. Then what would I do?”

“But you are not happy?”

“A woman in this world, in my position, what more could I want? Even to dream would be absurd. Nothing will change. I pray to Mother...” she turned her back. “I don’t want to think about this. Go please. I was happy until you came.”

She is the sort, he thought. She is the sort who would fight until death, who would never give up. Zia is right about her. She would be a perfect recruit. And yet still the words wouldn’t come to his lips.

All the goods on all the shelves screamed after him. For little more than a day’s wage, Ayla could - and probably did - buy one of a number of goods to ease her heartbreak. Drinks laced with tranquilliser, alcohol, cocaine; unwritten additives that kept people on a drip feed of addiction, kept them quiet, hooked into the system and the product. Perfidious, insidious, sold at every street corner, smiling from shop windows and twisted into fantastic bodies on television. A weapon of control, of subordination, keeping the broken-hearted from tears and the rebellious from violence. These goods kept the people Purana Shahar alive, and also slowly killed them.

He did not know what he could say to Ayla. Perhaps he could say nothing at all. But as he left he saw her looking after him, a thoughtful expression clouding her face.

3.

Nightfall in Purana Shahar. Gongs, drums and bells echoed out into the dirty grey sky, amplified incantations spilling out from neon-splashed temples, their floodlit spires writhing with intricate decoration and looking almost alive. Holy men thronged the streets, calling to the public with prayers, shows of ostentatious supplication or proffered flowers. Motorcycles wound through the crowd on the road, families of four or five balanced precariously upon them, many briefly stopping outside the light-washed temple courtyards to buy a garland from the beggar women, offer a prayer to Mother, light a firecracker maybe, before it was back on the bike; husband, wife and one child sandwiched between them, another at the front straddling the petrol tank. The shivering flicker of headlights played over sleeping bodies, over animals slinking out of view, dogs by the kerbside and cows settling down in the middle of the street. The traffic heaved; an endless press of bodies pushing in every direction, lines of snarling cars, auto-rickshaws, motorbikes, the rusted hulks of old buses crammed with bodies, hands wrapped around the window bars, eyes staring strangely out. Black side streets were illuminated by pavement fires as homeless families made their meals by the side of the road, innumerable people drifting past, unsteady light glinting off bright silks and the whites of eyes. Old, old city, the unsteady clutter of ramshackle buildings giving way to glimpses of some forgotten past: half hidden lumps of elegant masonry shadowed by rotting courtyards, buildings of unfamiliar architecture suddenly rearing themselves above humble causeways, gatehouses butting across roads, crumbling domes and minarets submerged under a tide of precarious shops and tenements. There was drama just in walking the streets, in watching the surrounding people, the exquisite shopfront displays,

the patterns and colours, the foodstuffs arrayed like precious spoils of war, snack sellers gliding through the hubbub offering bhel puri or deep-fried sponge, the filthy air, rawness at the back of the throat, a swarm of smells both fair and foul, the babble of conversation, music, whispered words across balconies.

Jeysh always walked as much as possible, enjoying the anonymity, the dirt and the dust. He liked the sense of limitless possibility surrounding him, the endless buildings of which no two were the same, the crazy bend of alleyways, the gangs of boys slipping through the crowd like piranhas towards prey, old men in shops huddled together drinking tea, women drawn along in cycle rickshaws, everything together, a sense of infinite human life, misery and bliss and drug-induced abandon, drunk and stoned and fervent, passive and raging, criminal, in love.

He passed beneath the weathered stones of the Friday Gate and stood for a while watching the current of traffic on the road beyond. Then he continued on towards a popular tea stall, men standing around in groups talking, or squatting by the roadside watching the cars pass. As was his custom, Jeysh took a cup of tea, turning to face the New City as he drank. The New City hung in elegant constellations against the night sky, glass spires and colossal towers painting strange patterns of light like an unsettling and ethereal dream after the fetid, stinking reality of Purana Shahar.

It was not the tea itself that drew Jeysh to this place, although it was good enough: sweet and rich, the milk doubtless laced with mild tranquillisers or beta-blockers. Rather, it was the sight of the New City, the complex storm of emotions he felt it stir within himself. It made him focus, it shored up his resolve when, like today, he felt his will crumble. He stood there and let himself hate.

“There’s been a bomb,” the chai wallah said to Jeysh, beard bristling and clearly feeling there was no need to apologise for his abrupt interruption.

Jeysh raised his eyebrow curiously. “Really?”

The chai wallah looked at him with the profound satisfaction of one who knew something he didn’t. “It blew up in a military compound. Took out some helicopters, apparently. Nobody hurt, but...”

The chai wallah himself had been an army man, and looked back on the experience fondly. It had, he said, given him a sense of order and authority that had been previously lacking from his life. Most problems in Purana Shahar he felt could be attributed to a lack of proper military authority. “Or more likely,” he would add, growling and waving his arm at the serene spires of the New City, “a lack of any authority at all. They just don’t seem care to care about us, or what goes on here. They’ll see us go to rack and ruin, rather than do anything for us.” Despite these anti-New City sentiments, he was still a military man and he knew where his loyalties lie. He had loved the army, and when his term was up had quit reluctantly, investing his pay in this stall. “People always need to drink and pass the time,” he would always tell Jeysh, “That’s one thing that’s certain, whatever else goes on.” He was a man who felt the world slipping from his grasp in a welter of incomprehensible rebellion and bombings, a sure sign of moral degeneracy that would not have been tolerated in his day.

“It’s a nasty turn,” Jeysh agreed.

“It’s bloody well out of control, that’s what. What we need is the New City to take a firm hand and clamp down on it. I mean, I’ve been in the army, I know about the

surveillance and bugging. I don't know why the people that do this can't just be found and shot. I don't see how hard that is."

"I'm not sure it's that easy."

"It would do us a lot of good. People need to be taught what they can and cannot do. At this rate, with all these ridiculous revolutionary demands and bombs, we'll descend into chaos! Where does it stop, if no one will listen to authority? Who will they listen to? Maybe the labourers won't work in the fields, and maybe then the zamindars will decide not to care because they don't want to be told what to do either. It's irreligious, is what it is. The doctrine of Mother tells us that some have to lead and some have to follow. The leaders have been chosen, and we have to put up with that. We have to trust them, like in the army with your superiors, that's why it *works*. It's the natural path of things, and I can't understand why these - these revolutionaries think that they can do better. What do they think they are - divine?"

"I don't know what they think, but I don't think society is in danger of crumbling just yet, even if someone's blown up a bomb in an army compound. You know, there can't be that many of them. Most people - well, we're a long way off from people refusing to work in the fields. We still need to eat. No amount of bombs is going to change that."

"So if it doesn't achieve anything, then what the point of doing it?"

Jeysh grinned. "It's a living, I guess. Same as anything else."

"And that's why," said the chai wallah, "we need someone stamping down on this with the authority of Mother. We need more military and more religion. We need the New City doing more. If these people think that it's a good living, blowing folk up..."

Jeysh grunted and drank up. He was going to be late. He told the stallholder not to worry, paid for his tea and left, smiling.

Nevertheless, he was disturbed. Someone had planted a bomb within an army compound, and it hadn't been him.

4.

It was a small, shabby room in an anonymous building. There were not many people present but it felt crowded anyway. They were already speaking as he entered. He settled at the back, Zia giving him a hostile look.

The room was considered clean. Baffling devices, the size and consistency of dust, had been scattered through the room to jam any microtransmitters or other bugging devices that may be on the floor or walls, floating in the air, caught in people's hair or clothing. It was an expensive counter-measure, but it at least created for them these precious moments of freedom.

Jeysh looked at the new recruits. There were seven of them, mostly young and mostly male, probably literate and unable to find a job commensurate with their education. They would prove useful, but Zia would be more interested in the women. She always was. "They make," she had told Jeysh many times, "better recruits."

Zia stood up to speak. She was a lean, impressive woman, powerful with words and sure of her ideals. Jeysh admired Zia's totality of vision, her discipline, her drive. She had a warrior's instinct to lead by example.

It was a well practised speech but it didn't show. Zia meant every word that she said. She breathed it, believed it, everything she saw and every way she acted confirming to her that she was doing the right thing. Her conviction showed in her, was cut into the hard muscled body, and it enabled her to dominate the room. When she spoke, everybody listened.

"When I'm talking to people," Zia said, "it's often difficult for me to know where to start. What I want to say to you involves something so massive and pervasive that I find it difficult not to sound ridiculous. Whether I do, I'll leave you to judge for yourselves. But first I want you to remember that if what I am about to say escaped this room, we may well all be killed for it. That's the nature of what we face. That's the thing surrounding us. So, maybe you're already thinking this sounds ridiculous, but..." she looked around. She had them mesmerised already: her stature, her gestures, the sound of her voice, fixing each and every one in turn with her stare as if she talked directly to them and them alone. "What can I do to make it sound otherwise, if this is the truth? This is the way things are, and no amount of speaking will change that. I think you already have an inkling of that, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Am I right?"

Several nods of assent.

"So let's start by thinking about what we all do. What are our lives like, and why? We scrape away for a living, fighting to earn enough money just to eat and drink. Maybe if we earn some more we can buy a TV, maybe a radio, maybe rent somewhere better to live. And what happens to us? What is the result of all this work? Do we feel better about ourselves, perhaps?"

She paused, let them think.

"No. And why not? What happens to us? Day after day, as we work, we are fed these dreams. You all know the ones, because they're around you all the time, on posters or bottles or television, in newspapers we read and songs we listen to. And what are these dreams? We'll, they're the things we're told we should buy, the things we should do, what we should wear, how we should act. And there's a trick behind this because we can never buy enough to be happy, we can never look beautiful enough to be happy, we can never be perfect enough. This feeling it brings out in us is a deliberate thing. In fact, this whole system is designed to keep us in a form of slavery, buying all these things in the hope that we will be happy, and then when we aren't we buy yet more. Working to buy, rather than working to live. It sounds absurd, put like that, but all these things that we can't stop doing, that we can't take control of, are designed deliberately to be this way. All these things are things that someone else somewhere else forces upon us, for their gain rather than ours. And that cynicism, that casual disregard for the happiness, for the true feelings of others, it disgusts me."

Zia took a sip of water, watching them all the while.

"So what do we do? It's all too easy just to try to ignore this or make a compromise with it. Most people do, after all, and I can't blame them for being duped, because these lies and dreams are *everywhere*. They surround us, and have become part of our normal life. Half the time we don't even realise what is wrong. How can we possibly defeat this when it's such an easy thing to give in to?"

She paused again, staring at each recruit in turn.

“But we shouldn’t. We have to remember all the time what these people are doing to us. There are many good examples of this, and one of the most frightening, one of the truly shocking things, is how much we are poisoned. The food we eat is full of tranquillisers, industrial effluents, reconstituted fat and other filth masquerading as flavouring, colouring, binding ingredients. We work so hard to buy the products they tell us to want that we don’t have time to cook. Our traditional foods are being replaced by packet products high in fat and salt, full of the shit *they* wouldn’t eat, which we are told we should whilst sitting inert in front of the TV or the radio. So too with the things that we drink. I don’t think most people realise that we are being deliberately and systematically poisoned. We are being treated with the utmost contempt by people who only care how much money they can cream from us.

“And then there is TV itself, a diet of programmes designed to misinform us, to make us stupid and afraid, to perpetuate the myth that those in the New City somehow know more than us, and are more fit to rule us without us having any sort of say. I could go on about television all day, but I’ll spare you. I think you all know what I mean.

“And what does it add up to? What does it all add up to? What are they doing to us, just to keep themselves rich, and to keep us under control? What I think it amounts to is a violation, the most grotesque violation of both our physical and spiritual selves. You have all been violated, I -” at this, Zia put her hand to her breast, her face distorted with emotion, “- I have been violated.”

She stopped again, waiting for this to sink in.

“And it goes further. It always goes further. One of the amazing things is that it always does. Just at the moment where you feel the New City couldn’t sink any lower, you discover some new outrage. Several years ago we discovered they could put surveillance equipment in capsules the size and weight of free-floating dust. Do you know what this means? It means we are listened to and watched everywhere: as we go about our business, as we share intimate or degrading moments, as we speak to loved ones. Everywhere. It’s a form of rape, if you like, reducing us to objects that can be used for the convenience of others, giving the New City the power to analyse us like we are insects, to watch us all of the time for any little form of rebellion. And if we do rebel, we will be gone. Just not there one day, like we never existed. So again I ask: what can we do? What do most people do? All that is left open to us is to hold down our menial jobs, eat and drink the poison they sell to us, ingest their spiritual toxins and quietly live meaningless and debased lives. I, for one, can no longer take this.” Zia seemed to be willing the recruits to become her, to suffer her hurts. Her body finely angled, the atmosphere about her seeming to crackle with electricity.

“It seems to me hideous that we should have to live like this. But what to do? Where does the heart of the problem lie? There has to be a centre to it, something that moves it and organises it. Something that even pretends to offer a justification for it all. Something that we all know, that we accept without thinking about it. And sure enough there is.”

She paused. Back ramrod straight, hair flung back like a flag of defiance, breasts rising and falling as she composed herself.

“Mother.”

Nobody moved. There was not a sound, as if everyone expected that at any second police stormtroopers would come smashing through the door and walls. As if, Jeysh thought, Mother is really watching and will judge accordingly. He stifled a yawn, eyes flicking from recruit to recruit, wondering how many could really be used, and how many would just be decoys, cannon-fodder, fighting the good fight in mind and soul until one day their luck ran out and they were picked to die.

There are worse things, he told Zia silently, there are many worse things than those you have described.

“I don’t think,” one of the recruits was saying, the sweat forming a sheen on his forehead, “I don’t think you should be saying this.”

Zia flashed him a look of hot sympathy. “It goes against the grain,” she admitted. “Even now, after everything I know. But.”

She stopped to drink some more water. “But.”

“Think about Mother’s words. Think about what She actually says. Her doctrine states that without Her rule we would be irreversibly set upon a path of destruction. Without Her control, without the rigid order She forces upon us, we would be locked into a cycle of warfare, indulging in an orgy of death that would eventually consume everyone. Her view has it that, given the freedom, the human race would annihilate itself. Only Her iron will prevents this, and only the societies that unquestionably accept Her rule will survive, whatever oppression and individual suffering this may entail.

“I can’t ever disprove Her. If there are indeed thousands of other worlds under Her yoke, still then She could never be disproved. But that doesn’t mean She is right. Are we at each other’s throats here, now, in this room? Of course not. Are we when we are with our families, or at work, or in the streets? Of course not. This belief that we are inherently evil, that we need to be constantly controlled and saved from ourselves, all that it does is simply turn us into infants. It helps to make us stupid and afraid of ourselves. I believe, rather to the contrary of Mother, that human beings have an implicit goodness. I believe that here and now we can take control of our own destinies and live together in freedom and harmony. That’s what I want, and that’s what I’m willing to fight for.”

She paused again, watching the effect she was having on these young recruits.

“This is not that distant and uncertain future happiness promised to the race by Mother; this is something that I believe we can achieve now, on our own, on this earth. And we can do this without having to subject the population to all the things Mother claims are necessary for us: the debasing surveillance, the drugs in our food, constant oppression and political disenfranchisement, the living in fear of speaking out or fighting back, the contempt of our treatment, the squalor of Purana Shahar compared with the beauty of the New City. Under Mother, we are the damned, we are spiritually unclean and genetically incorrect, not fit for the New City, too imperfect for the perfect future of others who we must serve. I find that so hideous as to be almost unspeakable. It fills me with rage every day, and every day I tell myself that I cannot let this happen. We are good people; we should have the right to determine our own future, whatever those in the City may say, and whatever the doctrine of Mother may say.

“We must fight. We must fight to stop Her killing us. That is all I have to say. I’m sorry it is so little.” she bowed her head, abasing herself before her silent audience before sitting down.

Jeysh gave them several minutes to let Zia's speech sink in, before he got his feet to discuss the more practical and mundane matters of resistance.

5.

After the meeting, Zia was in high spirits. For her, recruitment meetings were a personal challenge. She saw them as a gauge of her effectiveness and charisma as a leader. That she could still inspire people so readily was a source of pride to her. As Jeysh climbed on to the scooter behind her, he could see that she was still suffused with the glow of vindication.

They set off into the traffic.

Hoardings of different sizes littered the roadside, leering down with the same old promises for beauty products, skin lightening, low-calorie foods or foods loaded with saturated animal fats, pictures of cars, motorcycles, clothes; endless hungry aspirations, endless consumption in the quest for absolute happiness. Beyond the floodlit hoardings, a never-ending throng marched upon unlit pavements, the tiny flames from portable stoves punctuating the darkness, black figures briefly splashed in dusty light. The scooter weaved through the traffic, past oxen carts and bicycles, goods trucks, cars and rickshaws and motorbikes, a sad line of cattle terrified by the noise, holy men marching and singing, a panorama of shops, lurid fluorescent tubes shimmering off rainbow silks. Steaming food, a bright white oasis of tables under a shabby tarpaulin canopy, the roar of insects about arc lights, temple sikharas splitting the sky. So many people, each one with its name, its history and hopes, its petty struggles, its loves and fears. That is the prize, he thought as Zia shot across the main highway and into a sprawling shanty town. This is the prize, these people in their endless toil, their devotion, their adaptability. Living off the waste, the congealed fat and discarded bottles, wrecked cars and plastic sheeting, all the sorry flotsam of both Purana Shahar and the New City. This is our future; this is what the dream becomes after the hoardings have been pulled down and the promises have run dry.

They swung through queasy dirt tracks, the scavenged materials surrounding them forming walls and facades that seemed ready to tumble in at any second, suspended plastic sheeting marking out the notional boundaries of imaginary homes, pools of steaming effluent shining under the scooter's headlight, the sharp eyes of children looking out from the darkness. Zia had sometimes worried that the rebellion they were trying to foment would turn into little more than a distraction, an inconsequential game. Even if that turns out to be true, he would reply to her on such occasions, a game would still be better than what some people on the margins of Purana Shahar's life currently have.

Eventually the shanty town gave way to clouded cesspools, mountains of rubbish, evil streams of fluorescent chemicals. Toxic substances were pumped out from the New City and gathered here in oily swamps, from where they seeped slowly into the ground. Stunted vegetation grimly struggled for life, the rate of mutation so rapid over such a short space of time that within brief generations whole new species had come into being. Strange things scuttled in grotesque shadows. Ahead rose the City walls, sheer and

impossible, riddled with fissures and strange markings. Within them lay the heart of Mother's power. In front of such a spectacle Jeysh felt puny and ineffective, all his plans just seeming to be stupid boyhood dreams.

Here, next to the walls, were the badlands. The few people who bothered to come here were mostly scavengers from the shanty town. The relatively high level of radioactivity and other, stranger, transmissions meant that electronic and radio communications did not work particularly well. Dust transmitters and other surveillance devices could not function here. There were no spies, prying eyes, people listening in. They were so close to the New City, and yet they were safe.

Zia cut the motor and they idled to a familiar resting place. They left the scooter and sat themselves on the lowest branch of a malformed tree.

Zia passed a hand in front of her face and laughed rather bleakly. "We recruit these people with all of our fine words, but what have we really done? A lot of plotting and very little action. Don't you just long to fight?"

"Everything has to start somewhere. Fighting without a proper plan wouldn't help us at all. At least, not if we're serious, not if we really want change."

"And how do we know when we have planned enough?"

They both looked up, the colossal stretch of wall shearing off the sky.

"We can't possibly hope to face the New City head on. We need to know precisely what we're doing, and when. That's the only hope we have."

"Hm." Zia didn't look convinced. "How long do you think we can keep these recruits motivated? Not long, I'd imagine, if something doesn't happen quickly."

"We can always make things happen. A few fireworks are fine, as long as we don't start to believe that's really the way to change things. We shouldn't be distracted from our main aim."

Zia shrugged, maybe not believing him. "I didn't see that girl you were sent out to recruit. One of the girls from the dormitories, what was her name? Ayla?"

Even here, he thought, in the badlands where the air and the ground are toxic and sick, there is so much life surrounding us. Insects flickered hungrily through the darkness, scraped Jeysh's skin, scuttled along the grooves of branches. Trees and plants reared themselves out of the poisoned marshes, foliage bursting into ill flowers, trying to reproduce. Everything had the same urge: to split, to reproduce, reaching up desperately for sunlight or dragging splayed and useless limbs in the remorseless quest for food, for sex.

Maybe Mother is right, he thought. Maybe we mean so little that we really are worthless as individuals, and we only can make sense as part of Mother's colossal plan. And the pain we suffer is worth bearing for the success of the whole project.

And although we would be trampled, it would be by a new, superior human being that would know how to live in peace, how to create rather than how to destroy.

He shook his head, watching as a series of little bright blue spheres exited a fissure in the wall, descending gently until they burst just above the ground, an odious rotten mess slithering out from ruptured skins. Stomachs lined with poison, mercury in children, sedative drugs depositing heavy metals into the body, carrier bacteria from modified crops that bound with the gut wall, mutating it and causing tumours. Children left by the roadside, sold for paltry sums and then cannibalised for retinal material, liver, heart, kidneys, taste buds.

Maybe no worse, he thought, than any other creature. Flies caught in a spider's web, rats caught and killed by a cat, cows with tuberculosis or BSE. All the same. Mother understood. She saw with what was perhaps a strange compassion, but possibly a true one.

To save a rose bush, to make it strong, you must cut it right back, year on year. So the saying went.

He shook his head again, trying to come to terms with the enormity of the wall before him, the human ingenuity, the willpower, the exploiting of resources.

"What about Ayla?" Zia prompted again, her hand reaching for his arm in the florid darkness. He started.

"Ayla? I couldn't."

"Couldn't?"

He felt his heart burn in pity for the girl stacking her shelves, caught in her bubble away from all of this.

"Zia, she's just an innocent. She's not the right sort for this. She doesn't deserve to be poisoned by it."

"What are you saying - that she isn't involved anyway? That she isn't being poisoned right now? That she isn't being watched, that she hasn't been abused and made homeless by a whole fucking system that values people less than cattle? That if her genes are so extraordinary that she doesn't die young and blind and cancered like all the rest of us will, then she won't be dragged off and fucking well *dissected*? Is that the innocence you're trying to save?"

"Innocence is still innocence. I envy her, I really do. She has something special about her, and if she can keep it, she'll be worth far more than giving her life up for a bomb. Someone like her gives me a little bit more hope, and I can't destroy that."

"Sentimentalist." Zia spat down from the branch in disgust. A swarm of beetle-things descended upon it immediately, seeming to feed from it. "We need every recruit. Every fucking recruit. She would have followed us anywhere, done anything. She's perfect."

"Leave it, Zia. I'll find someone else."

"So we'll have one where we could have had two? And what is it with you and these fucking women? This isn't the first time."

He sighed, running his hand through his hair. "That they could be happy just living ordinary lives. You know, even that, even just the possibility, is a rare thing."

"It's still a deception. It's based on ignorance, nothing else."

"No matter, Zia. She's got something we will never have. I'll do my best to protect her from you."

"Sometimes," Zia remarked, a rather tart tone to her voice, "you sound just like the enemy."

He stared at the wall and did not answer, trying to see through it, trying to be within.

They weaved their way back towards the heart of Purana Shahar, Jeysh clinging to Zia's back as she negotiated bikes and vans and bison, religious processions, beggars and fruit sellers, absently meandering cows; the honking of traffic making his ears ring and the exhaust fumes biting at the back of his throat. The shanty town fell away to the oblique architecture of the new suburbs: crude concrete buildings whose height was decided by when the money ran out, anything from 20 storeys down to two, brutalist warrens defaced by the signs of human activity, geometric canyons strung with illicit electricity cables, phone lines, washing polls, saris spread out and fluttering against naked concrete, bunting hanging down, coloured lights, paper lanterns. Mile upon mile, ugly, squalid, harsh lines seeming to repel human flesh, then these too fell away at the old divisions of the town wall, the Friday Gate, and suddenly they were within Purana Shahar's old, old heart, the festering buildings with their rotted hints of elegant adornments, prostitutes leaning over ancient balconies, tightly-packed shops and temples, winding narrow streets, sunless courtyards that had played hosts to generations of cruelty.

While they had been at the wall Jeysh had told Zia about the bomb that had gone off in the military compound. Zia had been incensed, not just over the publicity some rival organisation would receive over this, but also because it increased her conviction that planning and preparation were counter-productive, and what was needed was direct action. Zia felt the stakes had been raised; some hitherto unknown group had demonstrated their effectiveness, and would be gaining recruits and funds from Purana Shahar's disaffected. "Meanwhile we do what?" she had asked him. "Nothing tangible. Nothing that people feel will give them hope. We have to act; we have to raise our profile. We don't exist in a vacuum; we need support. Dull but effective just isn't an option. We have to be talked about. "

This way of looking at their position appalled Jeysh. But it was part of why she was leader, why she could recruit people and bind them to the cause so effectively. No easy thing, he mused as he watched the street sellers, the women stretching out fabrics and turning to each other for advice, ignoring the shopkeepers' banter. It was all very easy believing in something, but everyday life - the eating and fucking and working - tended to dull the indignity, draw the sting, provide smaller and pettier matters to concentrate upon. Rekindling people's ire, forcing them to focus on the larger issues, was a necessary part of any social movement. Dull but effective may be capable of removing the mechanics of power, but anything further would be impossible without zealous support of the downtrodden, the forgotten, the oppressed; the people with nothing left to lose. And they would need signs of spectacular success in swift and regular doses.

It would be a difficult balancing act.

Zia wanted information about this new organisation. What did they stand for? Was there any chance of forming an alliance? How had they managed to get someone inside a military compound? All questions to which he had no answer. He promised her that he would find out. He had access to sources of information Zia didn't know about, and had made deals he wouldn't want her to discover. But for a certain price he could find out what she wanted.

Whether she is prepared to pay that price when it is asked for... He shrugged. She was adamant.

Zia drew up at a little triangular intersection of roads where a market had grown up. Jeysh slid off the scooter and she turned to face him. "How long before you can find out?"

"A week, maybe."

"Draw up some plans in the meantime. We need our people doing things."

Doing things. He nodded.

She hesitated. "If you need me..."

He waved his hand and watched her stiffen at his dismissal.

"Well then," she said, scattering a sudden convergence of biscuit sellers around her as she kicked her scooter into life, plunging with little warning into the flow of the traffic.

He watched her go, amused, sorry and admiring. He shook his head, turned and began to walk the rest of the way home, surprised by how heavy his steps felt.

7.

They drew lots. They were only young and they drew lots in order to make it real, to force them to do something. They may have been idealistic but they were not stupid. They knew too many people who had complained bitterly about the state of life, and yet who had done nothing. Things must change, and in order to achieve that they must act. Nobody else would do it for them.

There were three tasks to be allotted. Each task contained a particular form of sacrifice. Possibly, when they were drawing up their plan, they hadn't realised this, and possibly it was a form of emotional and psychological blackmail to ensure that they would never betray each other.

The first task contained the most obvious sacrifice. Even as they drew it up, they realised it would mean almost certain death for one of them. There had been a city, the dead city, whose name had been destroyed along with the rest of it after warring for independence over 50 years ago. Rumours persisted that the dead city had developed nuclear weapons and that these weapons, unused, still remained hidden in their silos somewhere in the dead zone. Reports of army patrols scouring the desert seemed to give these rumours credence. If there was any possibility of acquiring these weapons, the three reckoned, it was worth one of their lives in the investigation. The lots were drawn, it fell to Sunil, and soon after he disappeared from the lives of Jeysh and Anil.

Both Jeysh and Anil presumed Sunil to be dead. With no proof, however, with no message and no way of really knowing, they found it impossible to make a truth from their certainty, no way of confronting this as something that had actually happened. Sunil had left too vivid a mark in Jeysh's memory: the sound of his voice, the look in his eyes, his ideas. Impossible that he could be dead. While he could imagine all the lonely deaths, drowned in desert sand and infected by radiation, it was a reality that permanently receded from him. Whatever story he made for Sunil he could not believe to be true. He was destined to wait, maybe endlessly, for any news. Sunil's sacrifice had become a stone in his heart, an impenetrable barrier of resolve when all else had failed. Sunil may be dead; it did not matter anyway. All that mattered now was the strange form of his

sacrifice - that they should not know, that they would have to continue anyway. That was the promise they had made, trying to fight their desires into brutal breathing life.

The second and third lots were, no less than the first, a life's work. The second lot, to enter the New City and work to disrupt it from within, was drawn by Anil. The final lot, to organise resistance and disruption from without, to co-ordinate and choreograph all the different elements, fell to Jeysch.

They worked diligently. Slowly, methodologically, they destroyed all family ties, all friendships and prior loves. They moved areas, changed names more than once, worked hard to obliterate their dialects and body language, to switch semiotics, to be able to disappear in crowded rooms. They studied whatever they could find on chemistry, physics, engineering; they spent their evenings with chaat sellers and rickshaw drivers. They worshipped at Mother's temples, talked to the families of the disappeared, the dreamers on the streets, the homeless, the fundamentalists. They had their retinas altered in dangerous backstreet operations, their vocal cords and fingerprints changed, cockroaches slithering across filthy rooms as they lay there, the frightened murmurs of girls having abortions spilling out from behind other curtains. They emerged as whole beings from the ashes of their unknown pasts, and set about recruiting the first dribs and drabs of their unnamed organisation, shedding what responsibilities they could in order to sink further into the background. Anil faded, preparing for his future role by ridding himself of everything, becoming a ghost, waiting for his moment. Jeysch went on, recruiting and fixing and bargaining until at last he could slip into the shadow of the woman he had chosen to be leader: Zia.

Zia didn't know, of course. Nobody did save the two of them, and Anil no longer even existed, was not a name to anybody but Jeysch. It had become an organisation hidden within an organisation. There were several other people Jeysch had recruited whose pasts he had contrived to burn, and like Anil, they waited their chance to enter the New City. Zia knew nothing about this, and it was not part of the organisation's objectives. But Jeysch had made his promise; he had to work out a way to get them in.

It took him a long while to realise how, and even longer to accept the necessity of what he would be forced to do. There was no way of smuggling them in: the New City was impenetrable. If they were to get in, it would have to be legitimately. The only way he could arrange that would be to do some sort of deal with the New City authorities, some act of betrayal whose cost would be high enough for him to demand whatever he wanted in return. It had turned into a long and difficult game.

8.

Home. From behind the once-elegant balustrade there was a view across a stinking, crowded courtyard, music blaring from shop fronts, men squatting in groups, a knot of holy men standing chanting outside the local temple gate, the sound of firecrackers and gongs from within. He climbed the stairs, rising above the shit and the noise of the courtyard, hearing the flick of insects throwing themselves at bare bulbs, wood creaking under his tread. He nodded to the neighbours hanging out of their doorways, watched absently through windows as families gathered in front of the TV,

one hundred channel pirate reception, bright smiles and futures stretching beyond the stars, wannabe actresses twisting impossibly perfect bodies to music, the same old shit being sold, all in order to float the bank balance of some cocaine-addled New City slug. All the money he made, sweated out by rickshaw drivers, soft-drink wallahs, the hopeful young actresses and gnarled washermen down by the ghats, it would all be gone, blown like a conjuror's trick, disappeared into a void when he died, leaving nothing.

Home. Sarita had left the outside light on, a moth battering the glass in a fury of desire. He let himself in, closing the door quietly behind him, staring as he always did at the dingy furnishings, years of heat and damp monsoon slowly killing them. The pictures on the wall and the rug over the warped wooden floor were Sarita's touches, her attempts to make the place feel more human, her little trinkets and tokens scattered throughout the flat, a shrine set up over her cloth-covered trunk in the corridor. The trunk had contained all the goods that she had entered into married life with, and now it bore her shrine, in front of which she performed her daily worship to Mother. Her offering had gone out, only halfway burnt; he stopped to relight it, muttering her prayers for her. Before he went to bed he would eat, and then dictate a brief version of the day's events into his data cube.

He entered the kitchen.

"Shit!"

He had not expected to find her waiting for him. She sat in the kitchen, a bright shawl wrapped all the way about her, the light switched off but a candle on the table in front of her flickering unsteadily. In the shadow, she had looked to him like some spirit or djinni come to claim him, pull him down into the underworld, big black eyes consuming him.

"I thought you'd be asleep," he said, by way of an apology.

"I felt sick."

"Do you want me to boil you some milk?"

"No. I think it's passing. I made you some food."

"I don't need much." he stared remorsefully at the dish she had prepared, selecting for himself some pakoras and bhajis. "Sorry I'm so late."

"Work, huh?"

"You know how it is."

She sighed, reaching out to touch his arm. "What is all this work for? What does it bring us?"

"House and home," he said between bites. "Money. Food. All that."

"I thought it was all to help us be together. But all it does is keep us from seeing one another. You know, I don't want your money, I just want you. Just some time together. Remember that?"

"But if we had more time together, then we couldn't afford to live. As it is, we can barely cover the rent and afford food on top of that. What would you rather we did - live on the streets?"

"You always make it sound so impossible, like what I'm demanding is completely unreasonable. All I'm saying is that I want to spend some time with you."

He was being unfair, he knew. But, he thought, what can I say to her? The different parts of his life did not fit together into a coherent whole and it was Sarita who suffered because of this. It pained him that this should be so, but he felt there was nothing he could do. There was something more important than either of them that he had

committed himself to, and he couldn't ignore it. It lurked just beyond the door, it waited on the radio and listened in from the dust, it hung in the eyes of the painting in Sarita's shrine, it was in the air and in the food and inside everyone. He couldn't drive that fact away just to give Sarita more time; he felt he had to deal with it with all his waking strength. And you, he told Sarita silently, you've sacrificed so much already and you'll only have to give more.

He stared at a fly carving angular patterns about the dead bulb of the kitchen light. I wonder if you're real, he asked it, watching the maddening triangular patterns it traced. Either that, or right now another image of the two of them was being monitored and stored, watched somewhere in the New City. They would be analysing Sarita's miserable frown, so at odds with the bright reds and yellows of her shawl. He felt angry at the thought, then controlled himself, tried to see her as they would. Her pretty face, the shawl such a typical example of the sort of thing a poor young wife would buy for herself just after marriage, her faith in a happy future still unbroken. She would only realise later that she had given herself up to a dreary present for those early few moments of delirious love. Sarita no longer wore the shawl outside the house, wanted no one to see, to trace her back to her nineteen year-old self, so full of hope for her marriage and her future. But here it was, on record, stored and analysed and watched repeatedly, her DNA uncurled and her body language broken down. If she was useful to them in no other way, she was still a consumer, she still responded to adverts and slogans and music, she could still be led along the dream-path towards consumer heaven. And if it wasn't the fly it would be the ants in the corner of the room, the dust behind the cooker where neither of them swept, a spider squatting unseen in the shadows.

There's a way of telling, he thought. If I reached over and caught the fly, there's a way I can see. A subtle light in those black primeval eyes, a pattern of leg movements that was just slightly inauthentic. You had to train yourself exhaustively to be able to know. And I could show her, tell her these things, peel off a whole layer of her life.

For what good?

He always found Sarita beautiful when, like now, she had washed off all her make up. In this light, face painted only by shadows, her eyes glittering in candlelight, she became agonisingly human to him, agonisingly close. He wanted to reach out and touch her.

Always through his life the same sort of women had attracted him. He could trace it right through from his elided childhood, from the girls that used to brush his hair as they sang through to Sarita; slightly unworldly, with unconscious poetry flowing out from the fingertips, entrancing beauty poured into carefully formed calligraphy or kneading dough, soft hymns before a shrine's avatar, street sweeping shelf stacking eyes narrowed at a monitor screen magic of the real, a certain quality that he imagined he could watch unto death without tiring. Sarita had been trained as a seamstress and he suspected that, if encountering her now for the first time, he would still chase her with the same reckless abandon, the same desperate need for contact with that magic. The lyrical beauty with which she worked, she cooked, she cleaned, was a tearing apart of the ugly illusion of life, the promise of a deity in the banal.

He felt sure he would always be drawn to the same thing in his life, again and again. It was an unfillable emptiness inside him, constantly forcing him onwards, making him constantly hungry for something that, in truth, he could not possess. He had hoped

that by marrying Sarita, by having the source of this elusive magic so close to him, that he could slake this hunger, sate himself, unravel the absence within him and at last be free of it.

He watched the fly cutting triangles about the light fitting. Mechanical or otherwise, doing what it has to do. Just that and nothing more. He longed to be like Zia, to be so focused on the task at hand that nothing else mattered.

Sarita watched him watching, agitated by his silence.

“We should go somewhere,” he said. “We haven’t in a long time, and it may do us both some good. I could take some time off and we could just both go. I don’t know where, we can decide that later.”

“It’s always just treats,” said Sarita, looking away from him. “Don’t you understand? I don’t want anything special, I just want you here. I want you here when I eat, in the evenings and for breakfast and to share all the little things that marriage is supposed to be about.”

“I know, I know. But at the moment I can’t... I know what you want isn’t just a holiday or whatever, but at the moment that’s all I can give you. Just that. I know it isn’t enough, but...”

Sarita looked down, fingering the shawl, sniffing to herself and not wanting him to see her tears. “Okay, well, it’s not that a holiday wouldn’t be lovely. But please...”

He nodded, and appealed for her to come over and sit on his lap.

She hesitated - only briefly - and then acquiesced, walking round the table, her frame hunched in defeat, her feet slapping on the hard floor. She folded across him and he put one arm around her.

“One day it won’t be like this,” he said to her. “One day I won’t have to work so late and one day we’ll be - we’ll be free from all of this. To do just whatsoever we please, when we please to do it.”

“I don’t see why we can’t do that now.”

“Because,” he said gently, “because we don’t have the money. We don’t have any of the things we would need to be able to behave like that.” He stared at the fly staring.

“I don’t care about that.”

“I know.”

He moved his hand up across her stomach to the curve of her breast. He heard her low, long intake of breath as he moved his fingers.

“No, Jeysh, don’t. The neighbours will hear and start complaining.”

“No they won’t, not if we’re quiet.”

To his intense pleasure he felt her acquiesce. She arched her back, her shoulder blades digging into his chest. Lust, that easy traitor, gripped him and he began to move against her. She gave a gasp and muttered something just outside his hearing, trying to stifle her moans, the chair squeaking, the uneven legs knocking against the floor. Jeysh tried to lose himself in the touch of her skin, glad she still proved so ready to forgive him.

And then the sounds: the slamming of a door, someone banging on the wall. Sarita’s sighs of delight turned into an angry hiss. She gave him a look of exquisite hopelessness. Jeysh held her very tight, very still.

“How do they hear?” she whispered. “It’s like they’re waiting for us. It’s so...” she buried her face in her hands. He felt her body shaking. He held on to her, powerless. And the world listened in anyway.

9.

He lay awake long after Sarita had fallen still beside him, her breath lengthening into sleep. All these warriors and revolutionaries, he thought. All the heroes, the bandit queens, the freedom fighters of legend. He was willing to bet that none of them had acted through altruism alone. Reasons and justifications were always murky things, not to be believed or trusted. Beneath all the self-aggrandising rhetoric and litany of selfless virtues there always lay something more strange and personal, a weird kink, a desire for a particular slice of a particular paradise. It often made the ideals suspect and the visions impossible. Revolutionary struggle always seemed to be reaching out for the unreachable, not only in terms of changing the fundamental nature of society, but also in healing the fundamental divisions of self. If you heard me, he said silently to Sarita, talking to young men and women about bombs and liberation, you would still hear the same craven wretch who sat telling you lies and half-truths in the kitchen, you would still recognise me looking for something that isn't there.

So what if we change the world? We still won't be able to change people. Strip away the drugs, the food, the propaganda and the lack of formal education, the genetic screening and the City's selective breeding, and human beings would still just be human beings. Maladjusted childhoods, crazy parents, adolescent hormones, the nagging trouble of desires that can never be fulfilled, personality kinks or sexual drives. A fucking mess, a ball of knotted code, an original instruction that made no sense. Perhaps Mother was correct to enshrine the *beingness*, the principle of human survival, as the root and the justification for everything else that would have to be done to preserve this. It was as good, he supposed, as anything.

But I would want hope, he thought. I would at least want the chance of us changing ourselves, us deciding our own fate. Otherwise we are nothing, we are without the very dignity and self control that our language and our social interactions should offer.

He could at least fall back upon the relative certainty of the things he had to do. Logistically, some of these things were difficult, but they had hard and cold identities that did not alter under light or darkness. Day after day, he could feel he was doing his bit.

Zia had made two demands of him, one for information on the army bombing and the other for a plan of action as a response. For the first he would go to his New City contact. His previous contact, Ky, had disappeared, presumed assassinated. Each contact brought with them their own particular problems, and most did not tend to last long. Purana Shahar, or maybe their particular position within it, seemed to undo them; most turned to racketeering or smuggling, or else they tried to pull strings amongst rival powerful factions. Many turned native, abandoning their posts and disappearing into Purana Shahar's underworld, only to turn up dead several months later. He had yet to meet the latest appointment to the post, and wondered what attitude she would bring with her. Ky's City arrogance had led him to see Purana Shahar as a virgin bride with an extensive dowry, and his post had become little more than an instrument for taking whatever he could from her. It had made dealing with him awkward, and Jeysh had

waited for his removal with some keenness. He hoped this new woman would be more productive, although he did not bank on it. The only thing that all his New City contacts had in common was their peculiarity. New City folk rarely ventured beyond the walls; those that did were invariably possessed by something odd, most usually a rapacious greed.

Zia's second demand, for a plan of action, would be more intellectually challenging. There were a number of different considerations he had to balance, not the least between his own plans and Zia's need for the organisation to have a higher profile, to make targeted and populist strikes.

He lay and thought. All his best ideas came like this; inert and invisible, a dead flesh lump, brainwaves slower and less active than those of his sleeping wife. Nothing to be seen, nothing to be heard. No pens, no paper, no encrypted messages pinging across the net, nothing but his mind, the coldness of his will and his reason, stitching together a pattern of events like Sarita would stitch the decorations across a shawl, all the disparate parts cohering into a beautiful whole.

Zia, like most revolutionaries, thought along conventional lines when she considered how to achieve her aims. She had been indoctrinated by stories of the revolutionary heroes of the past, and she acted in kind. She believed in the need to make grand statements, that people would be swayed by rational arguments and a just cause, that the enemy was a heterogeneous mass: religious leaders, police, politicians, the army, judges, the legislature and the administration, all were corrupt and all worked hand in hand with the sole aim of oppressing the people. The people themselves were seen as another heterogeneous mass: good, oppressed, heroically struggling and waiting for the spark that would ignite them in rebellion. To Jeysh's mind, that failed to explain at all how a state worked. It ignored the extent to which people were complicit in their own oppression, often through ideas of religion or comfort or familiarity, and sometimes through plain old fear and bigotry. None of these factors were accounted for in the rationalist doctrine of revolution. If people had anything, anything at all, then that was often too much to lose in the cause of revolt. The truth was that most people believed in Mother and her doctrine, and they either supported the state and its actions or were indifferent to it, or else they felt they would lose too much by opposing it. There was very little in the way of direct action Zia could do to change this. Bombing military bases or administrative buildings and shooting senior public or religious figures may look impressive and seem threatening, but it achieves nothing. A few soldiers die, a few different faces are employed to say the same things and everything goes on as before. Meantime, the perpetrators of the act, usually following the event with loud political declarations of the usual type and the usual lack of effect, are easily found and dealt with. It seemed to Jeysh that these were not the actions of people who really wanted to remove Mother and all that she stood for. They were, in effect, people happy with the status quo and were doing little more than playing sick games.

Jeysh believed that the removal of an entire regime, at least one where the greatest number of people could not be incited to oppose it, could only be achieved by destroying confidence in its day-to-day apparatus. Even if Sunil had found the nuclear weapons and managed to transport them back, part of what Jeysh wanted to erase was the culture and the religion upon which Mother's authority rested. This could not be done by bombs alone; even if he could destroy the New City its culture would remain, seeping into

Purana Shahar and making sure that, essentially, nothing changed. As he saw it, any system of government had to rely upon a certain number of confidences: that millions of people can be controlled by a smaller number of police and army troops; that these people will obey prescribed laws; that buses will run, shops will be open, taxes will be paid, people will come out onto the street to talk, to eat, to drink, to socialise. Break these assumptions apart into little components, and the regulation and continuity of each individual piece began to appear a fragile and delicate thing. Where swooping in with bombs flying and guns blazing would many times only reinforce the fundamental logic of the existing social order, with people fearing either anarchy or an unpredictable future brought about by the disintegration of the current regime, a gradual and subtle attack upon the assumptions that underlie the systems of state could be far more effective not only in showing the need for change, but also at enforcing it. There would be a role for bombs, certainly, but more useful work would be done by empty packages left on buses or in public buildings, by seemingly random acts of vandalism, the targeting of infrastructure, the spreading of seditious rumours, low-key strikes on service industries. How easy it is to pull the emergency cord on a train, flood a building, hire bad contractors who will short out an entire block, disrupt the fragile electricity supply, fill the drains with fat, provide bad maintenance. Hoaxes, random shootings, small explosions in small stores, freight attacked or naggingly delayed until the contents became worthless, driving up transport premiums. A swarm of little things building up in his mind to a great storm, carefully choreographed, the shawl he was stitching. Zia would get her explosions, but he would weave them into part of his plan. It was the only way he could see of defeating Mother.

Outside, he could hear prayers rising from the temple. It must be nearly sunrise. He tried to sleep.

10.

He always found meeting a new contact to be a difficult experience. Learning how to respond to them only came with time, as did discovering what they wanted. So far he had only talked briefly to Neela over a secure channel, her voice breaking into a hiss of digital static where some of the encrypted packets had not got through. They had spoken just to confirm a time and a place to meet. ‘I’ll recognise you,’ she said, unnerving him slightly as he remembered once again how much she would already know.

It did not give him much to go on.

Neela had decided where they were to meet. Close to the centre of Purana Shahar lay Cadogan Place, a district left over from some forgotten era. Perfectly symmetrical, it was designed about a series of roads ordered in concentric circles. All the buildings had been built from white stone, presenting an elegant and restrained facade that was, at least in Purana Shahar, utterly unique. It gave out a sense of control, order, tranquillity, its wide windows staring out only across its own reflection, facing into itself as if rejecting the noisy chaos of the surrounding city. If it had been an attempt to assert some alien authority over the city, it had plainly failed. Even its own shaded promenades bustled with telecommunication kiosks and carpet salesman, beggars and shoeshine boys,

hawkers and traders and chaat wallahs. Disorder crept in: large premises endlessly subdivided into tiny shops and enterprises, the crush of people and the cries of salesmen, the arguments, missing windows and crumbling masonry, trinkets or stolen goods spread out on a sari across the pavement, a family gathered by a lighted stove scraping together an evening meal. The architecture, no doubt designed as a show of strength, of cultural superiority, had proved to be just another hollow mask, behind which Purana Shahar reasserted itself, as it always did.

Despite its rather faded present, it was still a favourite of Purana Shahar's elite: that mixture of gangsters, New City traders, mandarins and army generals who conspired to cream what they could from the rest of the city and the surrounding land. The Inner Circle, in particular, boasted a series of spectacular bars and restaurants that were well beyond the price range even of some of the more wealthy inhabitants, and were reputed to be like a little slice of the New City within Purana Shahar. Ostentatious use was made of armed guards on the doors; the beggars rarely bothered to even look through the windows. It kept the innocent out and the criminals in.

Neela had not chosen such a formidable restaurant to meet in. Rather, she had decided upon a very low-key establishment on the Outer Circle, accessed through an anonymous door on one of the service roads. Nevertheless, Jeysh was acutely aware of the wealth and power seeming to ripple through the atmosphere, careless of the beggars and hawkers that surrounded it, the shoddy chaos of the enterprises, the endlessly subdivided and sub-let shops, knowing that if it had mind it could dismiss them all, incinerate them with the click of fingers. That New City slice of the Inner Circle represented the grip on so much of Purana Shahar's life by so few. Neela had chosen very deliberately, or so it seemed to Jeysh.

Jeysh entered the restaurant. He found himself in a dimly lit antechamber, waiters attending to fussy couples, little groups sitting about drinking tea as they waited for their tables, fans swishing overhead. He looked about him, watching the waiting people curiously and thinking that none of them could be his contact. A young woman stood up, flattened down her clothes and walked towards him, eyeing him impassively. He stared back, keeping his incredulity from reaching his face. She was a slight woman dressed in the sort of City clothing he associated with television dramas. She can't be the one, he thought. She's much too young. He recalled Ky's furtive, grubby knowingness, and wondered why the New City would send as a replacement someone barely out of college. It didn't make any sense. There had to be some sort of mistake.

She's going to walk past me, he thought. It's okay; she's not the one, it's my mistake. Instead, she stopped in front of him, smiling, her hand held out like a man. "I'm Neela," she said.

"Jeysh." he shook her hand, finding her grip cool and assured.

"I booked us a booth." she summoned one of the waiters with a sharp little gesture and he led them through to a secluded table at the back.

She pored over her menu, apologising to him in the process. "I haven't got used to the food yet. I'm told it takes a while. Right now, I guess you could say I'm thinking about every meal very carefully."

She was obviously from the New City. Even if her sing-song accent and her liberal dress had not given it away, the sallow colour and bad skin suffered by most City

folk on their first exposure to Purana Shahar almost certainly would have. Some never got over it. It made him wonder with intense curiosity what had brought her out here.

She eventually ordered daal. Jeysh chose some bread and pakoras. "I don't need much," he explained. "My wife will have cooked something."

"Don't you ever wonder if one day she might suspect you?"

Jeysh shrugged. "You've probably got a better idea of that than I have."

Neela smiled. "Do you really think that I don't have anything better to do than watch hours of surveillance footage of your wife, just to look for, well, whatever?"

"I don't know."

"Presume for now that I do."

"How long have you been outside the walls? A few weeks, maybe?"

She grimaced. "Is it that obvious?"

He nodded.

"I thought I was finding it unexpectedly expensive. No wonder."

He laughed. "It'll get cheaper. What happened to Ky?"

"He was getting a little too interested in his own affairs, and not enough in ours. He realised we were getting unhappy and so he disappeared. He'll turn up."

"Alive?"

"Probably not."

He liked her candour. "And so they sent out you?"

She nodded, pulling her hair back behind one ear.

"You must be bummed. I don't think there can be a worse assignment. I mean, it's pretty much a death sentence, not to mention the havoc it will wreak in your belly and on your skin in the meantime. What did you do so wrong?"

She smiled, leaning back and staring levelly at him. "The way we were doing things wasn't working. We thought that by employing guys that thought in your way, and that engaged in your sort of subterfuge, that we could keep you under our control. All that kept happening was we lost control of the people we employed, and didn't gain much of use from you. So we've changed tack."

"And you're the guinea pig?"

"I'm the whole deal. There isn't any back-up if this goes wrong."

"And if it does?"

Their food was coming. He watched himself in her black eyes; the merest hint of a reflection. "You'd better hope that it doesn't."

11.

Neela picked her words with care. "Purana Shahar has always been very valuable to us. Most precious from Mother's point of view is the gene pool. But there are other things: it provides us with cheap labour and a ready market for our goods; it is a useful centre for co-ordinating agriculture without compromising the security of the New City; and it provides a focus for discontent, both inside and outside the walls. Far better that any uprising should happen here rather than there." She paused to eat some daal. "There's also a sentimental attachment to Purana Shahar, even in the New City, that shouldn't be

underestimated. Whether or not the Religion came from the stars, the people of the New City did not, and we remember our roots.” She paused again, this time to watch him, her eyes hooded in a way that was almost lascivious. “There is a feeling, however, in some quarters that Purana Shahar is past its usefulness. Its squalor and disease and petty uprisings are all being seen as an unnecessary waste of resources. It is seen in some quarters as unmanageable and a possible danger to the New City. Worse, some are talking about it as if it is actually holding us back from achieving Mother’s ultimate purpose, as if it is a stain on our souls that must be eradicated.”

She was silent, concentrating on her food and letting what she said sink in. Jeysht shifted uncomfortably. He would rather have put up with the leering and debauched Ky than this quietly spoken and precise young woman slicing apart his city. “So where do you come in?”

“While the administration still believes in the usefulness of Purana Shahar, the opposite view is gaining ground. We don’t have very much time in which to entrench our position. We want to bring things to a head, and make sure that events are loaded to work to our advantage, not to theirs. What we want is a horrific and bloody rebellion that will both shock the population into a new, passive acceptance of the New City’s rule, and that will flush out all of our opponents in a great thrust for power. It has to be close enough, it has to be *real* enough, to convince them to fight. We obviously couldn’t stage such a thing. What we’re offering you is a free shot at us.”

“And if this works, if I believe any of this, then that secures the future of Purana Shahar?”

“I can’t see any way that it wouldn’t.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“That’s the risk. If it isn’t big enough, or if it’s too big...” She shrugged. “Then it’s goodbye Purana Shahar.”

“And what do you think? Yourself, personally? Will it work?”

She held her silence.

“I’m not even sure that any of this is true. You could just be hitting me with a stitch-up.”

She spread her arms. “Why would I lie?”

“Why not? What are you here to do?”

She smiled dangerously. “Answer your questions. And offer you help.”

“And what would you want in return? You’re obviously not just going to do this, just give us a free crack at you, without wanting something back.”

“Right now, what we want is simple. Later, it will get more complicated, but right now all we want is the removal of Zia.”

“Zia?”

Neela calmly held his gaze. “She’s become too much of a demagogue. She believes too much in her own solutions, and not enough in the advice of others. I’m sure you’re aware of how dangerous that can be. At such a critical stage, someone like her could ruin everything. We wouldn’t want to fund any organisation who we felt could act in a way contrary to our aims, and Zia is very independent, very unpredictable. We would rather deal with someone who had a far more *controlled* sense of where they are going and what they are doing.”

“You want Zia dead?”

“We want the leadership changed.”

“That may provide us with recruiting difficulties.”

“That is not our problem.” her use of the plural led her speech to sound fascinatingly cold. It was a far cry from her earlier familiarity, as if she had been splintered into a kaleidoscope of personalities, each one only a slight turn of the glass away from the next, and yet appearing completely different.

“And if I could arrange for this,” he asked, picking out his words with difficulty, “who would you suggest to replace her?”

She smiled her slow, dangerous smile. “That’s up to you.”

Up to me, he thought. He nodded, tearing off a chunk of his paratha and chewing on it thoughtfully. He wasn’t quite sure whether to believe what she had told him. If it was the truth, however, then she had been astonishingly open with him. But by the same measure, she would have nothing to lose, whereas he could make only the slenderest of gains. It was not a position he best liked.

Neela ate her daal with perfect concentration, while across from her Jeysh weighed his options. He didn’t know what to do. Although he didn’t always agree with Zia, her methods or her actions, he prided himself on being astute enough to realise that there were very few people like her, and he would be unlikely ever to come across another. She had proved herself to be invaluable to the organisation, instilling a fervent passion and loyalty in its members that would have been impossible under Jeysh. She was a proud, fierce warrior; she allowed herself to hope and to fight in an era when most had succumbed to indolence, apathy or drooling vacancy. Her loss would be irreplaceable.

But if they were nothing without Zia, it was questionable whether without the tacit co-operation of the New City they would exist at all. Even if they could survive the repercussions of Jeysh breaking his links with the New City, what would be left of the organisation would be so weak as to be completely ineffective.

The temptation that Neela dangled before him was the chance to do things in his own way. She hadn’t voiced it as such, but he knew, in truth, that was what she offered him. It would provide not only the possibility of moving more resources away from Zia’s hollow populist gestures, but also the potential of being able to subtly subvert the New City’s plans. It would almost hand him the clear chance he wanted. He guessed that Neela had already anticipated this, and considered it an acceptable risk. After all, as she said, it had to be *real*.

He shifted uncomfortably, staring at his food. Was that worth Zia’s life?

“I need time,” he said eventually.

“I would have been surprised if you had made your mind up now.” She looked at him candidly. “It isn’t easy. But if you don’t agree, do you realise what you’ll lose?”

He laughed. “Everything, I would imagine.”

She didn’t answer.

He pondered, watching her finish her daal. “I came here with the intention of talking about something completely different.”

“Sorry. I’ve rather unloaded on you without you having the chance to speak. Go ahead.”

“Zia charged me with finding out who bombed an army compound.”

“You mean the recent one?”

“I figured they couldn’t have done it without inside help. That made you the perfect person to ask.”

She leaned back, dabbing at her lips with a paper napkin and looking amused. “It seems this job comes with a reputation already attached.”

“Well?”

“You’re right, of course. We don’t just help them, we fund them.” She pushed her plate away, looking more serious. “They’re actually very dangerous people. Very unstable. They call themselves the Hands of Mother, and as the name would suggest they feel it their duty to implement Mother’s doctrine. At least, that is, their understanding of the doctrine, which most people would probably see as excessively puritanical. They believe that only they have a correct interpretation of the doctrine, and that other readings will lead us to global catastrophe and extinction. They see the New City as promoting carnality and moral abnegation, its leadership not to be trusted, and what they desire for Purana Shahar is to return it to what they see as pure values and a more moral life. They are very intent on bringing us salvation as quickly as possible.” She stared at him, unreadable. “From what I can understand, they seem intent on bombing us all back into the Stone Age.”

“So even if the New City decides not to destroy Purana Shahar, you’re funding a group that will try to do it anyway?”

“It’s called insurance. Not just against that. Against you, as well. As time goes on, they’ll get closer to you. Like Zia, they want be the only show in town. You may have to act against them.”

“Which, I suppose, would be perfect for you? Factional warfare, bombs and bullets going off everywhere, keeping the public nicely scared, pleading with the New City to put down the rebels and extremists on both sides.”

She gave him an exquisite smile. “You’re drawing your own conclusions.”

“I am.”

“Sometimes the best method of action for you may be not to interpret but just to deal with what *is*.”

“Is that what you do?”

She just laughed. “Let’s pay the bill and leave. I’ve got to negotiate my way back home.” again there was that disarming switch in her personality, her cold professionalism gone and suddenly she appeared young, lost, rather bewildered.

“How are you coping?” he asked. “There are a lot of things about Purana Shahar that I imagine a stranger could find confusing.”

“The cab drivers are horrendous. I’ve seen all the parts of the city that I never wanted to, and paid double for the privilege. If I walk I just get lost - and hassled. And as for the maps...”

He laughed.

She paid the bill. He tried to protest, but she cut him off, sharp irony in her eyes as she said: “really, the pleasure’s all mine.”

They made their way outside, the almost forgotten stink and squalor, the choking air and maelstrom of noise assaulting them afresh. Several beggars clustered round them immediately, liquid eyes desperate, supplicating to Neela with a humility Jeysh found painful. Her face hardened into a mask, and he watched as she forced herself not to flinch from their touch.

“Have you been to any of the historical sites yet?”

She shook her head. “I’m still having trouble with the more prosaic sides to the city.”

“Well, maybe one day, if you’re free. I can at least make it less hassle for you. Let me know...”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

“And about Zia...”

She looked up, body suddenly like a line of steel, taut and dangerous. The beggars stepped back.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Her face was perfectly composed, impassive. “If you don’t,” she said, “someone else will. I would rather it was you.”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Soon,” she warned him.

“Soon,” he agreed.

They dipped their heads in a brief namaste to each other, and then parted.

12.

Soon. He wanted to make his decision *now*. Now, as he walked through the streets away from her, like crawling through the lines of a tangled spider’s web. His mind was full of her: her face, her body, her gestures, her words. She seemed to be waiting for him at every corner, only to dissolve into the crowd as he walked towards her. She seemed to be caught in the faces of women on buses, her body endlessly turning away from him to slip down lightless alleyways. He couldn’t make sense of her, and thought it of the utmost urgency that he did so, otherwise he would be playing in a game that was wholly her own.

A thousand thousand people spilled past him, intent upon their business, all the to-ing and fro-ing of husbands and wives and lovers, bosses and workers, the jobless, children, the aged. Eyes betraying dreams of money, stories of illicit affairs, the weariness of work, the quiet desperation of knowing other mouths waited to be fed. Purana Shahar hung before him like never before, all its lights and filth and crowded noisy life opening up, inviting him to reach out and take them, change them forever. It was an intoxicating feeling, sensual and powerful and dangerous.

He was appalled by how much he wanted to accept Neela’s offer. Now his mind had been opened to it, the possibility of betraying Zia and doing things his way, dangled before him in constant temptation. But the action would be a terrible one; they had shared so many confidences, gained so much strength from each other, had struggled so hard against such overwhelming force. Can I just, he thought, switch her off like a light?

And if he did, could he ever say that he had any integrity left, or that he believed in the spirit of his cause? If as part of winning he had to become the thing he fought against, using their methods and their plans, then what was he? What would be the legacy of such intolerable cynicism?

He didn't know. How could anybody? I'm not a god, he thought. I'm just one man, in a place of so many.

13.

Several things happened before he had the chance to meet Neela again.

Firstly, he had received a communication from a source he had long dismissed. It had contained only a string of numbers, and he spent days trying to decipher their meaning. He had eventually concluded that they must be a set of global coordinates, a date and a price. He may be wrong, but they didn't seem to make sense to him any other way.

Secondly, as promised, he had arranged to spend a weekend away with Sarita, much to Zia's disgust. She had accused him of being selfish, of not being committed, of not caring. Jeysh shrugged at her invective. "It's business, for what it's worth," he had told her. He would be taking Sarita on a journey upriver to an ancient and abandoned palace complex. Sarita still complained about his lack of everyday attention, but he could tell that secretly she was excited at the prospect. They had not spent any time away since they had been married.

Thirdly, a military convoy had been ambushed, and five bystanders died in the firefight. Unlike the previous bomb, which had never been publicly claimed by any group, the Hands of Mother immediately associated itself with this attack, seizing the moment of publicity to state its manifesto. After setting out a series of aims and beliefs, the statement added that any citizens in the vicinity of what the group considered to be legitimate targets could count themselves as being part of that target. The implied assertion, that a person could be risking death by tolerating or condoning the presence of those things the Hands of Mother found spiritually polluting, was not lost on the media.

Zia was predictably outraged, particularly as the moral debate seemed to have been moved on from the question of how legitimate was religion to the question of which form of the religion was most legitimate. "All the while we're sitting here doing nothing," she told Jeysh, "the political landscape is shifting around us and making us seem irrelevant. We're being usurped by a bunch of religious lunatics." she tried to demand immediate action, both striking at the military to prove the organisation's continued potency, and an attack upon the Hands of Mother in order to make a moral and political statement. "They are the logical conclusion of everything we have always fought against," she told him.

Jeysh had read the attack as a kind of warning from Neela, coming as it did only days before their next meeting. That could be madness, he thought, reading meanings into every little thing, seeing patterns that weren't there, engaging with phantoms as well as the very solid and very real menace of the New City. But he would be a fool to discount it.

His mind was made up anyway. It would have been impossible for him to leave on his weekend away with Sarita without knowing clearly and precisely what he had to do.

Everything had fallen into place. His initial decision had been a leap of faith, almost an arbitrary and irrational action, after which the reasons and justifications flooded through him, making his decision more solid by the second. He was surprised by the clarity within himself, excited and frightened by the thought that it could all work. He tried to focus on it to the exclusion of its meanings and its implications. He wanted just to memorise every detail, plan every moment of every avenue it could possibly lead him down. He had lain awake next to Sarita's slumbering form working out models, trying to second-guess the New City, working out every concrete and practical move.

Everything was connected, inescapably tied together, the thread of a web he had felt enmeshing him after he had last met Neela. All he had to do now was speak, and his words, those ephemeral things, would slowly ripple outwards. To cause what effect? he wondered. He hoped he knew. He hoped he had control.

14.

Neela waited for him in the shadow of the Lal Qila, wearing a scruffy T-shirt and jeans, hands in her pockets, staring down at the ground and absently musing. When she noticed him, she raised an eyebrow in polite inquiry.

"Sorry. Sorry. Zia just heard about the shootings. We're presuming it's the Hands of Mother. She demanded to talk to me and then went on at length about what we should do."

Neela looked at him coolly. "She's got a point. You don't want to fade away under all this. It wouldn't be good for you if people thought that the only alternative to us is *them*."

An illegal drinking den had been broken into, several of the punters shot. Like with the first bomb, responsibility hadn't been claimed, but there didn't seem to be much doubt about the perpetrators. A wave of frenzied paranoia swept through Purana Shahar, the shutters coming down on many shops, reports coming in of people beaten in the streets. Several notorious libertines were lynched, it being presumed that their moral degeneracy was to blame for bringing the Hands of Mother's harsh reprisals down on ordinary people.

"People are always being deceived. It may be we're better off waiting than committing any action."

"So what do you think, exactly? That you shouldn't be worried about the Hands of Mother?"

"Possibly not for the reasons you claim."

She watched him interestedly. Her skin was still ravaged from her transition to a life outside the wall, face without a trace of make-up, her bearing so unlike the women of Purana Shahar. She seemed strange under the fierce sun, heat radiating all about her.

They queued together for tickets, queued again to get through the security barriers, manned in the wake of the bombings by nervous-looking young troops. The Lal Qila loomed above them, elegant towers and palisades lifting effortlessly from a base of squat and powerful walls. The air shimmered in dizzying glances off deep red stone, making the peculiar ancient grace of the fort flicker and stretch under the bleached sky.

“You’re mixing business with pleasure,” Jeysh told her. “That isn’t meant to augur well.”

She smiled, shading her eyes with her hand. “You did offer.”

“It’s something you should see, it really is. And not just you, but everyone from the New City. One of the fascinating things about Purana Shahar is that it’s full of the bones of the past, all these dynasties one after the other that thought they were going to reign for thousands of years. The New City needs to learn a sense of its place. Some of these empires,” he nodded to the fort, “have been far more beautiful than the New City will ever manage to be.”

She looked up and down the queue, at all the bright silks, the parasols, the highly visible little cluster of New City men and women out culture surfing, the curious from Purana Shahar on honeymoons or using whatever scraped-together money they could find, everyone here staring with naked curiosity at a symbol sunk in myth, hinting of the life lived before the New City, before Mother.

And giving us hope of a life that will survive it, he thought.

“It would be easy to pretend that this place was still alive,” she said. “It’s easy to imagine some glorious old retinue marching through these gates, all silk clothes and jewelled armour. I could so easily sink into it, pretend to be someone else.” she turned her attention to the massive front gates. Winged by a phalanx of watchtowers and bright flags, they soared upwards with all the promise of another world. “And that’s what we’re both doing here, in a way, isn’t it?”

“Possibly. And would you really want to be someone else, if you could?”

She laughed. “No. Of course not. I’m trying to make the world a better place.”

“So am I,” he said with perfect seriousness.

She looked across the divide at him, his face so close to her own, her eyes so frank, so completely clear that he felt his breath catch in his body. “We can’t both be right.”

No indeed, he thought. And you are not stupid, either. Far from it, and yet your views are so far away from my own. This is one of the things I will never understand...

They were separated into two queues in order to be frisked, one queue for males and the other for females. The female queue was much shorter, but the search took more time. Jeysh watched, interested, as Neela’s bag was rooted through. A bunch of keys, a mobile and a box of tissues were all held out and examined. It offered Jeysh nothing to add to the little he already knew about her.

When they were through, they hired a crepuscular little man as a guide and were taken very slowly and carefully through the open areas of the fort. They were told tales of fantastic romanticism and breathtaking cruelty, strange fragments of history, the disjointed knowledge of folk memory and legend. It was impossible to extract any truth from the myths that had become woven about this place. The past slipped so easily into fantasy, where heroes could be stronger and more chivalrous, the maidens more beautiful, the society balanced in a perfect order where everyone knew their place. It seemed to Jeysh that such a colossal and beautiful thing as the Lal Qila existed as a gateway into this other world. It sat like a lotus, alien and strange among Purana Shahar’s squalor and chaos: the brown-hazed pollution, brutal cheap buildings tilting into each other, dark alleys and the darker lives within, the foetid struggle every day for any sort of life. Even stripped naked of its glittering marble interiors, its precious stones, its tanks of rose

water, the sounds of exquisite music filling its cool courtyards, even then it maintained a magic, a tantalising glimpse of a glorious past that had been lost amongst the muck and carnage of countless generations. All that was left was this beautiful skeleton of what it had once been, a tiny gesture of hope rising up above the winding streets. And the businessman, the honeymooning couples and New City tourists traced the movements of kings and courtesans like ghosts through its dreaming mind.

After the guide left them (he was himself a relic of a different era, softly spoken, ponderous and courteous, rambling through his hotchpotch collection of myths and legends) they wandered slowly back through the empty tanks and the courtyards of the hareem, populating it with figures and pageantry from films they had both seen, making around them a world that had never existed. They entered one of the little palaces that burst outwards from the inner wall, the arched low ceilings within providing shelter from the heat. A balcony stared out over the river, glittering silver in the ferocious sunlight as it carved its way through the city. Neela sat down upon a plain stone bench that ran the length of the wall, a bench that, according to the guide, had been a favourite spot for Emperors to stare out over their city. Now their place had been taken by a girl in scruffy jeans and T-shirt, her arm draped over the exquisite stonework of the balustrade, her eyes staring languidly out beyond Purana Shahar towards the shining spires of the New City beyond. Jeysh sat opposite her, a curious pain gnawing his innards.

There were several minutes of silence before Neela spoke abruptly. "We have business to discuss, do we not? Like I said, I could pretend otherwise..." she looked intently into his eyes before continuing. "But that won't help either of us. It won't help anyone at all."

"No." They lapsed back into silence. The emptiness of the Lal Qila, the quietness of its palaces and gardens contrasted so violently with the noise and fury of his everyday life that he felt he had passed over into dream. Neela breathed, the sound of her swallowing, the rise and fall of her chest unusually apparent to him, as if she were a giant, a heroine on a big screen, everything magnified. Outside Purana Shahar burped and barfed and farted and honked. He wondered if this was how it felt, staring out from the New City.

"You said you had decided."

"I have."

He didn't say more. She stared at him with considerable interest. "It's not an easy choice," she said softly.

"No." he followed the course of the river, imagining the streets, the shit and the animals, the great snaking monster of people, the lied to and abused, the disenfranchised, no say in their own poverty and ignorance, milked of value, of vitality, of beauty and humanity.

Remember it, he said to himself. Always remember it. He looked over at her, his face clear, and when he spoke, he adopted her trick of talking in the first person plural. "We'll need certain conditions met in return," he told her. "Over and above what we already get."

"Go on."

"We need to get several people into the New City. Legitimately. They all have skills in the areas for which the city is recruiting, and they can't wait forever in the hope that their numbers come up in the visa lottery. We want to be sure they get through that

and then the interview. They will need good security references so that they can get the jobs they're qualified to do."

"And that's all?"

"That's all."

She looked amused. "This sounds to me like internal politics. What is it? Do you have some big players that you've got to pay off? Maybe some of Zia's supporters that you need out of the way?"

It was a shrewd guess, and he smiled, thinking that maybe he was coming to understand her. "Call it housekeeping. I've got to pay some people what I owe them."

"Very laudable, although I can't say that it was what I anticipated. I expected - well, you're going to have to fight. The Hands of Mother might be crude, but they're also effective. And in any uprising, you're going to have to face us, too. We're not exactly lightly armed. What I could provide you with may, just may, tip the balance slightly in your favour. The more equipment you've got, the less the risk that either of us will obliterate you. I could offer you rocket launchers, military training, maybe even cloaking devices. It would be wise for you to take what help you can get. But," she shrugged, "it's your call."

He nodded. He stared at her, her body draped regally over the stone bench, languid in the cool soft shadows. "I sometimes think you must spend all of your time watching footage of other people's lives, rather than going out there and living your own. Does it ever feel like we're not real, and all you're doing is playing some sort of abstract game?"

"It has rules, much like a game does." she looked at him seriously. "And yes, I spend a lot of time watching camera footage, seeing people from angles that aren't *human*. If you want know why Ky and so many others went mad, well..." she turned away, staring out at the shimmering dusty city.

"Do you think perhaps that you're addicted?"

A shudder rippled through her. "What happens privately is best kept that way. Seeing too much of people behind their own doors is extremely distasteful. You can find yourself losing whatever faith you have in any sort of innate decency."

"And so providing a reason to justify the surveillance," Jeys murmured.

"But even then, if it's everyone, what can you really do apart from watch? You're powerless."

"Coming from an agent of Mother, that almost sounds heretical."

Neela smiled faintly. "If they are weak, then so am I. We can only be saved by an indomitable will. The more I see, the more I believe that."

"You've never struck me as such a fundamentalist."

She stretched. "We both are. We're both absolutists, incapable of walking the broad line between extremes."

"Maybe." he wanted to change the conversation, not willing to pursue this. "If something matters enough, maybe anyone would become an absolutist. Life and death are...pretty absolute. But enough of this. You're distracting me from why I'm here." He smiled a lazy, hooded smile. "Will you accept our conditions?"

"If I can't persuade you to choose something else."

He shook his head.

"Very well then. You have your deal." she held out her hand, smiling curiously.

He stared into the black hole of her eyes. The palace hung above them, fragile and exquisite and ancient. He felt that if he touched Neela's hand it would shatter about him, the last traces of an old order finally gone.

They touched, a shock of flesh, and he felt he belonged.

15.

With a kick and a muddy churn of water, the boat lurched away from the jetty. The heavy awnings flapped, bells jangled, the deck beneath their feet throbbed to the rhythm of the motor. The boat drifted back a little, caught by the current, before plunging forward like a drunken man.

Jeysh watched Sarita watching the shore recede: the chaos of shouting vendors; kids cutting through the crowd to dance in front of the freshly departed boat, rickshaw drivers jockeying for position, flinging promises into the cauldron of noise, prices falling with every step the disembarked made, flinging out smiles, pleas, lies; the chai wallahs who half-an-hour before squatted idly on their haunches now pouring drink after drink into little clay cups, all the while intoning their money-making mantra: "chai chai, garam chai." Moving away from shore, the sounds slowly receded, the omnipresent bray of horns, shouts and songs all fading into the brown fog that hung over Purana Shahaar. Sarita seemed to watch and watch, her hands gripping the rail, her eyes lost in the mazy, hazy confusion of shabby buildings and pollution, concrete Cubist nightmares, old summer houses home now to a multiplicity of families, rubbish heaps outside bristling with squealing pigs and children fighting over whatever discarded shit, half burnt and stinking. They sailed out through scrawny suburbs, towerblocks half-built and abandoned, crude temples, shanty towns slithering down towards the river, rude rough scrub breaking through the buildings, unkempt fields, factory orchards, men and women squatting about their toilet staring in blank curiosity at the motley madcap silk and silver awning of the boat rattle by, funnel belching an occasional protest.

He turned to Sarita, who was still watching as the suburbs disintegrated between factory complexes and fields. "Come on," he said. "Come sit down. We can get a spot under the awning, watch the world go by."

She responded to his touch, let him lead her over.

Most of the other passengers were newlyweds, either standing by the rails dumbstruck and shy, or else chattering away coyly, grasping this new rose eagerly before it could have a chance to show its thorns. They made Jeysh feel old and tired, a fraud stumbling through the approximation of emotion, a hollow man. Does it always dry up, die away? he wondered. Not if you watched a million couples would you ever really know. Below the secrets everyone kept were these unspoken fears, myths about life and love that no-one ever wanted to be disproved.

I am too old for this, he thought. I should give it up, walk away. Do what I know that I have to do without the stupid compromises I have set for myself. Without Sarita.

But the heart still beats, the blood rises, images in dreams unveil themselves before the mind's eye.

One day, he promised himself.

The factories and buildings finally folded away into nothing, leaving well-worked fields stretching out towards the crests of faraway hills. Somewhere behind them he could still feel Purana Shahar, a monstrosity squatting over the river, gorging itself, spitting its filth downstream.

They listened to the throb of the motor and the quiet lovers' chatter of the newlyweds, watched the shift and ripple of the water, the blue sky twisted and shattered in brown river. Along the banks men and women struggled to keep oxen in a ploughing line, or hacked crops to the ground, sweat standing out brightly in the midday sun. Jeys felt Sarita uncoil next to him, the frown disappearing from her face.

She sank her head on his shoulder. "If only it was all like this."

"You want to work in the fields like them?" nodding at a toiling couple driving a plough through the soil.

"Why not? We'd be free of... so much. We could be together."

It was, he realised, a surprisingly tempting offer. To live and to forget. To immerse oneself in the land, the harvests, each day's water, each day's bread. To forget Mother, to forget all the advertisements and the longing they engendered, the watching eyes, the politics and cynicism, the death and the bombs, the New City reaching its celestial fingers up towards the heavens.

It would maybe buy him - what? Salvation?

Possibly.

But everything we sought to escape would catch us up in the end, he thought. Somehow, somewhere along the line. It would cheat us of whatever we thought we had gained, because Mother's need, her hunger, was boundless and insatiable. These people out here would become like those in Purana Shahar, if that process isn't already under way. If we're not in our ignorance romanticising their lives, and every night they slump in front of satellite TV, eating and drinking and using the same traced and doctored products, having the same lies spat out at them in all the same ways.

"Do you really think that they're happier out here? They work themselves to early deaths, they're deep in debt, they can't read, they're the victims of corrupt officials, there are no schools for their kids... Why do you think so many of them end up living in the shanties?"

"You're so... You knock down everything I say."

"I'm always afraid you'll believe what you're saying."

"So you leave me with what? Our own four walls? And you never there. What am I meant to do?"

"Sarita, I promise it will change. All of it will change, but you just have to be patient. It takes time."

"Time. Time. How much of it? How much before I open my eyes and find that I'm sixty?"

"Don't be like that."

"No?" then he felt her sigh. "No... Perhaps not. It's so peaceful here, and there I was going on like a - like a nagging wife. I always promised myself it wouldn't be like that. What happens, eh?"

"People change. It's hard to hold on to our promises."

She watched him darkly. "What do you mean? Our marriage, is that it?"

“No. Not that, really. Just what you said - what happens? Sometimes I feel I have so little control over things. Like you said, sometimes we find ourselves falling into roles. I can see how it happens.”

“That doesn’t make them nice. I sometimes wonder if that’s all I am to you sometimes.”

“Well, what about me?” he returned gravely. “The absent husband. Do you ever perhaps suspect, like so many wives...?”

“Should I?” it was a direct challenge, so unlike Sarita. She had raised her head to stare levelly at him, her eyes glittering with all the nights of lost sleep, all the slights, the unthinking abandonment, all the little moments of her tender care that he never noticed.

It made him feel tiny, colossal, childish, adult. He felt he was playing a terrible game over things that should never be treated so lightly. He met her gaze seriously. “No. Never that.”

She nodded, a brief uncertain flicker in her eyes before she reached over and kissed his cheek softly.

They pushed upriver, carving apart the glassy brown surface. Quiet landscape rolled past on either side, a succession of unknown villages and temples, children playing by ugly bridges, people working in fields. Women, up to their thighs in the water, would stop and stare impassively.

It was pure carnival for them, a flash of alien and unimagined lives, the dreams of others floating past and on up into the unknown. The women would return to washing clothes in the shallows.

14.

Perhaps it came about through being surrounded by newlyweds, or perhaps through spending all day sitting on the boat, with little else to devote themselves to, but Jeysh found himself paying unusually close attention to Sarita. He rediscovered distinctive gestures that she made, the shape of her nose, the way her hair fell when unbound about her face and shoulders. He followed the motions of her hands, the curling and uncurling of her fingers; felt reawakened lust at the hints of curves shown through her clothes; was pounded by a torrent of emotions, a forceful desire that had last possessed him all those years ago. It was as if he had fallen back through time.

I can’t believe, he thought, all the years through which I have allowed this to fall away. I’ve lost her in the muck and the drudgery of life, so many times of seeing her on her knees over a bowl of washing, or hunched over the table making bread, all of the things that I’ve taken for granted and forgotten in her. The slow poison compromises made through life, the art of living quenching what it is supposed to sustain. He suffered a rage of desire as he watched her now, listened to her, caught afresh by her charm. This strange and unworldly woman, surprising him once more with her enthusiasms and loves, her passions springing from what depths he could never be sure.

They flirted desperately over dinner, sat on the deck as the boat listed gently from side to side, slowly pushing its way upriver. The sun set amidst a great bloody bruise on the horizon, the air turned red, water shivering scarlet. The land deepened into shadow,

an inky blackness beneath a deepening blue sky, scant few lights to map out the scattered villages. In contrast, the boat itself blazed brightly, the deck and the cabins dazzlingly illuminated with torches and coloured lanterns, a fury of insects battering against glass or burning briefly in flame.

The boat moored within the eerie, formless dark. Jeysh and Sarita sat on the foredeck, listening to a sitar player unfold haunting evening ragas, their fingers creeping over each other's hands, playing with knuckles, palms, wrists. They spoke but the words seemed to mean little. At length they could bear it no longer and so they retired, quietly, unobtrusively, to their cabin.

He would at that moment have acceded to anything she had asked of him. Mad images running through his head, remembering her words and fantasizing with wild and fervent belief of a life on the land, tilling the fields until he was too exhausted to stand, of a brood of children, of his beautiful and virtuous wife, the gnawing restlessness he had always suffered finally leaving him. He would have done it all as they tore at each other's clothes, explored each other's bodies as if for the first time, forgotten thrills passing up from her flesh into his palms, into his blood. Without the constant haunting of righteous and religious neighbours to curb them, they fought and kissed and fucked first with fierce abandon, and then with a dizzy languid intensity as the hours moved on, an almost endless night, this release stretching out in measureless moments as they sought to slake an unquenchable thirst.

But it was over at last, clutched one to the other as their bodies slackened, his mind reeling but slipping vertiginously downwards, all his words and memories and emotions calcifying, growing hard and distant from his earlier molten and feverish state. Events, other lives, other needs seeped back into his mind. He regretted his weakness, the absurd promises he had nearly made, the fantastic images he would never fulfil. He lay above her, listening to the rush of her breathing, the beat of her heart, feeling her solidity, her enigma, eyes closed and lips parted, face unlined, the smooth eggshell skull beneath. She heaved a sigh, tightening her embrace. He stared into the empty geography of the sheets, disgusted by the extent to which carnality could grip him, how much he would lie to himself to become its servant, to fulfil his body. And now... And now... It was more this he recoiled from, rather than her, the shape of his fantasies and their awful implications, the fear that he could wish anything, with anyone. Much as if, he thought, my actual feelings for Sarita don't have any weight in how I act. He felt cheap, he felt himself to be a traitor, yet he gripped her anyway and listened as her breathing deepened towards sleep.

There's something wrong with me, he thought. I should be able to love her in the same way, with the same constancy, as she loves me.

But, outside of his treacherous passion, he found himself forced to become this strange other him, live in a different life with different beliefs. As if he was possessed, some demon sunk in his bones. Maybe without the work, the drudgery, all the things constantly hung in front of us, maybe then. The thought haunted him. He was grateful for the feeling of sleep stealing over him, mingling his breath with Sarita's, a heavy and automatic rhythm, their flesh pressed together as the night swum through its darkest lakes towards dawn.

17.

With the sunrise, he fell in love with her once again. She was radiant: hair and skin gilded with soft golden light, black eyes huge and shimmering with emotion. She had dressed herself in green silk fringed with gold, and she sat by the side of the bed, a cool and impossible thing amongst the diffuse heat of the morning. Why I married her, he thought as he staggered out of bed and washed. Why I still could, after everything I've done and knowing everything that I do. He sluiced the cold, partially filtered river-water over himself, wondering at how her image haunted him, why, what thing it was that could reach right through him, squeeze its hands about his heart. He got dressed, followed her out into the streaming morning sunlight, his body aching, vivid memories of the night before shuddering through him as he watched her move, followed her body, wondered at the thoughts that had run through her as she had got up, got dressed, waited for him. Had words run lightning fingers across her mind, had she felt the moments of memory or hope or belief that make hearts contract, an agony of love or pain so sharp it can barely be contained? He didn't know; they had never used such words with one another, never reached through into such secret moments.

They were the first couple on deck. The stoves had barely been lit, the thick black smoke of new wood gushing up through the funnel. A little group of trees huddled on one bank of the river, while on the other he saw groups of labourers already in the fields: a long line of women hacking wheat from an uneven hillside; younger girls with water pots on their heads winding their way back to the village; men harnessing oxen or digging at inhospitable tracts of earth.

"So," Sarita said, staring at him out of shining eyes, "another four hours before we dock. And then the ruined palaces. It's just us, no? Not a group excursion?"

"It's just us."

She covered his hand with her own. "I'm glad. I wish this could go on forever. I wish there wasn't a back."

He wished so too, a physical wrench as if he could tear this boat out from the thin fabric of this world and plunge it into the fairy story of Sarita's three wishes, sailing gently upriver towards a placid eternity. The thought of what may await him in the palace complex ate at his innards. If it's hope, he thought, it's the most horrible hope there is, and if it's despair, well...

And a day's cruise behind them, Purana Shahar still waited, knowing its gravity would inevitably drag them back.

"We shouldn't forget this," Sarita said. "We should always try to remember it. All the other things..." she passed her hand before her eyes, "they shouldn't mean so much. It's like a nightmare, sometimes. Like we had a dream and, somehow as we chased it, it's gone bad."

"I won't forget," he said, and as he said it, he meant his promise.

"Maybe, you know, maybe if we had children..." she stumbled uncertainly to a close.

He bit back his immediate response. He felt plunged back into his other world, this little bubble burst and reality reaching through. You don't know, he nearly said. You don't know. Any child of ours would be nothing but a chemical playground for the New

City to investigate, a sack of flesh urged to do nothing more than consume the city's filth, expendable, a unit to manipulate. However much love we gave it wouldn't be worth a damn. Unless - unless I can beat them. And whether I can, and whatever world that would usher into being, I don't know.

It was a familiar train of thought. I could tell you, he said silently to her, I could tell you everything. And watch all your life unravel, see everything you've ever believed in be destroyed. My lies, Mother's lies; everybody has been lying to you.

She looked uncertain, shy, trying to conceal the honesty of her desire. He couldn't do it, couldn't induct her into his world and its sliding scale of truths. I'm a coward, he thought. After everything I'm a coward.

"Jeysh?"

He shook himself out of his reverie. "Sorry. I - I was, well, it's a difficult thing to discuss."

"Why? You always say that. But it actually should be simple. It's a moral order, it's Mother's first command. It's what human beings do. What else are we here for?"

"But of itself, that's so *meaningless*. Just think about it. Just think about how people live. Maybe everything's OK in the New City, maybe, but out in Purana Shahar? Just think of the squalid lives we lead, all of that work, all for what? The little apartment we've got, the neighbours either constantly praying or banging on the walls. What is a child of ours going to do, Sarita? What sort of education is it going to have, what sort of job will it get? Will it be scraping a living doing shit just so it can look after us when we're old and mad? Is that even a life? I'm not sure I'd want to condemn anything to that. You must know yourself, all the things that we've been through."

She turned her head away and he saw her pinch out the tears. "But then there's love, and isn't that what it means to be alive? Isn't that everything? Wouldn't you want someone else to have the chance to feel it?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Well what else is there? Why bother? What made you marry me if you don't have any hope in love; what makes you get up in the mornings?"

He felt needlessly cruel, sitting and watching. You deserve better than me, and yet you still love me. Still. Why? "Sometimes I wonder, when people have children, whether they're just thinking of themselves. There's a kind of selfishness in the act. You know, things don't get much more important; we would be creating life, another being, something outside of us."

"Of course it's important, and of course we're responsible. But if we aren't here for that, then what..."

"But Sarita, here? With everything in the world the way it is? *That's* what I don't have hope in. Even if it wasn't just a chemical thing, just another meaningless chemical process in the world, okay, maybe even then I could accept it if it wasn't so *bad*. It's just an accident, and the results have been pointless and horrible, and that just seems to be the natural order of things."

Her head bowed, she stared down at her plate. "So that's it then, for you. You won't, just because of the rest of the world. You know, even if it's just us who love it, who care and nurture it, well surely that's enough?"

Her abandon flooded through him, a hideous draining numbness, an unbearable loss in a life filled by her faith in Mother. What do I do? he thought helplessly. I'm fighting to try to end the things I talk about. And yet... He hated the irony of it.

He grabbed her hand in a sort of blind agony. "You're right, of course you are. And there has to be hope; there has to." He spoke urgently, wondering in that moment if it was true. It was a thought he had never dared to think before, something strange suddenly possessing his heart.

She looked up quickly, maybe expecting mockery, and was transfixed by his urgent intensity.

"And we could," he continued, "but not where we live, in the manner that we do."

"Then let's run away," she murmured, eyes blazing. "Let's leave all of this and just go."

Her second time of demanding, and he felt weaker, pulled at by her desires. Just let everything go, he thought. Everything. She dreams of freedom just as I do, only always to yoke herself again; children, rural labour hobbling us through day after day of unremitting work, penniless, in debt, misfits. He smiled sadly and shook his head. "Whatever you run from always catches you up in the end."

"But what can you do? What can either of us do? This is how life is; Mother teaches us so. It can't change."

Mother teaches us so. He looked at her curiously, the strange and fragile face holding him out from her. I should never have got involved with anyone. Cruel, so cruel that I did. I could fall on my knees and apologise, tell you the whole truth, and even that would not be enough. I married you and now it's all too late, there's no going back and unpicking what I've done. All I can do is somehow make the best for you out of what little honesty I can give you. If I had fallen in love with anyone, he thought, it should have been someone with their eyes already open, knowing everything, seeing me for what I am.

But such a person, of course, would hate him.

"What can I do?" he repeated softly. "I don't know. But I've got to try, somehow. Surely everyone should, otherwise I don't know what we are."

"We can't all be heroes. We need people that can just work and love and - and well, if there weren't such people, well, you can imagine... You know, all of these political ideas people have, they can't ever really work. At some point we just have to accept how human beings are, and deal with them that way. You can't just dream that one day by ourselves we'll get everything right."

"We could do better, though. That's the problem. Without any help from Mother or whoever we could so easily do better for ourselves. And yet we don't. That's something we don't have to accept about human nature. We can fight it, we can improve. Maybe we can never become gods, but even so surely we should try?"

She bowed her head again, and he heard the patter of her tears falling.

Jeysh was feverish with tension, feeling it boil beneath his tightly drawn skin. Through an effort of will he caged it, didn't allow it to cross his face or affect his movement. It's not a real thing, he told himself. It doesn't exist; it's an anticipation of an event that may not happen. He made himself think about other things.

The boat had reached the highest point of its journey. Beyond the river, the landscape had altered little, although mountain peaks weaved a barely discernible pattern across the distant horizon. They were almost at the border of Purana Shahar's known world, stories and myths bleeding into the air around them.

The little port had once been a key trading point for supplying the ruined palace complex beyond, but had dwindled with the fortunes of the palace's unknown dynasty. Ruined warehouses sagged into the water, stumps of old buildings lined the shore, elegant facades had rotted and crumbled. Most of the trade was now agricultural, the wharves filled with low-sitting barges waiting to transport grain, rice or coconut fibre down the river to Purana Shahar.

Jeysh and Sarita stood by the rail as the boat moored, watching the dockers carrying sacks to and fro, traders bidding for wares, goods piled by warehouse fronts, lines of women sifting through the content. The port seemed to huddle in from the river, leaving a vast expanse of naked landscape about it. Jeysh felt a long way from home. He stared out over the faint lines of the distant mountains, thinking that beyond them somewhere lay the dead city. Everything and everyone within its zone of influence had been destroyed, a genocide carried out just to make an example of a few insurgents.

He shuddered.

The boat was tied fast and the passengers disembarked, yawning and blinking and looking about them. They were enveloped immediately by a crowd of food sellers and rickshaw drivers and peddlers of all kinds of tat, charms and curses. The sun blazed down in a raging fury, battering at the waves, at the silks the women wore and at the peddled silver held out in grubby hands, heat spilling out its breathless dizzy embrace, the air stinging with it, choking them.

Jeysh picked out an autorickshaw driver from the scrum and negotiated a price for the trip to the palace complex. The driver led them away to the vehicle, spitting gouts of bright red paan from between decayed teeth, scratching his nether regions, singing to himself. He patted down the nasty rug on the back seat for them to sit on, farted and coughed as he settled himself in the front, touching the forehead of his picture of Mother (a light-skinned, large-eyed, red-lipped woman wrapped demurely in a sari) before pulling the motor into stuttering life and swerving with mad abandon out onto the road.

It didn't take them long to leave the port, the crowded little buildings and the battle of trade falling away, to be replaced by the dumb silence of fields, lonely figures of labourers, men and women huddled over paltry packed meals of roti and rice, packs of goats being herded by the side of the road. The road itself was rough, disintegrating, throwing Jeysh and Sarita against one another as the rickshaw rattled and bumped its way forward, a huge plume of dust rising after it, choking the walkers, the riders of bikes and the pullers of carts, an enormous matrix of unknown life.

Jeysh sat, shaken by the rickshaw's progress, furious with himself for his earlier weakness. The promises he had made were, if not outright lies, based on very unlikely conditions, and he saw his words as being those of a disgraceful coward. How much had he lied? How much was emotionally honest - how much was truth? He didn't wish to

look into himself to see. The thought that he had miscalculated, that he could never rectify his mistakes over Sarita, ate away at him.

And all the newlyweds we arrived with, he thought, will they go on and have children soon enough? Follow the will of Mother, fulfil their human destiny? He admired it. They will probably be okay; they will probably get through life one way or another, and look back thinking that it wasn't so bad. That's just the way of things. Maybe you can't worry about the future, can't plan. But what else has my whole life been? He wondered. Planning, trying to anticipate every nuance in his environment, trying to guide and control the people around him because for him the future had become all-consuming, one possible future that he was compelled to try twisting the present into.

Better that than just accepting what we have, he thought. Sunk in Purana Shahar's filth, barely educated, polluted and poisoned, manoeuvred, the pieces in someone else's game. What life is this? He looked round, saw Sarita's delicate frame hunched as she gripped the handrail. I can't let it go on, not for Sarita, for Ayla, for anyone. They must not be used in the same way so many already have been. It must be stopped.

The sky an endless, depthless blue; the fields an infinite patchwork of gold and green; the road a dusty white line ploughing on; the dreams of thousands of generations, the same motions, the same songs, the same water-pots balanced upon heads, eyes catching eyes in the age old way, fleeting signs across the water pumps. It never ended. Maybe, he thought with a wry smile, maybe I'm just not father material. Not here, and not her, maybe. Watching a child grow up, the enthusiasm and love slowly turning to cynicism and fear. You wonder what you have done, what happened.

But then if not Sarita, who? If Mother is right, if as it seems the only good of a human being is to breed, to marry its own genetic stock with that as close as possible to its idea of perfection, then surely I owe it to myself, *to the race*, to find whatever match that I would wish to have children with?

One image kept forming in front of him. He ignored it, trying to keep himself focused on what lay just ahead. If I have to forgo all of this, he thought, well so be it, I will. It should never have to happen to anyone ever again.

They arrived at the gateway to the palace. The palace was surrounded by a colossal outer wall, massive slabs of red sandstone butted together in a way that was familiar from the Lal Qila, still unbreached, the battlements having stood firm to years of scorching wind and monsoon rain. Around the walls, grass humps hinted at other buildings, at streets and markets, shouts and crowds and laughter. Ghostly echoes hung on the wind, whispers from long ago punctuated only by the hum of honey bees and sandflies. The gates themselves had long ago rotted, or been stolen for some other use, the ceramic tiles on the surrounding archway had fallen, split, become lost.

They left the driver waiting and entered, Jeysh's heart hammering despite his attempts at control. The palace complex sprawled across plains of red sandstone paving, a confusion of carved pavilions raising terrace upon arched terrace, domes and spires, echoing audience chambers, intimate rooms, long-stretching tanks amongst the remains of formal gardens. All the adornment that had once made the palace glitter - the inlay work in marble, the precious stones and mirrors and paintings and glass - had been stripped away over years, leaving everything to the imagination. And yet oblique carvings remained, covering almost every surface in some buildings: animals and flowers, stars, geometric patterns, warriors and women winding about the whorls and arcs

of alien scripts. Jeysh found it disorientating, the tell-tale signs of human organisation and habitation sitting uneasily with its mystery, the opacity of its vision, something once so clear transformed by age into something ungraspable, beyond any hope of interpreting. All their knowledge, their language, their history and their beliefs had faded and been forgotten.

They ambled slowly through the complex, Jeysh carefully keeping watch on the few other people, trying to conceal his agitation. The other visitors were mostly from Purana Shahar, much like themselves, a thin stream of chatter spilling in patterned echoes across courtyards or through long sets of chambers, the glimpse of figures and shadows, a couple having lunch in the shade of a pavilion. As Sarita wandered wide-eyed, chattering, speculating on the meaning of carvings or the uses of rooms and buildings, he became aware of someone carefully shadowing them, following at a discreet distance, waiting outside when they entered buildings.

If it's not my contact, then it's my death, he thought. He stared at Sarita, trying to drink in her form and shape and speech and motion, wanting to hold her complete in his head. If this was the last time he saw her, he wanted to take her image with him when he died.

They entered a long series of low rooms, surfaces covered in indecipherable script and geometric patterns. Sarita began to wander from room to room, running her fingers over the carvings, eyes carefully following each line. After two rooms he turned to her.

"I'm not feeling too good. I think I'll head back outside."

She turned to him, concerned. "What's the matter? Should I go and get someone?"

"No. You carry on. I just need a break for a bit. I probably haven't had enough water, something like that."

"Okay, well, I'll be out soon anyway."

"No, take your time. I'll be fine."

"Well," she said, looking guilty, "this place is fascinating. I could stay for days. And any of these patterns would be just perfect for stitching. If you think you'll be alright..."

"I will. Really. You just enjoy yourself."

She looked around her quickly, and then darted forward to kiss him on the cheek. "See you outside, then."

He hurried back. The rooms screamed unintelligible taunts at him; arcing script, interlocking geometric patterns, figures in unfamiliar poses, these unknown meanings twisted from the brute stuff of the rock, dead gods and lost beliefs trapped into one shape as all around it the faith had changed and ebbed away and then eventually died, leaving only this meaningless hulk, a scrawled and futile question. He was glad to get out.

The man who had been following him had sat down, spread out a shabby carpet over the flagstones and arranged his wares for the passers by: dismal trinkets, bottled potions, peculiar little artefacts.

Maybe he's just a trader, Jeysh thought, nothing more. I always knew this was a mad hope, unlikely to come off.

Nevertheless...

"Namaste."

The man, under his bright turban and shaggy grey beard, had been burned almost black by the sun. He stared at Jeysh curiously, eyes flicking across Jeysh's body.

"Namaste, bhai. There is something you want?"

"What do you sell?"

The man smiled. "Many things, bhai. Many things from many places, but I think it is only one thing that you want. Something from the dead places, something - I have been told - that will enable you to finish something long started."

Jeysh stopped the surprise from spasming across his face. This man knew. Whether contact or killer, he knew. Too late now, thought Jeysh, to do anything but act. "You were told by whom?"

"By a dead man. He said he had been dead for years, but he was dying again. He had been too long in the dead city and had caught its disease. He told me to bring myself here, where I would meet you. This so far has been true."

"And he gave you something to give to me?"

The man nodded. "He said you would pay."

Jeysh plucked a sealed wad of money from where it had been hidden, handed it over. The man's eyes bulged. "He said an amount. I thought he might have been lying."

Jeysh shook his head. "Why should he lie? They were the words of a dying man."

"He was your friend?"

"Not for many years."

"Then this is a curse?"

"Yes." Jeysh held out his hand and the man delivered into as small but heavy object wrapped in cloth. He put it into his bag, feeling the air around him bend with the horror of it.

Jeysh watched as the man began to pack his things away. The transaction done, he felt oddly calm, waiting for the bullet in the back, a helicopter overhead, the noise of closing troops. Betrayal was an element he could never dismiss. I live my life expecting it, he thought. But I live, anyway.

The moments passed in harsh, expectant silence. Nothing more happened.

"You have been to the dead city yourself?"

"Near enough."

"And is it like they say, a treasure trove?"

"On the fringes, where it is safe to go, not any more, but..."

"Hello?" it was Sarita, emerging back into the light and blinking, the gold stitching on her sari catching the sun and flaring into whorls of fire.

"This man," Jeysh said, "claims to have been to the dead city."

"Oh," it was a sigh, "how wonderful. I've always imagined that it would be something like this place. Is it?"

"Madam, it is much grander, like this as an elephant is to a dog. It has domes that would cover this entire palace, temples that seem to hang up in the sky. Ruined, of course, shattered but still beautiful in the way a broken mirror can still reflect a beautiful face."

You old ham, Jeysh thought. One glimpse of young flesh and you're off. It's a good job I decided not to trust you.

"And are all the stories true? Do people still live there?"

“Madam, that is unfortunately a lie. Desert caravans often pass, but very few would dare to enter. The curse of Mother lies upon it still.”

Sarita touched her forehead in reverence to Mother. “And let us hope it ends there too.”

The man bowed, Jeysh shivered.

19.

The money was impregnated. Within minutes of the man breaking the seal, he would be dead. Jeysh felt slightly sorry for him, but the possibility of him telling any tales could not be risked. If he could make even the slightest guess at what he had been carrying, there was too much of a threat that he would talk. It must not happen.

Jeysh tried to imagine Sunil out under the burning desert heat, dying of radiation sickness but managing to fulfil his pledge; the first of the three to do so. Would it seem worthwhile to a dying man? Jeysh didn't know. But it had been done.

As they left the palace complex, Jeysh briefly closed his eyes and remembered his friend. Such strange, distant heroism. He helped Sarita into the back of the rickshaw, climbed in himself and clung on tightly as they sped over the bumpy road, trail hanging in dust behind them, precious cargo secreted in his bag.

The trip back to the port did not seem to take long. This is it, he thought. We're already past the furthest point and closing back in on Purana Shahar. He could already feel the pull of home, this dream world of words and visions and emotions suddenly not making sense anymore.

After leaving the rickshaw they had time to wander through the port's bazaar. Fat, sweaty salesman launched into well-rehearsed patter as they passed, trying to flog anything from stuffed animals to cheap jewellery. Jeysh watched Sarita hesitate before a stall of silks, the stallholder immediately standing by her shoulder and ushering her in. “Just look, just look,” he was saying, not bothering to keep the hungry desperation from his eyes. “All lost skills now in Purana Shahar, only here now do we have these weavers, they who are special, who are the daughters and great-granddaughters of those who weaved for the old emperors. It is all done in the traditional style; you won't find this anywhere else.”

It's unlikely, Jeysh thought. It's probably all the same tat that can be picked up in any Purana Shahar chowk. But Sarita's expert eye roved up and down the yards of silk, following the detail of the stitching, watching for flaws, lingering over strange and beautiful motifs. “It's lovely,” she admitted at last. She turned to Jeysh. “Could we, perhaps, as a memento?”

Sale! The stallholder's eyes beamed. He launched at once into a complicated eulogy of the silk's craftsmanship, ending with some tirade over machines, factories, how everything nowadays was the same. “This - this is tradition. It is heritage. It can't be bought at any price, but for you, my friend...”

Yeah, yeah, Jeysh thought, fumbling for his wallet. Probably a sweatshop somewhere of half-blind windows churning this stuff out for a bowl of rice and a dormitory at the end of the day. But it may just be true; it sometimes was. He haggled in

a perfunctory manner until the theatrical bulging of the stallholder's eyes, the effectively conjured ghosts of a starving family, a rapacious mother-in-law and hapless impoverished weaver girls suggested he had reached the right price, and the business was over quickly. The stallholder shot back immediately to the front of his stall in search of fresh victims.

Sarita had a good eye; the silk was beautiful and its rich colours would suit her perfectly. He wrapped it as elegantly as he knew how about her shoulders. She reached up and kissed him, her eyes shining.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He looked at her, at the beautiful empty promise of her, and felt his heart would burst open. They walked hand in hand back to the boat like young and foolish lovers, as if just love alone could change the world about them.

20.

The day wore inexorably on, eating up the space between themselves and Purana Shahar, eating up their emotions and memories as if they had never existed, as if they travelled back from the heart of a fantasy made ever more meaningless the more distant it became.

Only the weight in his bag reminded him. Nothing else has changed, thought Jeysh. Each place carries its own particular magic, which can never be transported elsewhere. He headed towards his past, the same as he had left it, only with one crucial difference.

He dreaded it more with every mile of their approach.

That night they tried to recreate their previous passion, made even more desperate by the unspoken knowledge that this would be an end to it. After this, it was back to their cramped room, the thin walls, the restless movements and jealous listening of the neighbours. Jeysh, clutched by the knowledge of the thing in his bag, felt hollow, a mechanical thing. His body responded to Sarita's deft touch but not his mind, the pleasure suffusing his nerves not seeming to reach as far as his thoughts. It left him utterly alone, cold in this corpse that moved, groaned. His thoughts ran ferociously, uncontrollably: bomb components, patterns of disruption, social theories of control, philosophies of communication. He was sickened by his terrible weaknesses, this woman like a faultline running through him. She bent over him, leaving kisses like painful little wounds fizzing on his flesh. We can't live without sharing, he thought as sweet sweet physical sensations spilled along his spine. This fatal need to communicate our weaknesses, like heroes in myth revealing their one vulnerable spot to the woman that would kill them. We have no choice, he thought, we have no choice because nothing is real until it is said, and then anything can be. All this inside of me, all the things I can never say to Sarita, if I never speak of them, they will never exist.

Her silken hair brushing his skin, the wounds from her lips, the weals of saliva; all burning him, blazing against his untruths. Pictures of Neela tumbling through his mind, finding himself fantasizing as Sarita caused frissons of pleasure to erupt through his skin. Her precise neat body, the glossy hair, the steady impassive eyes. The game she played, the subtle deviance from her instructed role, neither without nor within but weaving a

skein of lies against his own, words an elastic and negotiable difference from the truth they signified. This is maybe what I share, he thought, and if so, it is with Neela alone. Such a pure clean desire sweeping over him, a dream of completeness, of not holding anything back, the fantastic promise of melting through lips and skin - those hands, that face, skin wrecked by Purana Shahar pollution. He wanted to scream, shivering with the exquisite delicacy of Sarita's touch. It's just a dream, he told himself. Just as much as everything else. But the hole was already there in his heart, growing. He tried to close his mind, kissing Sarita's lips, throwing himself into her embrace with the desperate hope of oblivion.

21.

As part of Jeysh's agreement with Neela, Anil should by now be entering the New City, Jeysh's package smuggled in with him. It was unlikely Jeysh would ever see him again; once inside the walls, migrants were not permitted to leave again. Jeysh tried to imagine Anil's new world, but his images of the New City were all from films, television and lurid rumour; vast glass and steel towers, impossible riches, impregnable power. It was not real, not a place in which people could live or eat or sleep or die. He had lost Anil to it, and now he felt small and frail and alone. During the nights he had speculated endlessly about the rightness of their cause, the possibilities of success, the events that had led them to make their pact. A pact that has ruined our lives, he thought, removed the wealth of possibilities within the everyday that provide succour and meaning to most people. It was too late to change; his whole life forced down a pathway that had shaped his experiences and beliefs, that had made his words and actions, himself as solid an edifice as the New City, as irreversible; to change him would similarly take his destruction. And now Anil had gone, he felt his responsibility grow heavy. One of us left, he thought. One lost to the city, to do what he can, and Sunil...

A complex emotion twisted inside of him. He couldn't let himself think of Sunil.

Jeysh spent most of the next week holed up with Zia discussing - or more often arguing - about tactics. The difficulty for Jeysh was in manoeuvring her into a position where she would fall into the trap he had set for her. It wasn't easy; she brooked little disagreement with her own ideas, and would dismiss his plans as fast as he could lay them out. For the first few days, Jeysh had left their meeting place and wandered through Purana Shahar's narrow alleyways feeling frustrated and vindictive, agreeing with Neela's view of Zia and more convinced than ever that betraying her was the right thing to do. It may be doing what they want, he would think as he stood by the tea stall, but it will suit us even better. He carried this new hatred everywhere with him, a splinter of ice in his heart, seeming to divorce him further from the organisation and into his own game.

Nevertheless, a long, strong partnership was disintegrating and it pained him. He missed the support that Zia had used to provide him with, both emotionally and intellectually, but he was no longer in a position to compromise. They fought, Zia unconsciously fighting for her very life, and he found it depressing. The limitations of her character that she defined as strength, he could only see now as weakness. They were

both persistent, inflexible; sometimes he just wished to pull out a gun and shoot her dead on the spot.

An unexpected event, however, played her into his hands.

One night he had taken the long route home. It hadn't seemed important at the time, but later he remembered the whole night with hideous lucidity; the banality, the unthinking presumption that ordinary life would carry on as always around him; his unusual route through spice bazaars and dank courtyards, past dilapidated temples lined by leprous beggars, a leaking water fountain, pilgrims sat in groups by the side of the road playing tambourines and begging for alms. Shopkeepers sat nursing cups of tea, recorded prayers wailed out from doorways. He remembered thinking that he needed Zia to change her mind; her death was no good at this present juncture, it would only martyr her and make her attitudes impossible to alter within the organisation. He came up with one scheme after another, only to reject them all. He crossed the complex lanes and byways of Purana Shahar as a fortune teller absently runs across the lines of a palm, looking for secrets and the hints of destiny; anything he could use.

He reached his own courtyard none the wiser, the usual natter of neighbours minding each other's business, the music from the shops and the temple, washing being hung out, the tinny blare of televisions. Everything as it should be; the way it always had been.

He entered his flat. The hallway stank of incense. Ever since their return from the river, Sarita had become particularly devout in her worship. She had left him an incense stick before the icon: he lit it and performed brief puja for the amusement of whoever may be watching.

Sarita had given up waiting for him and gone to bed. He crept into the kitchen and ate a miserable supper. He listened to the building creaking, tried to imagine what Sarita must think, picturing her spending the evening listening to the hollered prayers of the temple and wondering where her husband was, where she had gone so very wrong. It shouldn't be like this. Nothing should ever be like this.

The ordinary world buzzed and ticked about him. He sat for a long time pondering whether he should talk to Neela, or what precisely he should do. Zia's death must have the right effect; it must push the organisation, of its own accord, to his direction. Every method he considered would not work. At last, he gave up. He cleaned the dirt from his face and feet and then slipped into the bedroom.

Sarita was asleep, laying on her side with her hair streaming out like a flag. The sigh of her breath scored the distant hubbub from the courtyard. He sloughed off his clothes, parted the netting and slid into bed next to her.

Her eyes flickered open, soft with dream light. "Oh, it's you." she gave a smile, her face rich, drowsy.

Who did you expect? He wondered. Who were you dreaming of?

She turned her body towards him, resting half across him, the press of her warm flesh, her breasts, one hand sliding across his skin, her lips seeking his.

One effect of the river trip seemed to have been this increase in their love-making, furtive and hushed, time stolen together in the blackest hours before dawn, all bitten-back cries and controlled desire, the muffled creaking of the bed, shifting and gasping until they had both reached orgasm, when a familiar darkness would descend over Jeysh, and

he would hate this, hate the automaton he could become, Sarita's skin drowning him, an alien medium holding him out.

So it was this night like the others, laying as she slept on him, hating her and loving her and all the panic of a trapped animal, the emotions he had to crush within himself to not scream or run. The darkest point of the night and then it happened. The sound seemed to spill down from the heavens, a great tearing crack that left the sky in tatters, the room rocking, the windows rattling violently in their frames. He sat bolt upright, knowing that sound, Sarita instantly awake and screaming, clinging onto him.

"What is it?" she demanded. "What's happened?"

The gulf between his different lives suddenly shrank away.

22.

The two of them sat in the kitchen, listening to the radio as live reports started to come through, the dazed hyperbole of journalists who had no clear facts, but who had one eye on promotion or prize-winning. They stumbled through reams of purple prose, lurid descriptions, cheap sentimentality as the wounded and the dead were carried out. Jeysh made tea and they both sat, staring into their cups.

"I just don't see why," Sarita said. "I don't understand what anybody gains from bombing a temple."

"I'm sure we'll find out."

The reporter on the radio kept describing more bodies being removed from the wreckage. More and more, not just from the temple but from the surrounding buildings, which had collapsed.

"All these people dead, and for what? They were *praying*. What sort of people could do this?"

"The sort," Jeysh said quietly, "who believe that they can only achieve their ends through the killing of others. That what they have to fight for is more important than the death of a few, if it will bring greater good ultimately to the many. Or maybe they don't even care about the many, and it's just something they feel they have to do. I don't know. So many people think they have the way that everyone else must follow. Isn't that, after all, what Mother tells us to believe? That it is the survival of the race we must think of as important, that if the need arises we must sacrifice ourselves for it?"

"Not like this." Sarita shivered. "When I perform puja, I don't think of death. I think of life."

He didn't answer. He had no answer. Death is death is death, he thought. It's an instrument, a torture of others, a fear. People made examples of, moved across a chessboard and then thoughtlessly sacrificed. It's a statement of contempt, of passion. Without it, nothing would change, because without it nothing meant anything. It is always someone's son, someone's daughter, whatever their colours or beliefs.

You can't love everyone all of the time, he thought. Not even Sarita. You can't not fight, whatever the consequences.

But the reality of what it meant, played out in the lurid descriptions of the radio reports... That was horrific. He stirred his tea and was silent for a long time.

“I’m going to see,” he said abruptly. “We can talk and talk but it doesn’t mean anything.”

He got up. Sarita clung to his arm. “But what if there are more bombs? What if they’re just waiting for people to gather and then...?”

He looked at her seriously. “It might happen. But I might die crossing the road. Who knows? We can’t live in fear. No human should ever do that. This thing, what it’s done, I must see it. All these reports are nothing; they can’t say what needs to be said about it.”

“Well then, in that case, I’m going too.”

“You, but Sarita, you - it won’t be like TV, it’s not something you can switch off and just leave alone when you don’t like it any more. There isn’t a camera telling you what to see. It’s...”

“You just told me not to be afraid. I won’t be. I don’t understand how anyone can kill people like this and I want to - I need to - see what happened.”

He stared at her, wondering.

23.

They hurriedly got dressed and left. The whole of Purana Shahar seemed to be awake; large groups of people clustering around any stall or auto with a radio, shops opened up and people huddling in front of televisions. The same images splashed over and over again on the screens: bloody bodies on stretchers, men screaming, women crying, a foggy haze hanging before the cameras, the blue flashing lights of emergency vehicles, black-suited troops organising the rescue operation. Babbled speculation rang out onto the streets: it had been this or that separatist group, anti-Mother factions within the military, mad loners, an extortion racket gone horribly wrong.

It was a walk of about half a mile. They found themselves within a persistent drift of the curious, the vicarious, some people eager to help, a lot of devout young men with a hungry look, wanting someone to blame. Sarita took hold of Jeysh’s hand. What had previously been the occasional smashed window became more and more frequent, until the roadside was littered with silver slivers of glass like cruel and jagged knives. Shopkeepers knocked the remaining glass from blind windows sockets; it fell to smash and tinkle with the rest, a destructive symphony seeming to echo out from every direction. Families were already cleaning patches of ground outside shops and doorways, rags wrapped around hands, the odd long dark trail of fresh blood marking the road. Ahead, the air shone with the promise of revelation, buildings and people plunged into silhouette by the haleated arc of light.

When they reached it, the scene was hideous. Jeysh was unprepared for the incessant desperate jabber, the calling out, the arms desperately held aloft, glowing whites of eyes, milling spectators, panicked screaming, men and women clutching each other as reporters and cameramen ran through the melee pushing spotlights into bloody wounds and too-wide eyes, mangled limbs and ruined bodies, a fine-floating cloying dust of brick and plaster, acrid sweat and guttered fires, the stench of death, desperation, bewilderment. The temple had been almost completely destroyed, a great gaping hole

ripped through into adjoining apartments, the private junk and litter of unknown lives harshly exposed, smoke still belching from the tangled ruins, flames licking at blind and broken windows. Some people stood and watched, some people talked, some did what they could to help. Somewhere to his left, a line of stretchers covered with white plastic sheeting waited for ambulances to arrive to take the remains away.

Sarita stood in what he guessed was rapt, uncomprehending horror, her eyes flicking over the mess of bloody limbs, the rubble of the temple, lotus motifs and carved figures thrusting out at strange angles from the jumble of wrecked masonry, the temple forecourt become a dumping ground for the rescued, the injured, the dead, all piled together unceremoniously.

“We should help,” she murmured, watching the men and women pulling aside rubble with bloody hands. “They can’t - we can’t leave them alone. Not to die like this...” she let go of him and walked mechanically towards the wreck of the temple, choking on dust, watching the lines of people pull apart these sacred ruins. She was stopped by an army guard. “No further.”

“But I want to help. I’ll do anything.”

“We’ve got help enough, Miss. Besides which, our boys will be moving in soon. The best thing you can do is - is just leave it. Leave it be. Go back home.”

She turned away, nodding heavily, uncontrolled tears streaming down her face. Jeysh caught hold of her and she buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing bitterly. People churned about them, the cameras still rolling, reports breathlessly rushed out, thick dancing clouds of dust rolling sensuously over all the anguished faces, over the smeared trails of blood, over the wide-open mouths that no longer breathed.

So easy to do this, Jeysh thought. So easy to smash and smash, to spread fear and hatred and woe. Less easy to do what Sarita had offered; to give a little back, share the pain, the burden. She had been refused her catharsis. He knew her; she would have worked and worked until she tore her hands, ripped her muscles, until she couldn’t stand. She would try to heal this.

Is this the world we want? He wondered. An atmosphere of constant paranoia, the inflexible absolutism of opposing hatreds, pain paid back with pain time and again. Is there anything, he thought, that stops me from being just as bad? Is it any better to be convinced that I can bring this to some kind of end? Maybe these bombers believe it too? Whoever dies in whatever bomb is still someone’s daughter, someone’s son, and I’m desperate to stop this, to stop Sarita from having to suffer this, for her life to be her own. And if I can’t guarantee that I can bring an end to it, then am I just as hideous?

Sarita was still crying, a terrible sound that choked out of her. She would not wish to leave but there was nothing she could do. It was a tragic human inability to turn base metal into gold, to transform a situation to make the world all right. She would still have tried anyway.

He felt a cold anger surge through him. We have to stop all of it, he thought. Everything that has led to this damn situation. No time to compromise anymore, no more time to allow the state to continue these grotesque games, contemptuously toying with the people supposed to be under its stewardship. We have to fight fire with fire, he thought. Or else do what? Tolerate this forever? Let the same people break us apart, invade our heads, mess with our bodies, destroy the spirit of generation after generation. I’d rather

die, because this excruciating reality isn't tolerable. To fight against it is maybe all we can mean as human beings, but I will learn to make that enough.

More would die. This terrible wave would rise and rise. But what are you, you heads of corporations, you eavesdroppers, you copywriters of genetic code, you weavers of falsehood and banal dreams, you airbrushers of bodies, you peddlers of shit? You who justify the current way of things, the filth and squalor of the shanty towns, the millions of malnourished and homeless and uneducated. You who chant the familiar mantra that it is the race that matters, the ideology, the money, and all and every individual should gratefully sacrifice themselves to this.

He had to make the world better. As Sarita had said, he must look forward with hope every morning.

Together, they turned away from the destroyed temple and began walking home.

24.

It had become light, a grey-blue sky hanging above the narrow streets. The peeling paint and rot of the buildings, the beggars and homeless families, workday traffic and roving hawkers, all the weight of unbearable detail emerged from the amber-washed gloom of the night. It felt too real, too sharp after the nightmarish images of the temple bomb. Exhausted, dizzy, Jeysh and Sarita decided to stop at a little tea bar.

A television blared in the corner of the bar. The Hands of Mother had already claimed responsibility, issuing a brief statement. The temple, it alleged, had been the focus for a heretical and corrupt interpretation of the Words of Mother, an interpretation that had encouraged sexual licentiousness, liberal thinking and a questioning of doctrine. That innocent people may have died along with the heretics was the fault solely of the heretics; had they not been so self-centred and careless of others in pursuing their corrupt vision, then the tragedy need not have happened. The destruction of the temple was to be celebrated. It had strengthened society by exposing a vein of evil.

The statement ended by assuring those of strong and orthodox faith that they need have no fear.

Jeysh watched Sarita interestedly for her reaction. Her hair was grey with dust, her face whitened into a mask torn across by tears, eyes like gouged black holes, this cold exterior like a death that lay upon her.

She watched the television silently, playing with her tea. Several flies seemed to hang effortlessly in the air, watching her also. "I've never thought of Mother as anything but love. Not this."

"Maybe they think that by what they're doing they will make the world a better place. End heresy. Make us all happy, harmonious. Maybe that's a form of love."

She shook her head. "How can it be? How can causing the death of others be love? Every single thing is precious. Isn't that right?"

"If they were here in front of you, and you had a gun, what would you do?"

"And if I killed them, then what?"

“So you don’t kill them, and they carry on anyway, killing more and more people. What do you think is going to happen? They aren’t going to die just because what they’re doing is *wrong*.”

She jerked back as if she had been hit. He regretted his sarcasm.

“Doesn’t it feel in your bones,” she asked him softly, “that behaving this way is wrong?”

“I feel in my bones that I have to stand up for what I believe is right, against people like that, people who are just destroyers. We can’t let these people rule us; we can’t let fear of their bombs take us over. And if we do nothing, they will. You know, it could have been me, it could have been you in that blast. Don’t you think we should fight for a better world, one that’s free from this?”

“And maybe that is the thing causing all this. Everyone wants to change the world, but no one can agree what into.”

“Wouldn’t you end poverty in this world?”

“Yes, if I could.”

“Well then...”

“I don’t believe in bombing anyone to achieve that. Better poor than dead.”

“But others don’t agree, and they *will* bomb you to make their point. Why suffer that?”

“And what then? You’re wrong too, and nothing has been helped. You’ve made the world worse. When I think of what we’ve seen...” she pressed a hand against her face and began to cry again.

Jeysh watched her, waiting for the tears to be over.

25.

As a consequence of the bombing, Zia walked into his trap.

Later that day, after he had put an emotionally and physically exhausted Sarita to bed, he went out to see Zia. Purana Shahar buzzed with uncertainty, fear, anger, the temples holding special worships, hard-faced young men gathering in groups with banners denouncing atheism and liberalism, chanting loudly at the passers by. Whether they supported the bombing wasn’t clear, but they used it as an excuse to promote their own brand of fundamentalism. Condemnation of the attack had been twisted by the fact that people did not want to be seen supporting a liberal temple frequented by what were popularly thought to be the dissolute and immoral rich. Rumours began to circulate about strange goings on within the temple: money laundering, unsavoury gatherings, sexual encounters upon the premises. Although the New City watched on silently, the malignancy of the rumours seemed to suggest its hands at work.

The box room he used for meeting with Zia was deep within a rotting building, itself hidden in a black courtyard behind a disused and crumbling temple. Old blind widows squatted by the walls and begged for alms, young girls squeezed at washing by the water fountain, human and animal faeces piled in stinking mounds by every corner. The stifled moans of prostitutes echoed from opened windows, rats chattered in the walls,

restless men lurked in the shadows, trying to sell him the women, the girls, hash, guns, anything he wanted.

It could not be further from Neela or from the shimmering lights of her home. He felt his old hatred, fresh as if it had never gone away.

He traced the labyrinthine corridors and chambers of the building, floorboards warped, shuddering under his weight. The paint was peeling and bare plaster crumbling, most light fittings empty, strange noises emanating from strange rooms. Creatures skittered out of vision, voices murmured, hypodermic needles crunched underfoot. In the box room itself, electrics sparking to reluctant life beneath his fingers, he watched in horrified fascination as lines of ants dragged little mechanical components from a hole in one wall across the floor and into another.

Soon afterwards, Zia also entered. She was pale with anger, her fists clenched. She didn't bother with any introduction. "We've got to do something about this."

"It's certainly an interesting new element."

"That's very like you." She rounded on him. "Sometimes I think that you don't really care. It's not *interesting* that they're killing innocent women and children. It's sick."

"I don't know why you're so offended. Surely the people they bombed are the same rich liberals who we hate for maintaining the status quo?"

"That would be fine had the media and those in power not used it as an excuse to attack atheism and socialism, as if those people were atheists and socialists and as if that meant they had somehow deserved to die."

"Well, it's the perfect opportunity, isn't it? Now they have got all the excuses they need to come out and say these things. People have died; what better time to define a universal demon?"

"We're being twisted inside out," Zia said grimly. "We can't allow it. We can't let this kind of thinking creep in and take over. We have to fight back, make sure there are no Hands of Mother that can be used as an excuse."

"You mean a change of tactics?"

"We can't let them poison the whole debate. People can't be allowed to see what they're doing as acceptable. As the authorities seem to be on their side, the only thing we can do is to wipe them out and hope that this gains us support and shifts the debate away from its current direction. We also have to show that we will not allow the killing of the innocent, that we are their champions against these lunatics."

"You needn't use such loaded language with me."

"Loaded?"

"Maybe those people didn't deserve to die, but maybe they weren't so innocent either. What were they? Industrial magnates who denied the same ease of living to their workforce; exploiters of labour and capital; dealers, swindlers, racketeers and profiteers. Innocent? It's such a rabble-rousing word. You accused me of not caring - well..."

"Do you want to win, or don't you?"

He remembered his conversation with Sarita and shrugged. "I don't want to win with bullshit."

Zia just stared at him coldly.

"So what you propose?" he asked eventually.

"We have to take them out."

“And what? Ignore everything you suggested before, like hitting the military and all of that stuff?”

She glared at him and he didn't labour the point. “In the long term, that's still my aim. But in the meantime things have changed and we urgently need act. We can't allow these fanatics to gain the momentum over us. Maybe no one is crying over these deaths, but I'm sure there will be worse to follow. Everyone is scared, and I don't think they would mourn the passing of the Hands of Mother, however much they may agree with parts of their agenda.”

“You know, this is all a diversion.”

She stared at him harshly. “If it were left to you, we wouldn't do anything at all. And meanwhile, people are dying and the blame gets deflected onto our cause and our beliefs.”

“And there's no guarantee that will stop if we give up our actual aims to chase the Hands of Mother. Instead, all we will be doing is diverting resources from what we should be doing. We can't forget that what we're trying to do, what's at the end of all of this, is the aim of bringing down the entire system. You might never think that we can achieve it, but I do, and I need money, and I need recruits. If I'm going to support this little sideshow, I need your help in making sure I get what I need to get things done my way. Or don't you trust me to know what I'm doing?”

She stood stock still, staring at him like she could penetrate to his innermost being. “You've changed. You're not the man I once knew.”

“We've both changed. The world does that.”

“Can I still trust you?”

“If you don't, well then...” He let the sentence trail off ominously.

There was a long silence as she stared. “You won't deal with this half-heartedly?”

“Zia, you know me.”

She nodded, turned away. “So what's to be done? How do we face them? Bombs?”

“That would be seen as too cowardly, even if we could manage it. It would suggest that we were afraid of them, that we couldn't engage in a straight, honest fight. If we want to win ourselves support, we are going to have to beat them in a straight out firefight.”

“And if we fail?”

He shrugged. “We should make sure we don't.”

“How?”

He held his nerve. “Good groundwork beforehand. But more importantly, you have to lead. From the front. It's got to be a talismanic victory; it's got to capture the imagination, both within and without the organisation. You have to do it, Zia, you.”

A slow but reckless smile spread across her face. “It's been a long time.” She clenched her fist, and then opened her hand wide, staring at the fingers. “How it would be to feel alive again, actually doing something, not cooped in some shithole listening to your sophistry.”

“You'll do it?”

“There's a level to all of this that's personal. That these bastards should dare...” Her eyes flashed, he watched her face set. “You know what it's like to physically prove that you're better? No, you wouldn't. Well, sometimes it's everything, sometimes beating

the bastards like this, it vindicates everything, standing up and fighting for what it is we believe. That is the soul of a human being. Not skulking around dropping bombs.”

“Just make sure that you do it, yeah?”

“You’ll arrange everything? The time, the place of ambush, whatever?”

“As long as we have a deal.”

Having offered her the one thing she wanted, he could see no way she would refuse.

“We’ll need more recruits,” he continued. “More money pushed into my stuff. I’ll make sure you get enough to successfully fight this thing.”

She nodded impulsively. “Of course. This is our chance to signal our intent, to stand up and fight and so initiate the end. You won’t regret this; my way is right, you’ll see that.”

“We have a deal?” he held out his hand.

“We have a deal.”

They shook, the box room seeming to close all the tighter about Jeysh as he watched the flushed light in her cheeks; that terrible, destructive, charismatic energy of the woman.

The ants continued to march, carrying their machinery with them from where to where, indomitable, unstoppable.

26.

There have to be, he thought, reasons for every person you pick. There must be no question about their loyalty and their commitment. And so, despite his qualms, despite his wish to keep her safe from this gruesome game, he turned to Ayla. She was perfect, and he needed her.

She saw him as soon as he entered the shop, as if she had been waiting for him for every moment since he had last left. She turned round the moment the door opened and stared straight into his eyes, vindicated hope blossoming across her cheeks. He felt sick as he watched her stock sit forgotten by her side as she watched him, her body bundled with tension.

He turned to Jutta at the counter. “How’s trade?”

Jutta looked out across the humped stock, the cartoon colours and attractively curved bottles, the food additives and poisoned sludge, growth hormones and feel-good drugs, the smiling faces and beautiful places promised in the packaging. “Mother is bountiful. You know, with all this blowing up going on people are eating, eating. Comfort, I imagine. I don’t know.”

Jutta himself looked like a man who could swallow his own stock whole and not notice.

“I could even, maybe,” he continued, “hire another assistant. My good wife always complains how I work all the hours Mother sends. But then, how else are we supposed to eat, no? How else can my wife sit in front of the TV eating sweets? I don’t know, and even if I had another assistant what do I do, trust the whole shop to them? Not

until my son is old enough! Then the shop will carry on and then I can sit back with the good wife eating sweets in front of the TV. Then life will be good, no?"

"You seem to have it all sorted."

"The future, dear boy, is simple. Why people worry I don't know. Life just goes on, like it always has."

"Maybe that's why some people worry?"

Jutta laughed uproariously, as if at a great joke. "What? When we have everything we could need? What's to worry about? But enough of this, you'll be wanting to speak to Ayla. Ayla! Take lunch, bachchi."

Ayla took an ice-cream from the refrigerated cabinet, paid Jutta for it and walked out with Jeysch into the midday heat.

On the surface, Purana Shahar seemed normal. The streets swarmed with life, the endless shops all open, miles of shining silk for sale, ox-pulled carts butting through the crowds, cries of haggling, precarious towers of earthenware pots, socks and pants and vests and shirts all jumbled up in plastic crates by the roadside and sifted through by legions of women determined to unearth the bargain of the day. But behind this, there had been reports of acid thrown in the faces of women not wearing traditional dress, firebombs lobbed at temples deemed too liberal, vigilantes destroying drinking dens and lynching the owners. Everybody strove to avoid being next on the Hands of Mother's list.

Jeysch and Ayla pushed through the crowd towards a little junction, where a water fountain surrounded by stone steps had been erected in the middle of the road, a traditional spot for gossiping women or those wanting to watch the world go by. Jeysch bought them both a plate of chaat from a nearby stall and they squeezed themselves into a space on the fountain steps.

"I can't believe Jutta won't let you take anything for free."

"Oh he's not so bad," she said defensively. "Every Saturday he gives me the vegetables he can no longer sell. I cook for the dormitory. We are grateful."

"Well, all he's doing there is making sure he doesn't risk being fined by throwing them on the street."

"You're too nasty sometimes."

Maybe I am, he thought. He looked at this thin, modest girl huddled next to him on the steps, her sari pallu pulled over her head, her gaze slightly averted.

"I think it's difficult not to be," he told her reflectively, biting into a piece of chaat. He watched her unwrap the ice-cream, tucking the wrapper back into the folds of her sari. "There's a lot of things in the world that you just don't think about, and then suddenly when you do, it's horrifying. Just little things, like your ice-cream, for instance."

"I know it cost a lot," she said woundedly, giving him a huge and soulful stare. "I know that, but we all need pleasures, otherwise, otherwise..."

"I'm not trying to deny that, and I'm not saying that you've done anything wrong. But just think for a minute about what that ice-cream is. It's made somewhere in a factory using the cheapest ingredients, you know it's all pig fat and salt and sugar, flavourings and colourings made from Mother knows what processes. The water involved will be untreated, full of pesticides, traces of heavy metals, whatever. On top of that they put in the drugs that make you feel good and keep you addicted. Then they put a plastic wrapper on it, and when you've finished with it where does that wrapper go? Blocking the sewers

or choking a cow that tries to eat it, breaking down into carcinogenic polymers maybe. And think how many of these things are churned out every day, all the people paying their precious money to buy one in good faith, and what is it doing to them? It's not helping them, it's not helping us or the people around us, it's not helping you to be clogged with all this pig fat, this sugar, cancer-causing colourings and chemicals. It helps a few people, those who run the company maybe, and those in the New City who finance the company, and it helps keep us unhealthy, stupid, dependent. This, it's things like this, you know..."

She was holding it now like it was some kind of bomb. She had stopped eating it, and it was starting to lose its shape under the pitiless heat of the sun. "I just wanted to spoil myself," she said. "I just wanted a treat..."

He felt joyless, a bigot, a pedant. "I'm not saying you shouldn't. I'm not saying it's wrong every once in a while. We have to spoil ourselves otherwise what do we get from life? But you said that maybe I'm too cynical, and well, what I'm trying to say is that the people who do this..." gesturing to the ice cream, "you know, all the money that goes into selling it, the effort that goes into making something that's an accumulation of bad things into a luxury item, something that pollutes us, kills us, well what are these people? Who is it that can do this to a fellow human being, for whatever money?"

"I hadn't thought," she said, not without embarrassment. Enormous glops of melted stuff slithered to the end of the ice-cream where she dangled it and then splattered thickly into the dust below. People stared at her curiously; she seemed not to notice.

"You should finish it," he said to her gently, appalled at himself, at what he had done.

"No," she said. "It's better this way; it hurts nobody. I should have thought. I'm a fool that I didn't."

She watched it melt and drip with a sort of numb horror. Splat, splat. Marking out the dust. As if she could just watch and so dissolve this hideous monster she had suddenly found gathering around her.

"But why should you have realised?" he continued in the same tone of voice. "Everything encourages us towards believing what we are told, towards not thinking. We're bombarded by it, you know, eat this and be happy, change your skin tone and marry a rich man as a consequence, false promises and false smiling faces as if somehow all of this isn't selling us something, but is making us better people. And who doesn't want to be better? You'd be a fool not to dream, not to believe that there's someone out there offering it to you, in a packet or a tube or whatever, you've got to believe someone."

She nodded bitterly. "So is this why you never took me along to your meetings? Because I'm stupid, because I can't work these things out, I can't see what things are. All day, every day, I never thought."

"None of these things are true unless they're true of everyone, not just you. And why anyway do you think I came back this time?"

She looked at him directly, almost for the first time since they had sat down, a clear but haunted gaze, brief and startling. A crack opened up on the melting shell of her ice-cream, and half slid off the stick, slapping wetly into the dust at her feet. "I don't know. Probably because you wanted to use me, the way most of the girls in the dormitory get used."

The knowingness in her tone shocked him. It was spoken shyly but casually enough to imply an open secret. “What? Men from our organisation?”

She nodded. “Mostly. The landlord, his sons, they have their favourites too.”

It was his turn to be shamed by his stupidity. “I didn’t know. Maybe I should have guessed. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “Some of the girls, well, we’re damaged goods, aren’t we? We still have wants, though, and some of the girls...” she trailed off with a shrug. “Well, they aren’t going to get married, are they?”

“Ayla, I promise you, I didn’t realise the dormitory was being used as a brothel.”

“It isn’t that bad. It isn’t like that.” she looked around, at the people swarming in slow lines through the streets, the hand-pulled carts, the shopkeepers, women with cloth bundles balanced on their heads, loading pots or yards of material into auto-rickshaws, the holy beggars, the naked grubby children flitting like shadows through a forest of legs. “What my father did to my mother, to my sisters...” She looked at the simple bangles hanging from her thin arms. “That was bad. As to everyone else, as to me, I don’t know how we’re all supposed to live, what our lives should be like. I see things on TV and in films and I imagine...” She shrugged. “We’re told things at the temple but that doesn’t seem to make any sense to my life. So I don’t think it’s bad. I didn’t spend long on the streets before the mission picked me up. I think I would have died, otherwise. I was not very clever.”

The rest of the ice-cream slithered to the floor. Several people muttered disgustedly. Ayla watched the vague form melt, and run in a little river through the dust. Jaysh absently chewed chaat, trying to conquer his horror, his rising sense that everything was wrong, a choking labyrinth of false morals, with any truth behind it lost long ago. People within the organisation, it seemed, were as bad as those anywhere else. What can we do? he thought. What can we do but carry on, try to see a way through? Hope that we can smash down this whole shitty edifice and start again, create something better.

The disturbing ease with which Ayla would have given herself thoughtlessly to him. Would still. A power that made him want to physically retch, that hung tantalisingly in her thin, cloth-clad figure, so close, so attainable.

“I didn’t come back because I wanted to - to *use* you,” he told her uneasily. He wondered if, absurdly, she would take it as rejection, another mark against her. She merely sat, withdrawn into herself, ashamed of what she was and almost appearing not to listen. He decided to be honest, thinking that maybe it would appeal to her, clear away some of her self-doubt. “I didn’t come back before because, well, because sometimes breaking down the world people have built up around themselves, you know, the hopes and the enjoyments and the treats, whatever, well, that can be a terrible thing. I’ve never been comfortable with doing that. If people are happy, or secure in whatever way, destroying all that is - is maybe sometimes not right. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

She nodded, her eyes on the tiny ice-cream river.

“Sometimes people are better as they are. They shouldn’t be fighting, they shouldn’t be paranoid, or too cynical, any of that. Sometimes knowing all these things can just be destructive, it can cut you off from a level of this,” gesturing with a hand to the bustle, the movement, the colour, the hum and hubbub of life. “There was something

in you that I... I had too much respect for, maybe. Something that I thought was so connected to all of this that I didn't have the heart to break it."

"But now you do?"

"I'm sorry, I'm truly sorry for it, but yes. Things have changed. We need you; we need people like you, everyone sympathetic and willing to listen. So I changed my mind on you. You being with us is more important."

"This happiness, this thing, if it's stupid I will be glad of it going. Like the ice-cream. I don't think I've got anything to lose: no family, no husband. What have I got - a bed and a job. I don't want to be stupid. Let me come with you," she suddenly looked urgent, her eyes dark with all manner of unknown memories, feelings too strange or too complex for him to understand, too far beyond her words. She gripped his hand.

27.

He arrived home early. Sarita was still cooking, several pots steaming in the cramped kitchen. He poured them both some tea and then sat down, his ear close to the radio so he could hear it above the clatter of the pots and the hiss of the cooker.

"How was work?" Sarita asked him.

"Oh, okay, yeah."

"You're home early."

"Yeah. Things are kind of slack this week. They'll pick up. How about you?"

"All the repairs for the Lakhani children are done, and Mrs Lakhani paid me on the spot. All I have to do now is to think what to spend the money on."

"Hardship."

She smiled. "You're only jealous. It's a long time since I had this much work. I'm enjoying it."

"Good." he loved watching her work; her frowning concentration and nimble fingers, her whole being seemingly poured into each piece of cloth as she would shape it. He had hoped, on this rare occasion of being back so early, that she would maybe do some more before going to bed.

"I spent a lot of time today talking to Mrs Lakhani." Sarita didn't look round at him, but carried on cooking. "She said she would get bored in the house without her children around. I think she feels we're in a shameful state, not having children yet. She didn't say as much, of course, but she did ask there was anything medically wrong with me, or if we belonged to some religious sect or something. I couldn't bear it - it was so *humiliating*. I've seen other women looking at me too, with that look in their eyes, why do I not have children? It's hard to give any sort of explanation. And sometimes I think they're right to ask..."

"How many times do we have to go through this?"

Sarita stood, the pots boiling behind her, looking wounded by his sighing dismissal.

"You know how impossible it is right now," he said more gently.

She nodded and silently went back to cooking. He decided to make peace - so rare, after all, for him to be here at this time. We might as well enjoy it, he thought

himself, rather than fight. After all, how often it will happen again is something that I don't know. If nothing else, he felt he needed to prove that he could be a good husband and that maybe in a different time or place he could have provided Sarita with all she wanted. He changed the subject. "Did you hear the news today?"

"Yes," she said, spooking rice out into the bowl. "The power cuts, you mean? It seems strange; first bombs and now this. Some man on the radio kept saying that the two weren't related, but I'm not so sure."

"I was standing by a tea stall when it happened," he told her. He had broken off logistical talks with Zia and they had both taken a walk to Jeysh's favoured tea stall with its view over the New City. They had stood, the vehicles buzzing belligerently past, a lambent dusk falling slowly across the sky. The city's spires stretched elegantly upwards, shining ethereally into the dying evening. Then, suddenly, the lights on one of the tallest towers began to flicker, before abruptly fading out, a line of darkness swiftly falling from the top to below the line they could see, leaving an illusory trace upon the retina as if from a falling star. Everybody noticed; there was an alarmed muttering from the men clustered by their rickshaws, people craned their necks to look out of car windows, the chai wallah swore. The new patch of darkness stayed stubbornly black, unfamiliar, a sinister hole in the shimmering firmament.

"I told you," the chai wallah bellowed, "I told you they had no control. Now they can't even light up their own fucking buildings. What is the world coming to? How are they going to sort us out here when they can't keep their own buildings lit? First bombs, then lynchings and now this. They should send for the army."

Zia raised her eyebrows. "I've certainly never heard of the like."

"There never has been such a thing. It's one step further on the road to ruin, mark my words, young lady."

"I suppose, though, even the City must sometimes have power cuts. I mean, accidents happen, right? Nowhere can be perfect."

"Madam, have you ever heard of such a thing? In all my time, no. This cannot be an accident."

"You mean they turned the lights off deliberately?"

"I mean sabotage."

"But what good would that do? They're just *lights*."

"You think the lights go out in Purana Shahar just because the supply is bad? Madam, it is a statement of - forgive the pun - power. The same is no doubt true here. It is a warning, and it is saying that things will get worse."

Zia sniffed. "Well maybe, and maybe not. I prefer warnings of a more concrete manner."

The chai wallah had a point, and Jeysh knew that Zia was shaken. The organisation extorted money from various factories by threatening them with power cuts, and through its moles within power stations had disrupted the entire electricity supply on several occasions. She probably hadn't assumed that knowledge of the practice was widespread.

"So," Zia muttered as they walked away, "just assuming for a second that he's right, have you any idea who's done this?"

Jeysh did, although it was a wild hope and may well be wrong anyway. Under the contact blackout between the New City and Purana Shahar, he had discussed with Anil

how and if Anil could provide any message that he was still alive and that his mission was working. They had talked about various methods, more fancifully than with any real hope, the two most significant of which had been a staged, localised power cut at an agreed time of day, and the dropping of the New City's firewall, again at an agreed time. They had dropped both as being too risky. They had agreed there could be no communication, and each would have to just trust the other to be alive and working according to plan. And then, despite their discussions, this. It was the right message, at the right time. Part of the reason Jeysh had decided on a break right then was precisely in the hope, despite his agreement with Anil, that Anil would conjure something, provide some sort of sign, however oblique. He knew Anil would want to, and wondered if he had felt secure enough, or maybe rather than a message, this had been the start of the activities Anil was meant to carry out, and the time had either been purely coincidental or else a convenient marriage of the two things. Otherwise, the authorities had intercepted Anil and the device he was carrying, had extracted information from him and were now leading Jeysh on in the hope of exposing the organisation, not just the parts that Neela knew but everything, in order to crush it completely when the time came.

Or else, of course, it could be a genuine power cut. As Zia had said, such things do happen. It was, Jeysh admitted to himself, the most likely option.

He didn't know. He didn't want to guess.

He professed his ignorance to Zia. She was clearly uneasy at the idea of events being beyond her control. She mulled over numerous possibilities, her speculation tinged with paranoia, half-listening to the chatter of speculation running the length of the roadside, almost as fast and loud as the traffic passing. They passed back into the dusty glare of Purana Shahar's narrow streets, the new strip of darkness hidden but not forgotten. Jeysh realised that Zia was scared. This was new: an event that she could not qualify according to her world view, either a random and threatening event or some deeper conspiracy about which she knew nothing. It highlighted the crude and oppositional method of her thinking. Too late, she had realised there may be other games outside her own. Everything could change.

Jeysh felt her fear just as keenly within himself.

"Here's dinner." Sarita placed the pot of steaming rice on the table, and then ladled him out a plate of daal. The smell billowed up at him, making his stomach clench with hungry anticipation. The kitchen suddenly felt very solid, very real, the hard shapes of ceiling and walls, Sarita's familiar form and familiar actions, the bright pattern splashed across her clothes, the smell like a line leading him back to childhood, everything so comforting, so normal, the innocent actions of thousands of years. As if what's going on outside can't really be happening, he thought himself. Everything has always been this way and always will be. There is an unbreakable pattern to life, to love. These things work as they must, and to think of destroying these patterns built up over millennia is insanity, a grotesque egotism. The outside world was unreal, a madness.

I am being stretched, he thought, beaten out of shape. Something must give.

Sarita served herself some daal and sat opposite him. They both took rice from the bowl and began to eat.

"I'll make some more tea," Sarita said after they had eaten half the food, mostly in silence. She busied herself about the kettle. He leaned back on his seat, watching her. "Do you think," she said, "that this power failure, I mean, after the temple bomb, do you

think it was deliberate? I don't know, maybe I'm trying to connect everything and maybe it isn't all connected. But I feel funny about this."

"I think it's just a bad coincidence, being so soon after the bombs." he was surprised at the keenness of Sarita's sense. In the aftermath of the bombing, she hadn't discussed such things much. She had locked away from him all the effects of what she had seen and felt. She had been attendant of her shrine, making long prayers to mother and burning little offerings for the victims, the families of the victims, the innocent everywhere she fervently wished would never have to experience such a thing. She seemed to have drawn a thick line between the Mother she worshipped, who was compassionate and loving and mysterious, and the righteous inflexible tyrant to whom the bomb had been dedicated.

"Maybe. But there might be more to it."

"So you mean you don't think it was just some component went wrong?"

"I don't know," she said simply.

He loved that in her; a deep, true love that he hoped would survive whatever. If Sarita didn't know, or wasn't sure, she would simply say so. It was something he couldn't attempt to match. Lies, endless lies fell from his mouth, twisting and distorting the gap between words and reality.

"Perhaps you're right to suspect," he said, watching her pour the tea into the pot. "But even if someone claimed it, could we believe them? For a start, it could be accidental but someone could claim it anyway, just for the free publicity. And it's not so bad, not as destructive as a bomb, so it's less likely to have such an adverse effect if anyone did claim it. Even if it was deliberate, we may see competing groups all claiming to have done it. It's impossible to know what to believe."

"Yes," she said. "Sometimes I think that whatever it is that happened, we're going to be told the same things anyway. The news will tell us the version that they want us to believe. And if anyone else claims to have done it, well, we probably wouldn't believe them if they said so."

"No."

"Words," she sighed, placing the pot on the table and sitting down again. "They create such a fog. Something said as a lie becomes a truth in someone else's head, like all those boys with their meaningless '*I love you*'s spoken to the girls. All our words have become so - so confused."

"I thought you believed in the doctrine of Mother? Isn't that just words?"

"Yes. But that doesn't seem to help with this, with just speech."

"Those words of Mother," he said carefully, "that are written down and brought to us in books, they are words, surely, just like the others, just like '*I love you*'? There's more than one way of reading them. Those bombers, for instance, seem to have understood the doctrine in a very different form from - well, from us. And yet they are the very same words."

Sarita shook her head. "That's passion. That's different. The bombers don't have any understanding of the doctrine of Mother. If they did have, they couldn't kill. They can only understand the words, not the passion. Mother is not bombs or death. She is love, she offers us life."

Several days later, in the shit and the squalor of a shanty town, Jeysh would remember these words. He trudged through half-formed alleys, mounds of rubbish, wild

dogs glaring out at him from dens of discarded junk, naked children running past, the rasping coughs of the dying echoing from behind thin walls, women hanging out still-dirty washing or scavenging for food scraps, sat gossiping on filthy shreds of tarpaulin as they watched their sick, large-eyed babies crawl in the muck. He was planning the ambush that Zia would lead, charting the unmapped stinking blur of rough wood and pig-iron, working it all into his head in ordered and precise lines, another part of the weapon. "Mother is not bombs or death. She is love, she offers us life," he would remember. Female babies discarded at the side of the road, the ravages of disease moulded over a beggar's face, the open sewers, standpipe empty of water, this hideous freedom to spawn, proliferate in shit and then die, another statistical blip, a number counted somewhere in the glass towers of the New City as they broadcast the doctrine of truth and peace, watching out over us like we are monkeys in a cage, a pornographic prostituted spectacle that they were somehow better than, that somehow allowed them to judge and dictate to the rest. People see it all around them, he would think, all the lies, the hatred, the contempt, and yet they place their faith in it, in this betrayer, call it Mother, invoke its love, its attention.

We see what we want to see, he thought, watching the children throw stones at a piebald dog. Flayed already by several cuts, it yelped where it was caught, bright red blood arcing quickly out. It stumbled in the grim stream of effluvia between two houses. The children laughed.

We see what we want to see. Draw an infinity of patterns from the same words. We are always divided, he thought, realizing with it Sarita's passion, her desperate need for Mother's words to contain meaning, to resonate out over all of human kind.

Is there any more we can hope for?

Possibly. If Sarita had never been lied to. If those words '*I love you*' could ever have the resonance of something which could not be doubted.

Is it impossible to recapture the purity of those words, he wondered as he lined up angles for sniper fire along the twisting lanes. He would find them perfect, the shanty town an ideal place for a massacre of the Hands of Mother raiding party. It would be his first concrete move in the complex game he played against Neela.

There must be some way, he thought, we can unchain ourselves from all of this and learn how to be free.

28.

Later that night, sitting in the kitchen watching Sarita sew, he had felt that he could give it all up, give in, live like everyone else in search of such perfect moments. Under strange shadows cast by the lamp he watched her odd concentration, the finesse of her quick darting stitches, her head bent and her brows slightly furrowed. The sounds from the courtyard - the puja bells, firecrackers, tinny music drifting out from shops - all seemed distant from him, as if they were the sounds from another world, as if Purana Shahar had been left behind and they would never need to come back.

He remembered Sarita's dream of just running away. Maybe we wouldn't even need to do that, he thought. We could just stay here and keep the rest of the world at

arm's length. She could sew, I could run a tea stall, snacks maybe, whatever. Fuck the rest of them, fuck the hopeless dreams of revolution and the stupid words of religion; we don't need any of it. Just us. Just this.

He spent the entire night in this dream-state, mulling over a thousand plans of escape, all the dizzying possibilities, the things they could do no matter what the ending. Make ourselves into poetry, beauty, rebellion, do whatever we want because in the end we're only going to die anyway, and what I said to Sarita is true: we have to live without fear.

When at last Sarita finished for the night they had gone to bed, Jeysh fired with the lust of having observed her unconscious grace, the precision and lyricism of her work, nimble fingers and black, black eyes, faraway in this other world which excluded him entirely. They made love recklessly, careless of the noise. They drew secret words over each other's skin, pleasure blossoming from each other's lips, from fingers, the delirious rush of blood through veins seeming to blur with the passing of people and traffic through the city's byways, the chatter of radios and telephones, televisions, chat rooms, words spat down wires, emotion translated into electrical impulse, the twitch of nerves, his whole body laid out, a map she could contort, manipulate, breathe fire and dreams over as she wished. The city teemed and multiplied about them; they bent to its will.

He loved her then, holding her and listening to her breath. All the things about her.

It couldn't last; he knew that, but suffered through its waning anyway. The daily world around him sank through the cracks in his skin: people gunned down in drinking dens and gambling houses, dancing women shot through the kneecaps and raped, lovers beaten, the tales of women having acid thrown in their faces. Gangs of youths roving the streets, looking for any excuses to attack anything. Police and army indifference. He argued with Zia, organised practice runs, studied plans of buildings, water supplies, electricity and data grids. He sent people to infiltrate utility and telecommunication companies, journeyed to slums and sat squatted by the road, talking to community leaders while drinking bad tea.

And Sarita cooked, and worked, spoke to friends in the marketplaces, listened to the radio at home. She prayed before her little shrine in the hall and left incense sticks for Jeysh to light when he came home at night. If she noticed him turning cold, like stone long after midnight, she did not give any sign.

29.

Neela had abandoned her New City clothes for a salwer kameez. She no longer turned heads; he hadn't noticed her, she had drifted up to him on a tide of the town's flotsam, just another young woman.

She joined her hands and bowed before him and the shock of recognition ran through him. "Namaste."

"Neela. Namaste." He returned her solemn bow. "I didn't recognise you."

“Sometimes it’s paid for me to stand out. But right now it doesn’t.” she gave a self-depreciating smile. “See, under the clothes I’m just an ordinary girl. You didn’t even give me a second glance.”

“I wasn’t expecting to have to look for you. You’re taking seriously what the Hands of Mother said, then?”

“What woman can afford not to?”

“I might even feel sorry for you, if you didn’t treat it all as a game.”

She looked at him. “And isn’t it, one way or another?” She nodded at a man who pulled at a laden cart, his wiry muscular body perspiring. “That’s real life. Is anything that you or I do ever going to change it? I don’t think there is, whatever we achieve.”

“Maybe that’s a proven fact in your world, but it remains unproven for us.”

She laughed. “Come. We should enter. This wasn’t an easy appointment to arrange and we shouldn’t keep the caretaker waiting.”

The ancient, colossal Minar had been closed to the public for generations, but suitable wealth or connections were considered ample grounds for entry. It reared in a huge stone stub above the southern districts of Purana Shahar, massive and unearthly, its higher reaches decorated by unsteady arcades, its decoration smoothed by time into a blur of sandstone ridges. Everything apart from the bare essential fact of its power, its brutal domineering size, had been pounded from it by the passage of years, by winter winds and monsoon rain and baking summer sun. The gatekeeper received Neela’s bribe gracefully enough, unlocked the gates and ushered them through. Jeysh heard the metal crash back shut after them, the turn of the key, and then he was caught by the eerie feeling of being alone with Neela, such a rare occurrence in this cramped and public city, a silence between them as they stared up at the strange alien tower, a dark staircase awaiting them, the honking and hooting of the crowded streets outside echoing all about them. Neela hugged herself and shivered. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. After you.”

He ascended, the stone stairs uneven, the smell of dust and must and age clinging around him, spiders’ webs brushing past, the walls rough to his fingertips. Odd grey light was let into the spiral stairwell by little windows, but often they ascended in darkness, the pat of palms and soles accompanying their laboured breath, feeling their way forward, a warm breeze spilling down from above, bringing with it the noises of the town, all the traffic and shouts and bells, the blare of music, as if they ascended from a sepulchral underworld towards a promise of joy. The balconies had been deemed unsafe, so they could only stop to stare before heading further up, toiling now, the peculiar tattoo of their feet, his and then hers, almost in unison. Eventually they reached the top, a roofed chamber supported by surprisingly delicate columns, a low balcony, the world sweeping away below them. They stood and looked across the sprawl of buildings, the smear of pollution, the unimaginable shifting tide of humanity clogging every street and alley. Kites reared and dived across each other’s lines, washing hung out upon flat roofs, the crude polygonal outlines of the cheap unfinished housing softened by the dismal lives that clung to them and covered them in a spray of colours. Neela stood, still regaining her breath, hands gripped on the worn sandstone balcony, gazing out seriously over the babbling riot, the infinity of rooftops, the ooze of wood smoke and engine pollution, her eyes glittering with a strange light.

They stood in silence. The colour, the noise, the squalid heaving of life, the shadow of the ancient god towards whom the Minar had reared, everything in their surroundings seemed to seep through their skins and infect them.

Neela, at last, nodded towards the distant New City needles. "Did you know there was another power failure?"

"I didn't."

"It wasn't as dramatic as the first, certainly. Not as *visible*. I don't imagine it could be seen from out here. But it was enough to get people worried. There's talk in the New City that maybe someone's slipped through the net."

"What? Do you mean they climbed the wall? Or is it that for all the background tests of people coming in, the psychometrics and the profiling and whatever, they think they have made a mistake?"

Neela stared at him seriously. "I think that *I* may have made a mistake."

"It would be a difficult one to admit without putting everything you're working for in jeopardy."

She nodded. "They're talking about expelling all of the migrants. Even the families that have been there for generations. Do you realise how damaging that could be? There's already a rising fear of aliens, foreigners. Now rumours are flying about that they're sabotaging our power supply. It just makes the idea of wiping out Purana Shahar that little bit more credible."

"What are you asking for - my sympathy?"

She smiled, so very unfamiliar in her salwar kameez. "I'm just telling you. It might affect you. It might affect both of us."

"I honestly have no communication with the New City."

"Nonetheless, the consequences of these actions may affect you."

He was angered. "I don't know why you don't just blow us all up anyway. That would sort the problem out, wouldn't it? What are you doing outside, out here, what are all these stupid games? All the pointless bother and effort when you can just destroy us and stop worrying?"

She shrugged, staring down at her hands. "That wouldn't really get rid of the demons, would it? And surely that, as much as anything, is what it's about? I don't think it's an answer. I wouldn't want to see Purana Shahar destroyed."

"But you're happy to keep it down by whatever means. Look at you: forced into local dress out of fear for one of the organisations you yourself sponsor. It's absurd."

"We both know that I don't count. It doesn't matter how much I have to compromise myself. Like you, all that matters is what I can do."

"At least I do it for others," he said. "Not for a wage, not for a career or for kicks, not for some damn monster. I do it because it has to be done."

She spread her hands. "You think I've done all this for myself?"

"Then why?"

"I've told you before. My reasons haven't changed. I want the best life for the greatest number of people."

"So why do you work to remove all choice, all the joys of life from us? What does that leave us with?"

"First and foremost, preserve as much life as you can. The rest will follow. Look at it through my eyes. Kill that woman, maybe," pointing to a figure on a rooftop, "to

save that household from destruction. Kill a household, maybe, to save a town. Kill a town..." she shrugged. "What would you have us do - let the world implode in an orgy of fear and paranoia, everyone killing everyone else in stupid uncontrolled warfare? And all for what - the upholding of the rights of one man? That's grotesque. I would think it a sin whether or not I believed in Mother. I just couldn't stand by and allow that to happen."

"And so you heroically bear the burden for those deaths that have to happen?"

She answered his mockery without rancour. "Why not? Don't you?"

"Only because you have made things so intolerable that I have no choice."

"Things are intolerable anyway. All these factions: you, the Hands of Mother, all the gurus and gods and doctrines and chosen ones, all the followers and worshippers and earnest young men, all intent on proving each other wrong. Where does it all end? How is anyone meant to live? I truly want peace."

"On your terms."

She pushed her hair away from her face and gave him a beautiful smile. He felt it cut through his chest. He was entranced by her gestures, her words, her lilting accent, the fierce conviction in her eyes. "On whom else's should it be? Yours? I mean, after all, the state you're trying to bomb us into would hardly be one created by the will of the people, would it? What gives you any more right than us? After all, at least we have the apparatus to create peace, unlike you, who can only be a nuisance, upsetting people and destroying things here and there."

"At least any peace we did achieve would be based on principles of justice and equality. At least people would have a say. That surely has to be better than the Mother mumbo-jumbo, with every decision passed down by all the corrupt and rich imposing their will upon the rest of the world."

"Would that really be freedom or the same slavery all over again, just with a chamber of randomly appointed idiots calling all the shots, and following whatever lunatic whims? At least the current system allows us to intelligently discuss the problems in the world without descending into factionalism. You should think more about what we do. We aren't doing things just for cheap political tricks. Yes, sometimes we kill people, and yes, we help maintain inequality. But it *works*, in a way your brand of politics never will. We follow compassionate rather than partisan policies; it's compassion on a monstrous scale, admittedly, but not just for one or two people or voters or what have you, this is for *everyone*. That surely is some kind of achievement."

"If it's an achievement, it's one based upon keeping the greater part of us in squalor, it's about lying to us and drugging our food, spying on us, playing these ridiculous games to try to make yourselves legitimate, assassinating us when we don't agree..." He looked away, too hot with anger.

"But," she said softly, "you would assassinate me for not agreeing with you, if you thought it would help your cause."

He shrugged. "Change isn't going to happen by itself. Killing to achieve it is an unfortunate but necessary paradox."

"Yet still you claim a moral high ground." She looked away from him, down over the madness and clutter, the inexpressible beauty of this place he so dearly loved. "I don't think you can claim to be much different from us. You will go to the same lengths, for the same aim. Don't you understand that even if you succeeded you would still just become us, nothing more and certainly nothing better? You would do the same things in the same

ways because - because *that is just the way things happen*. Better realise it now, rather than when it's all too late, and you've become what you thought you hated."

He stared at her, her slim frame hidden in the bulk of the salwer kameez. "No," he shook his head. "In the short term it may look that way, but in the long term the whole reason for our system, whole point of abandoning politics completely and just accepting random appointments, whoever they are and from whatever walk of life, is to destroy ideology and to get rid of the very thing you're talking about. You're wrong, you have to be, otherwise why live?"

She turned fully towards him, leaning back on to the lip of the sandstone, her arms spread outwards, hair caught by the wind and streaming out into empty sky, kameez pulled around her skinny body. Eyes blazing, urgent. "Then kill me. Go on. There's nothing to stop you. You can unstitch everything I've done, you can beat me. Just one push, it's all it takes."

She stood, defiant. His blood burned; want eating into every muscle, feeling himself lost in her skin, her hair, her pride. Hating her and desperately in love, a fury and an incomprehensible despair, as thick and tangled and endless as the milling confusion spread out all around him. He clenched his fists, feeling he would tear her apart, then he turned away, his shoulders shaking.

30.

She dropped her arms and walked carefully over to him, gently placed her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said. "I went too far."

Her touch blazed through his nerves. "Would you really have let yourself be killed?"

"Could I have stopped you?"

"I don't know."

"I think you do." She moved away to stare over Purana Shahar, the brown smudge of pollution dense enough now to hide the New City beyond. Her face was unreadable, her body relaxed. He joined her, staring along the length of the Minar back to the ground, the worn stone falling away from the sky and back into the tumult below. The game; life. They swam giddily above it.

"Everything is set up," he told her in a rather cold voice. "All I need is for you to put the raiding party in the right place. Zia will lead the attack; she'll get her publicity and you'll get the panic that you want. It should be it a great victory for her; at least she will have a few weeks to savour it in."

"If you don't deliver her to us afterwards, we'll come and get her anyway, and it won't be at a time of your convenience."

"I'm not going to back out."

Neela nodded. "There once was a time for women like her. For heroes. Maybe when this was built, or the Lal Qila. Now wars are fought by the likes of us. I've never even fired a gun. You?"

He shook his head. "I know how. Zia insisted I learn. But..."

"Those that wage war and those that die are no longer the same."

“Were they ever? Or is that something we just want to believe?”

“I don’t know,” she said quietly.

They stood watching out over the world.

“Have you been following the progress of your most recent recruit?”

He started. “Who?” then he remembered. She always had the advantage, could watch him time and again as he went about his business, could try to read his thoughts. “Ayla.”

She smiled a strange smile at him. “She’s worth paying close attention to.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll make sure that I do. Thanks for the advice.”

“Zia has taken a shine to her. She’ll be included in the raid, more or less certainly.”

“I would still rather she wasn’t.”

“And what would she be doing instead? Would you prefer her to be living a lie, like your wife, perhaps?”

“They both deserve better than the truths they would be faced with.”

“Maybe. But what does this say for your precious randomly appointed democracy? If there are truths people shouldn’t have to face up to...” She let the implication hang.

“What it says is that building such a thing will be hard to achieve, and when we have won it there will be no need for such lies to maintain it.”

“Very laudable.” he could detect no edge of sarcasm to her voice. She turned away from him. “Are you comfortable lying, the way that you do? You tell so many people so many different stories.”

“I keep in mind the reason why.”

“But are you anything beneath it anymore? Don’t you find it difficult not being able to reveal anything of yourself, especially to those who are closest to you? Don’t you think it’s tragic, that they should never really know you?”

“As what - a liar and a betrayer?” He laughed.

“Surely there are things that you would want to share? Things that you can’t?”

Not with them, he wanted to say. I don’t want them infected with whatever is in my head. He said nothing.

“None of my business, huh?” she said gently. “I can’t say I blame you. I was just curious. Unlike you, I’ve got almost no one to lie to. I tell the truth - mostly, at least. Funny, no?”

“Funny. Maybe we’re not as similar as you thought.”

“Maybe.” She let a long pause hang between them, during which he could hear her breathing over the urban white noise, could see her breasts rising and falling slightly beneath her kameez.

He said nothing and she eventually dropped her eyes. “Are you sure Zia can bring this off? It’s no good to us, as well as no good to you, if she falls at this first hurdle.”

“The location and timing have all been well enough picked. Zia’s good enough to sort the rest, and right now she’s hungry for glory. Just make sure the Hands of Mother group will be there.”

“Of course.” He watched her distant gaze, a glassy reflection of the sky playing across her eyes. “I read,” she said, “that often at monuments such as this, illicit lovers pay bribes to be let in after dark. Does it really happen, do you think?”

“Perhaps. There would be nowhere better, certainly.”

She nodded. “It is a moving place. It makes me wonder what it would have been like to be born in some other age, under the eyes of different gods. Maybe then...” she didn’t finish. She stood perfectly still for several moments, then turned towards him with deliberate grace, her head angled back to meet his gaze full on.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” he told her.

“It was my indulgence; my pleasure. I don’t imagine we’ll need to meet again until after Zia has been dealt with. Before then everything will just be numbers and places.” She shrugged impassively. “That’s what life is, after all.”

“Very well.”

She held out her hand. “Until then, you had best escort me back to the ground.”

Her hand, that mark of betrayal, that stain upon him. He closed his fingers about her skin.

31.

On the day it happened, he got up as usual, kissed the slumbering Sarita goodbye, lit an incense stick and stuck it at a jaunty angle before the hallway shrine. He left the flat just as the bloody light of dawn faded from the sky, a golden morning now hanging above. He stopped for tea as usual outside the Friday Gate, watching the traffic choke past as he exchanged observations with the chai wallah and the rickshaw drivers. After that he wandered through Purana Shahr, passing time with several logistical meetings, describing to utilities employees how to sabotage water supplies, sewage throughput and key electricity sub-stations. The traffic had been held up by several hoax bombs planted on the roadside just out of town, and as he passed through the streets he noted several burnt-out buildings; the consequence of another night’s vigilante action. He walked through the hubbub, shopkeepers investigating what was left of their holdings and shouting at each other, and followed the wind of streets down to the ghats. He ate a cheap lunch from a chaat stall, watching the swollen, filthy roll of the river, the flotsam borne by its current: plastic bags and bottles, dead dogs, shoes, driftwood, shimmering little candles sent out from the shore in prayer. It was curious feeling so idle, he thought, with so much about to happen.

He was slightly bored, worried. Everything was out of his control, was up to Zia, Neela, the Hands of Mother. He wondered if he had got everything right, if it would work, pan out the way it was supposed to. More pertinently, he wondered if he could trust Neela. If not, he thought, I probably won’t have long to live with that knowledge. But right now he presumed she needed him enough for him to be able to trust her.

She played a strange game, and he still didn’t know entirely what to make of her. He had lost his self-control, even his outward demeanour crumbling, a familiar stab of want paining him even to think of her. I’m a fool, he thought. I haven’t come this far just to wreck it all for - for what? The intimacy she promised was alluring. But would it prove to be any more tangible than his love for Sarita, this thing that somehow slithered away in the space between his images of her and the touching of her body? Most likely he would find it the same, slipping from him even in consummation. And anyway, another woman,

it isn't - it *shouldn't* - be everything, it shouldn't drive these carefully laid plans from his head. He found it interesting trying to weigh up what he would be willing to sacrifice for her, and what he wouldn't, were she to ask. It was undoubtedly part of her game. *Their* game.

He let the sun swing in a long, slow arc over the ghat. Shadows crept out and lengthened hungrily. The regular harsh slaps of the dhobi wallahs pummelling clothes diminished as one by one they collected their bundles and retreated back up the long line of steps. Great patterned squares of rugs and cheaply-dyed sari material were gathered up; the sadhus put down their parasols and stared with dark eyes at the dark river waters. Bells, gongs and chimes began to call the faithful towards evening prayers. Little boats slipped across the mass of water to find moorings for the night.

Soon, he thought, soon. Anticipation and frustration held him in equal balance. He thought back to the agreement he had made long ago, and wondered if it mattered so much now, wondered whether Sarita or Neela should be more important to him than this strange mass of people, than the comings and goings, the falling in love and the hate and the fervent beliefs that would happen anyway, with or without Mother. Maybe he had got it all wrong.

But if we have no ambition to change...

Ah, all the things people had endured, given the promise of eternity beyond death and left to rot in life. It shouldn't be enough; things must be made better here, now. Such madness, that it should come to this. He briefly closed his eyes and wished that maybe he could just forget.

No, too late anyway. He felt everything around him already set on course, with nothing he could do to stop it: the passage of water, the mutter of voices, the conversations passing through wires, broadcast frequencies penetrating his body, the temple gongs chiming through to heaven. What had been done could not be brought back. He opened his eyes on to the grimy present, the foam at the water's edge, the cracked and crumbled steps, stained concrete buildings on both sides of the river collapsing in crazy jumbled terraces to the steep ghats, the reality around him so much more than anything he could hold in his mind, more than anything he could fathom. I've done what I could, he thought. I've tried. I have wet my hands in the blood of others, and now we will see what comes of it.

As the sun sank towards the cluttered skyline he decided to make his way home. I wonder, he thought as he started up the steps, how much of this place is the way it is because of Mother and the actions of the New City, and how much is despite them. Would I, as Neela has claimed, destroy an essential part of Purana Shahar by destroying its oppressors, and thereby transform myself into my own nemesis. Maybe not, he thought, because we're such driven creatures that it would be impossible to destroy the essential spirit of Purana Shahar, which is only ourselves. He watched the milling confusion of people heading home from work, queuing to enter temples or pressing through the traffic, the songs of beggars and the cries of hawkers, the tinny blare of music, the chatter on the radio. So driven that it was scarcely believable, everything rooted in and invested in the future.

He stopped for an evening cup of tea, the sun swollen and seeming to hang almost before him. The chai wallah had heard about a rumoured transport collapse in the New City and wanted to know Jeys's opinion. Jeys shrugged, genuinely surprised by the

news. It could, he thought, be Anil at work, but there again it could be chance. “Who’s to know even if it’s true?” he said out loud. “They never tell us anything, so is it a wonder that rumours fly around? Especially after the power failure.”

“No smoke without fire,” sniffed the chai wallah. “You hear so much. They can’t seem to run anything anymore, not like it used to be. Lax moral standards. Those Hands of Mother people have got a point. What we need is discipline, vigorous morals, clear thinking. Somebody’s got to get a hold on this.”

Jeysh nodded, interested that the Hands of Mother were beginning to find their appeal. He drank his tea and made his way home.

Sarita was eating, listening to the news bulletin on the radio. He contained his tension, making a pot of tea for them both and serving himself some food. It should be starting just about now, he thought to himself. He asked Sarita about her day and listened to the ins and outs of the day’s news, wondering as he slowly ate and drank.

Confused reports of gunfire and possible gang conflict in one of the shanty towns made the bulletins about fifteen minutes later. So, he thought, it’s actually started. His back crawled in anticipation, waiting for the scale of it to become apparent, for the reporting to drown out all the rest of news. As the fighting grew more intense, with the Hands of Mother no doubt putting up stiff resistance, this inevitably happened. The radio channel had a reporter near the scene, the rattle of arms fire punctuating her breathless descriptions, a staccato throb of helicopter blades overhead, shouts, answering fire. She stuck with the initial line that it was probably gang warfare, and as it turned out that would be the accepted opinion for the next few hours, at least until the statement Zia had prepared beforehand was broadcast.

When he later saw camera footage taken from a helicopter, Jeysh had been aesthetically pleased with his tactical decisions; long flickering lines of tracer bullets stabbed through the darkness, flares and stun grenades threw sudden vivid flashes of light among the disorder of the shanty town. Shadowed figures hastened through narrow streets and fierce bright battles were fought at close quarters. At first, hearing it on the radio, listening to confused reporting and wild speculation, gunfire and explosions ripping back and forth through the shanty town, he had felt genuinely sick, partly through the grotesque nature of what he had organised, but more worried still that Zia may not pull it off. He hated the feeling of not having control, and part of him wished to be there, to fight it out and organise it all from the ground. However, as soon as it became apparent that one group had been pinned back, pushed through the maze of unnamed streets to the high wall that separated the shanty town from a line of warehouses, just in the pattern that Jeysh had planned, he knew it was more or less all over: Zia had won. The last members of the Hands of Mother raiding party were dispatched silently, brutally, hidden from the glare of the cameras.

Jeysh and Sarita had, for the most part, listened in silence, Jeysh at one point fussing over the washing up to hide his worry. Speculation mounted on the radio about the precise cause of the battle: drug feuds, political or religious divisions, corruption. It was interesting how a broad picture of something like the truth emerged over a little more than a few hours. There were, however, important omissions. In the statement Zia had broadcast, she had carefully enunciated the organisation’s political aims, but these were completely left out of the radio and television reportage, leaving the audience with just

the thrill and pointless terror of the violence, an idea of murky yet dramatic dissent between dissident and thuggish factions.

Despite that, Jeysh thought, it has been a success. He allowed the warm glow of satisfaction to pass through him.

The next evening he met up with Zia and together they drove out to the city wall. To Jeysh's surprise, she brought up the subject of the destroyed city. For long moments he thought that somehow she had discovered his real plan, and was going to kill him. He felt sweat slick his palms as he wondered what, if anything, he could do to protect himself. Here, like this, I'm utterly powerless, he realised. It was an unpleasant sensation, and he struggled in its grip to make sense of her words. "After that, "she was saying, "it was claimed there would never be another rebellion, certainly not a serious one. And we've proved them wrong. We've shown that they're losing their grip, that not only can their control structures be unravelled, but that they *are* being unravelled. If there really is a galactic empire out there under the godhead of Mother, then maybe the whole damn thing is falling to pieces, like all empires eventually do. Maybe they won't stop us because they *can't*. We can take our chance now, we can strike not only at the Hands of Mother but at the whole fucking edifice: the military bases, the centres of administration, the temples, all the symbols of their oppression. With popular support behind us, when the people realise that we can actually win..."

He shook his head. "Is any uprising truly popular? It's a significant minority at best. Most people, unless they are forced or have nothing to lose, tend to settle for the status quo. It's easier. If you're counting on the people to spontaneously rise up and support us, you're not going to get anywhere at all."

"You're wrong. When they realise that they can make a difference, that things can be changed and they can be free, that we can beat not only the Hands of Mother but Mother Herself..."

"That strikes me as far too optimistic. Some people will support us, to be sure, but most probably won't. If you count on people's support, nothing you want is going to come to pass."

She stared at him in exasperation. He watched her powerful body tense, ready to let fly at him. "You enjoy making problems. I sometimes wonder about you - about your commitment, your beliefs. Sometimes I feel you don't belong in the organisation at all."

He shrugged. "I often don't agree with you, that's all. I thought democratic debate was one of the things we stood for."

She didn't answer.

In the evening after the attack had happened, Sarita had been subdued. That could just be due to work, or more probably me, Jeysh thought. But whatever, she lay wide awake long after Jeysh had come to bed.

She had left the bedroom radio burbling softly to itself, the fresh horror of more details continually emerging. Most of the eyewitnesses had been illiterate shanty town dwellers, the despised scum of Purana Shahar, and their accounts were confused, shot through with shock and religious fear, each seeming to wildly conflict with the one before. Then the professional radio pundits weighed in with lurid accounts of gunfights they hadn't seen, gleeful predictions of the breakdown of law and order, rabid speculations about the political nature of the groups involved, wilfully twisting every fact

to their own bizarre agendas. Reporters indulged in the vicarious, vacuous thrill of hunting down and confronting the relatives of dead. It was inane, relentless, endless.

It's working, he thought. It's been swallowed just the way I could have hoped for. He should have felt triumph surging through him. This, after all, was the first piece of the jigsaw falling neatly into place, something he had staked everything on and he had won. But the sick truth of it, he thought, under all the purple media prose, the hysterics and propaganda, is nothing more than death. The one cruel fact that propelled his scheme onwards, the one thing that mattered.

Let's hope, he thought, that whatever comes is worth it. I can't stop now, can't stop only with death and nothing changed. It has to work, has to, using whatever method it is going to take, otherwise each and every life lost is worthless.

He couldn't accept that.

Sarita turned abruptly towards him. "You're awake?" she hissed.

"I am."

She sighed, and he felt her arm snaking round him. "All this. The people on the radio sound like they're enjoying it."

"They probably are. It's their job; their chance to shine."

"They seem to like the cruelty of it."

"It probably confirms what they think. Their own nasty little world."

"And you?"

"If you have several different but immovable views all clashing over the same thing, well... Something has to give way. And if people can't do it with words..."

"So you think will always happen?"

"I can't really see a time when it won't. Whoever's in charge, someone will disagree."

"That's what I hate. You know, some of those people on the radio, the eyewitnesses, they were so afraid that they couldn't speak. And all for what? They're suffering because of someone else's ideas."

"You remember the bomb, the one the Hands of Mother planted? Well, what if they aren't stopped? They just carry on blowing more people up. Who would you rather was dead?"

Sarita sat up, legs drawn up, palms of hands pressed to her cheeks. "It shouldn't come to killing anyone. Because then what happens next? If we kill back, then they act the same again, then anybody involved or who has a relative or a husband or anything involved has to kill back again, and then it never ends, never."

"So we do what? Let whatever injustices we see just pass us by?"

She shook her head. "Only life, death, Mother, only they are absolute. With everything else we have to make compromise. I don't understand how people can't see this. We're surrounded by it every day, and yet suddenly it's like we can't understand something so simple anymore. We want to pretend we can have everything our own way. What's happening to us?"

It was a question to which he had no answer. He watched her, hunched over, her flesh glistening in the luminous darkness, the black holes of her eyes filled with despair.

"When we were on the boat, everything seemed so perfect that I thought that anything, no matter what, could be worked through. And now, I don't know, it seems that nothing can."

She stared out, into a darkness he saw, he knew.

32.

Jeysh heeded Neela's advice and, as soon as he could, went to see Ayla. Zia, in her discussions with him following the attack, had been particularly effusive about her. "She doesn't feel fear," Zia had told him. "During the fighting we got separated from the rest, and there were just the two of us, pinned down at the side of a building, with people shooting at us from both directions. We had taken shelter behind some cart or other, the type they use for transporting fruit or whatever, no real shelter, and the bullets were ripping it to pieces. I honestly thought we were done for, and I remember cursing my stupid foolishness for wanting to get involved. Suddenly it made no sense, and I was going to die like a coward hiding behind this flimsy cart. I just couldn't see a way out; there wasn't a way of not being killed. But Ayla just stood up, right into the hail of bullets with no more look about her than it was rain, she took aim and shot one dead. Then she did the same with another, no fear about her, nothing at all, like she didn't see the bullets or she simply didn't care." Zia had shaken her head in genuine bewilderment. "She is either very brave, or insane. I keep changing my mind as to which."

Since being recruited into the organisation's armed brigade, Ayla had been taken from her job and her old dormitory. She was now housed along with many other female activists, with her food, clothing and board paid for by the same half-legitimate women's charity that had initially taken her in. Her new dormitory was registered as a women's religious retreat, and was in an ugly compound situated at the far southern edge of Purana Shahar, close to the rubbish heaps and shattered ancient villas, huge factories ripping the skies with smoke. Jeysh took a rickshaw most of the way there, then walked the last portion through unfamiliar streets, the roadside lined with billboards, the messy cluster of shops and kiosks like the flotsam left behind after a flood.

On approaching the security guard with the correct two sentences he was allowed into the compound, and he waited for Ayla in the dusty courtyard, watching women spin and dye cloth under the pitiless sun. It could be any religious mission, he thought, anywhere.

He recognised the figure of Ayla crossing the courtyard towards him, her bright clothes almost lost amidst the activity of the courtyard, her sari pallu characteristically pulled over her head. She carried a tray of food, and bent her head in a shy namaste before sitting next to him and holding out a metal plate.

"Please eat."

"Thank you."

"After what you said last time, food has become important to me. All this, it is all natural ingredients, used without pesticides and grown in violation of the gene patents. To think once I never knew of such things, and now..."

"You appear to have grown well on the results."

"It is so much better than the dormitory was. Here we're left alone, treated with respect even." She shrugged, looking slightly guilty. "I never expected such things, but

everything has changed for me. I can't ever repay that enough. I always remember that you gave me a chance, and I'm determined to repay your faith in me."

He took some of the food. It was good. "It seems you've done more than that already. Zia told me about your actions during the ambush."

Ayla shifted awkwardly, not looking at him. "It had to be done," she said simply. "I couldn't allow Zia to die, not when there was some hope that, if I forgot about myself, then I could save her. She's like - like a *mother*." Ayla paused to let her heresy sink in. "She inspires people; she can change the world."

Jeysh felt his treachery like something rotting under his skin. "But nevertheless, what you yourself did could be counted as extraordinary. It's filled everyone with, I don't know, with a sort of hope, like the impossible can happen. Like we can win."

"I was afraid," she said flatly. "Whatever people may say about me, it was still like that. I was terrified; I didn't know what the right thing to do was or what was going to happen. As we went into the ambush, I was so afraid that I almost couldn't walk. It was so confusing; we had all these plans, we had been told what to do and yet when it starts everything seemed to be noise and flashes of light, smoke, people screaming and running about, gunfire everywhere. I didn't know what to do. Zia kept shouting at me and I just moved like a machine, not sure what I was doing or why. I hadn't fired a shot, I couldn't make out anything, and there were wounded people screaming and vomiting, then the helicopter, and grenades..." she paused, eating a handful of daal. "But this probably sounds, I don't know, so naive. Why I'm saying it, why I think it's special only to me, I don't know."

"It is special, every time for everyone. Carry on, and don't worry about me."

"Well, if you wish. You can't have come all this way just for this."

"I came to see how you were. This is part of it. Please, continue."

She ate more daal, gazing thoughtfully across the courtyard. "You know, when you told me about the ice cream, I felt rage like I hadn't known before. That people could do this, no? It was the same sort of thing when we were trapped. I remember thinking about the ice cream in particular, and then all the other things that we had been taught, that Zia had said, it all suddenly came bursting through me in this rage. Not like I wasn't afraid, but like I had to do something." She gave another shrug, watching the other women work. "You know, things my father did to me, did to my mother and sisters, that felt to me like - like a whole world of pain, like there was no end to it and no escape and no way of fighting it. And then sometimes I think of everything happening everywhere, and not like my father who was just a fool and stupidly violent, but elsewhere people acting in a way that is worse, that is deliberate and calculated to cause harm, and then whatever I can do, whatever, it will only ever be enough if I can stop that..." She drew a deep and shivering breath. "I'm not making sense." She laughed painfully. "I wasn't brave. Zia - I don't know, maybe there was an unexpected turning but we found ourselves caught on two sides, hiding behind something - I don't remember - and by the side of this shack. People were shooting at us and hitting the side of the shack, with bits of wood and other stuff falling down on top of us. From inside the shack I heard screams, and I couldn't bear it, these people who had done nothing, everything they have wrecked in this - this nightmare that might as well have fallen from heaven. It made me realise that I was nothing, a tiny drop, something that would not be missed. I was nothing, tiny." She stared at her hand wonderingly. "Every second of my fear was destroying them, and all for

what, my life?" She shook her head. "Everything came together, all my anger and terror, the people screaming and injured, Zia next to me - this woman who had opened a new world for me - and it all became clear, like everything made sense and then I just did what I had to do." She shrugged again, dismissively. "I just did what I had to do."

He pictured her as she had been, back when she was stocking shelves and paying Jutta for her ice cream. From that to this, he thought. Listening to the screams of the injured and the bark of gunfire, sheltering from bullets that chewed into the walls behind her. Risking her life for a principle. It was not a transformation he would wish on anybody.

"I don't think, really, that anybody can be asked to sacrifice themselves. You can choose to, and it's your choice alone, but if we demand it then what are we?"

Ayla looked down at her fingers. "It's always been my choice. You can choose to accept things the way they are, or you can choose to change it. You know, I think back to what I was and it makes me angry. We were treated so badly. My father, he used to work in one of those factories, textiles, and he worked until he was bent up, twisted, he had ruined himself. Then, you know, he lost a hand in the machinery, lost his job..." she trailed off, shuddered with wordless thoughts. He looked away from this still greater intimacy that she offered. "It all seems so stupid. For what it did to us, his family. I don't understand it."

"I don't think I would want to, certainly in any way that could justify it."

"Perhaps you're right. Understanding can sometimes be a weakness, no?"

"It can disable you."

She nodded, finishing her daal. "That's what I sometimes think. But I've said too much, and now I have to get back to work. You'll think me stupid for having talked so."

"No. Not at all. You think about things in ways that maybe I haven't. That maybe even Zia hasn't."

She shook her head. "Zia opened my eyes. She showed me everything that now makes my world. I would give every drop of blood for her."

"Then she's lucky. Very lucky."

"There isn't luck," she said baldly, all the weight of her life seeming to settle on her. "There isn't any such thing."

They bowed to each other formally, and then exchanged parting words, he hoped with honesty. He placed his half-eaten tray of food upon her empty one, watched her take both and then walked away.

He sat awhile in the courtyard, watching a group of women spin thread as they chattered and sang. These women who had been crushed into nothing; the betrayed and the ruined. You could well be the ones, he thought, who will change the whole world about you. Why has Neela led me on to this? What is it she sees that I can't?

Uneasy, but aware he had little choice other than to play her game, he left the compound and headed for home.

Retaliation by the Hands of Mother was swift, deadly, and wrong. They hit a charity for homeless women, plainly having got some sort of tip-off about how the organisation recruited. The charity they bombed, however, was genuine, run by merchants' wives and other individuals who wanted to see a little of the profit they had creamed off given back to those who needed it.

Jeysh wondered if Neela had been involved. The target was so close that he thought it probable. If this was a deliberate act on her precise information, it would be horrific. He clung on to the distant hope that maybe the Hands of Mother had misinterpreted a hint Neela had given them. If not, he thought, and it's most likely not, well then, it's an act of astonishing cruelty, and I would do well to be very, very afraid of her. And I have to presume it was deliberate; I can't afford to do otherwise. The thought filled him with a sort of numbed devastation. I thought, he said to himself, that she was decent. On the wrong side, that's all.

He may have made an appalling misjudgement.

The damage had even managed to silence some of the media pundits, at least for a little while, before the usual self-righteous drone about morality, sin and fallen women began to fill the airwaves, making it sound like the homeless women and their benefactors had somehow brought this upon themselves. The bomb had been timed for just after seven in the morning, when most of the charity's administrators and volunteers had arrived for work, and the homeless in the hostel were eating breakfast. It had been a powerful device, ripping through the guts of the cheap tenement building and leaving little more than an ugly toothless facade, most of the building having fallen in on itself. Nine of the charity's employees and 61 homeless women died. The charity had always been noted for scouring Purana Shahar for those suffering most: the terminally ill, lepers, TB sufferers, the mad and the chronically disabled, making the nature of the deaths all the more strange and shocking.

He had cut short work and taken Sarita out to dinner. Over the preceding weeks he had noticed her mood becoming more distracted and unhappy. She slept late, prayed more and talked little. He had planned the meal as an attempt to cheer her up; the bomb that morning had put paid to any such ideas, but they mechanically carried through with the evening anyway. There was nothing else to do. They ate on a roof terrace crammed in among the other buildings of the bazaar district, a golden sky fading with the sunset, insects boiling about the arc-lights and butting into the little TV under the restaurant awning. Sarita stared fixedly at the pictures on the screen; the ruined tenement, a sprawl of dead bodies, the horde of stunned yet voracious onlookers ringing the scene.

Body after body was taken to waiting ambulances. Missing limbs, only half a head with the brains slopping out, the injured waving bloody stumps in agony, bones pushed through skin, horrific burns bubbling across bodies. Relatives of the deceased covered their faces and wailed, almost oblivious to the cameras that circled like vultures. The statement by the Hands of Mother that had accompanied the act was childlike, almost imbecilic: "this, and any other so-called charity implicated in the war against us shall be shut down. The will of Mother must be respected, and sin against her doctrine cannot be tolerated." As if, he thought, this had been nothing but a political act. As if Ayla had not heard the screaming of the shanty town dwellers during her firefight.

"It's only going to get worse," Sarita said. "It's not going to end. Not until we're all mixed up in it."

He suspected she was right.

Earlier in the day, Zia had acted recklessly by coming to meet him while he stood in a crowded market, talking to a supplier. She looked characteristically urgent, and people fell away before her. He met her uneasily.

“I wish you would use a mobile phone,” she told him irritably.

He assumed a mild expression and looked round pointedly, nodding at the various masts that reared their brutal heads above the market. “And have everyone know where I am all of the time? Not to mention know everything that I say. It’s bad enough that, even without one, you can still find out where I am.”

“You need to be more available, not less.”

If it’s her this time, he thought, well then, who next? His skin crawled. He rubbed his face, trying to halt his thoughts as he nodded a polite goodbye to the supplier. He let Zia lead him into a grubby back alley. She bought two bottles of soft drink and together they sat on the filth-blackened step of the vendor. Further down the street, a group of boys cat-called any woman walking past, and from somewhere kitchen-hands yelled at each other, thick smoke billowing out into the narrow space between buildings.

“This stuff will turn your brain into mush,” he said, gesturing at the cloudy liquid within the bottle. “If it isn’t already, meeting me like that.”

Zia shrugged, her eyes ablaze. She took several gulps of the liquid. “The time for creeping around is over. Your ideas have lost whatever momentum they had. The time for *your* sort of fight is over.”

“We have an agreement.”

She made an impatient gesture with her hands. “I don’t think that means anything anymore. Everything has changed, and I can’t let you hold me back from what I know I *must* do, morally, for the good of everyone. I can’t let the innocent carry on dying like this.”

“Zia, I don’t care how cold this sounds, but you have to remember that this is just a sideshow. We can’t afford to get dragged in too far. I’ll help you get one back on them, but I can’t give you everything. You agreed, remember?”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” She was urgent, talking in a low fierce voice.

“This is the start of the end. This is everything tipping over into total fucking disorder. We have to strike now; we have to take on all of them. People will follow whoever seems strongest. With the New City falling apart as well...”

He looked at her sharply. “Who told you that?”

“They did. Their fucking firewall came down yesterday, and we could see what their media were up to. Infrastructure meltdowns, random shootings, anthrax sent through the mail. If you want proof of it, then I’ve got proof, but for now just believe me. We have to strike, and we need all of our resources if we’re going to pull it off. I’m not asking you, I’m telling you. If we hit a military base and then the Hands of Mother, quickly and in succession, they won’t be in any position to respond for days, by which time we could have total control of Purana Shahar. Right now the New City army,” she hissed at him, “the fucking army, are manning the fire systems because there’s a strike among fire systems personnel. That shows you where we are, why we have to act *now*.”

He wondered briefly if she was drunk. But no, he thought, she’s just acute enough to realise that maybe the one opportunity we’ll get is nearly at hand. And she thinks that

she can do it her way, a good old-fashioned attempt at a revolution, just like the one that had led to the destruction of the Dead City.

Maybe, he thought, Zia really is the best of us, like Ayla believes. And maybe with Zia gone the whole organisation will crumble and fall, and end the hope of us all.

It would end the foolish dreams we have been fed, he had told himself coldly, watching her taut, supple body perched on this filthy step. Which was all her revolution would ever be?

He shook himself out of his reverie. The insects boiled about the lights in insensate fury, battering the glass in a thick rage of wings and bodies. From below them they could hear the sounds of the streets, the shouting and chatter, bartering and cat-calls. On the television the line of the dead continued to file out from the ruins, followed by the hard cold eyes of the cameras, the weary haggard faces of those still sifting through the rubble; a remote scene on a tiny box under the terrace's awning.

Jeysh sipped his tea and watched.

Sarita eventually broke their silence. When she spoke, he was surprised by the heretical nature of her words.

"Sometimes it doesn't seem to me that we deserve to be saved. Sometimes I wonder if Mother's passion for us isn't a mistake."

He looked at her carefully. "Everybody has got to have hope of something."

"I don't know." she stared over at the television, the upturned faces of bodies under sheets, eyes staring blindly at the sky. "We all seem to have different ideas of what it should mean, and too many people seem ready to do whatever, kill, cheat, I don't know, just for their own idea. Sometimes I think we'd all be better off dead. I don't know what it means anymore."

"People fighting for what they think is right, surely?"

"Right. Wrong. What about all the children? Do they ask for this? It hardly seems fair that they're put through this."

"But surely if you think Mother-puja is right, you should fight for it against whatever?"

"There's always fighting. When will it ever stop?"

She seemed frail, borne down by the huge weight of the night sky above her. She looked tired, upset. He reached out his hand to grasp her own. "Sarita, patni, what's wrong? It can't just be all these bombs."

She didn't answer him directly; rather, she sat holding his hand, her fingers playing over his knuckles. "I used to think that human beings were good creatures, deep down, and that somehow, by the will of Mother, a sort of goodness would just spread out and take hold of everyone. But it seems to be the opposite, and that all we can do is just spread our evil and hatred to one another. It seems that what is bad in us is stronger than what is good."

"Maybe not all people."

"But it doesn't take many people to plant a bomb. And so it goes on, sucking more and more of us in all of the time, all of us thinking how good we are, and how decent, and how everything would be fine without the other people, and hating them, and them doing the same to us. It - it won't ever end." she seemed to run out of words quite abruptly and then stared at him in mute appeal.

Maybe it can, he thought, maybe it will. But first it had to get much, much worse. It was, he felt, the only way.

His attempts to comfort Sarita were genuine, but ineffectual.

34.

Events escalated far more quickly than Jeysh had envisaged. Two days later there was another bomb, much larger and, by his own estimation, far more sophisticated. It happened late in the evening, as Jeysh had been standing at the tea stall staring out over the light of the New City. Although it was several miles away, he had heard the blast rolling out angrily across the sky. Everyone had looked up in confusion, wondering what had happened, and Jeysh had hidden his panic, meandering through a lazy round of speculation before he could knock back his tea and leave.

This time, the Hands of Mother had better intelligence, or had realised their previous mistake. They had hit the southern compound.

They plainly didn't care about how this act would look, and something in him admired the cold ruthlessness with which they had pursued vengeance. It was an ugly, ugly scene: body parts and debris, strange little trinkets, personal effects, clothes, shoes, shards of furniture scattered in the street around, shattered strips of building still standing upright, a stairwell reaching up into nothing. Rubble, an intolerable sown field of the stuff, glass shining in jewel-strewn paths, the noxious dust of vaporised skin and stone, wet rivers of blood slipping out from recovered bodies. He could do nothing, remembering Sarita's agony of being only able to watch, feeling the need to somehow heal this as rings of police and soldiers kept the crowds back. He felt within himself a blind rage, a sense of personal violation, the incredible cruelty of this force visited upon the compound, the extent of the carnage mocking him, daring him to break down, to renounce the path he had chosen for himself, turn coward and run from this scene for which he was, in many ways, responsible. And yet another part of him wanted to sate this rage, wanted to kill and kill and kill to numb the appalling burden, the awful weight upon him of all these young women's lives. For a long time he looked but could not see, the blood rage completely consuming him. Then he remembered Ayla and a new, cold fury overtook him, a hatred and a self-hatred so complete, so bottomless he thought he would never find a way out of them. She could be anywhere, he thought. One of the soft mangled bodies, lumps of blood and bone scooped up by the emergency teams and let fall in a profane pile for someone else to cover. Or maybe even less, the bloodied little chunks he had encountered over the previous streets, or a whole body crushed under tons of concrete. He didn't know, couldn't know anything, milling amidst this strange crowd, more isolated than any time, feeling it was his burden, and his burden alone. Action boiled without much sense, they started bringing out women alive, streaked with blood, torn clothes, hair burnt away, either screaming repeatedly or dazedly silent with shock, unrecognisable, hobbled and destroyed like little old men. Even had one of them been Ayla he would have found it impossible to tell. He watched, waited as if for some revelation, as if something would have to come and make it right. Nothing did. The number of women pulled out alive dwindled swiftly, just a procession of lifeless bodies

being shuttled past in the flickering storm of blue sirens, camera supernovae, television lights, powerful search beams falling down from a hovering helicopter, like the judgment of Mother staring down into the smoking hole.

The night filled him, the bitter smoke and violence, the crude unflinching and unthinking finality of the act, a base cruelty so shocking that he found himself reaching for justifications to make sense of it, to contextualise it and so reduce its awful reality. Sarita's right, he thought, we damn well don't deserve to live. Not any of us left alive through all this. Enough. I will finish it, if only to strip away all the pretensions, all the lies and the empty trash words, the craven desires, the love of power, the fantasies of freedom or justice. It's all just layers of shit about the bare, bony fist of death, obsessing and consuming us from first until last.

35.

Ayla had survived. She made her way to one of the recognised meeting points, where Jeysh soon got word.

Several members of the organisation were present. They had been desperate and panicked before, one told Jeysh, but the miraculous survival of Ayla had given them a little hope. "She's twice blessed. First she saves Zia, and now she walks unscathed from this. It's a sign, I tell you, she's been ordained. With this girl, and with Zia...Maybe, just maybe, we can survive this." they were, he thought, clutching at straws, and their faces showed as much.

They were in the basement of a small machinist's shop. While the others huddled around a little table, Ayla had requested to be left alone, and she sat in a little alcove, surrounded by broken parts. Jeysh walked across to join her, looking at her, her startling reality, tangled hair and bloodshot eyes, remains of make-up ruined by tears and streaks of dust, dirt across her hands and clothes. He wanted to touch her, make sure she was warm and true.

"I thought you must have died. I looked for you late last night, after I heard about the bomb. There was nothing."

"I had been out buying food. I always go late; it's the cheapest time. And today it was my turn to cook." She shook her head. "I heard the blast. I was only several streets down from it and some of the windows broke. Some people were screaming and a woman was covered in blood. I helped her before - before returning home." She stopped and swallowed. "I didn't realise. I didn't think it would ever happen. All the rest of my cell, my *sisters*, they were all inside. The - the charity girls too. I don't know if any of them survived, and even if they did, well, the military..."

He nodded.

"I - I saw what had happened and then I left. That's what we were taught, to leave, even with women still screaming for help. It could have been me there, screaming, and someone else walking away. Any other day of the week and it would have been. Why did it happen when it did? Why?"

"You can't ask yourself that. You'll go mad asking. One of you would have survived; there's no more reason or pattern to it than that."

She shook her head. "I loved them. After so long without anybody to love." She rubbed one side of her face, and he realised she was crying. One, two tears caught in her lashes; nothing more. "I just want to pay this back."

That much, he thought, is almost certain. He listened to her with pity, but also with a numb fascination at the depths of her emotion, the vengeance he felt in her rising like a cold flood.

He wondered how much the timing of the bomb had been a coincidence. He remembered Neela's advice to watch Ayla, and was troubled by the possibility that Ayla's escape may not have been down to chance. His stomach churned at the idea. He still found it difficult to think of Neela as so callous, so unflinchingly committed. Like she said to me, he thought, we have much in common, *this* more than almost anybody.

This wasn't a game anymore. He felt sick, but the image of Neela, the allure of her intimacy, filled him with as much longing as repulsion. After all, he thought, who else can I turn to? Who else could possibly understand?

36.

It became unsafe to leave. Riots had broken out, reports of looting and lynching and gunfire, premises trashed and set on fire, anyone who looked wrong was attacked. The usual targets, he thought, the weak and the old and the defenceless, the ethnically different, women, non-conformists. Anything this fury, this fear could latch itself on to. He hoped Sarita was inside rather than out collecting work. He wondered at her, would she be listening on the radio, thinking where he was and if he had got involved? The gulf between them, the impossibility of their marriage, pained him as he let himself think.

Despite Ayla's miraculous escape, it was hard for the little knot of people to avoid falling back into abject horror. Somehow, they didn't seem to think it would ever come to this, and now they were in shock, their security violated and the real world leaking in. That's right, he told them silently, death isn't just something that happens to the other side, or a long way off in news reports. It waits at every corner, walks at your shoulder, watches over you. The only way on now is through hate, or madness.

Overhead, outside, the riot continued. If they burst in here, Jeysh thought, we're probably dead. A group of scared, bedraggled men and women, our world turned upside down. Maybe we need another miracle from Ayla.

But then maybe, like most people, we'll live on anyway, however horrific the scenes outside.

Ayla offered nothing, sitting in her alcove, seeming to grow huge in the darkness.

The destruction of the compound had been a severe blow to the organisation. Very few of the women, save for Ayla, had been outside the compound at the time of the blast. While many of the organisation's members worked in little cells spread throughout Purana Shahar, the compound, along with its two other sisters, had provided the militia that Zia would need for any serious strike against the New City's power. If this is down to Neela, Jeysh thought, she's pushing Zia in exactly the right direction. While reducing Zia's strength, the provocation would be sure to make Zia strike back recklessly,

throwing all the troops she had into her plan for revolution before the Hands of Mother could deplete her forces yet further.

Neela's giving me the opportunity I need, he thought. If, *if*, she's the one responsible. He had to find out before he did anything. Had to confront her. Because if it was true... He shuddered.

If we get out of here, he thought. They waited in the cellar, gagging on the musty smell, listening to rats skitter across flagstones, the drip-drip of whispered conversation, dreading any noise from above.

And then, when the noise came, it was as if Ayla had somehow performed another miracle. They look up to the sound of feet rushing down the stairs, a figure throwing back its hood, and rather than the sight of death, what they saw was Zia.

Jeysh had not counted on her impetuous bravery. He heard later that she had travelled through the carnage of the riots to visit every single meeting point, gathering all the strays and the afraid and the broken to her, speaking to them with urgent conviction, galvanising them. She seemed fearless, carved with rage, an impossible dignity in her bearing, all the more convinced - and convincing - of the rightness of her path in the wake of the bomb. The effect she had upon the little cellar was electrifying. She spoke of her pain at so many of her comrades deaths, of the vision of the future these women had died for, of the oppression and misery dealt out to so many more over so many years. It can't go on, she told them, this must be the final mark of it. We cannot allow it to go any further. She conjured out the fear of her audience, transforming it into the rage of the righteous, the wronged, the sufferers, the warriors. She described tortures that she claimed would be awaiting the women rescued from the rubble as Mother's agents sought to extract every possible piece of information from them before they were discarded, destroyed as useless, morally degenerate and abhorrent for resisting Mother's rule, women in the wrong place at the wrong time who were therefore genetic failures, hopeless evolutionary dead ends. Her greatest scorn, as if Jeysh was not sitting nearby and had never planted a bomb under her orders, was reserved for the Hands of Mother, "those bombers, those cowards, women-killers, innocence-takers, those mutilators of ordinary people. They are scum, the absolute abyss of humanity, and all the spirits murdered by them cry out for vengeance." Before a crowd who, at her entrance, were defeated and demoralised, she resurrected her dream, citing Ayla as the example of moral imperative and faith that would carry them through. Zia threw her whole body into this battle to regain their wills, there was about her a desperate and attractive abandon. It worked. By the time she disbanded the meeting, dark having fallen and the rioters slunk away, he could see quite clearly that Zia was going to have her war; that it had, in fact, already started. This had been the moment she had trained for, hoped for, dreamed of for all of her life.

37.

After the rest had gone, Jeysh and Zia talked. Zia, seemingly poured from lightning, marched the length of the cellar, occasionally stopping to clutch his arm as she made some point or other. There was about her a seemingly unbearable energy, her eyes

alight and her hair shining in a trail after her, a smell strong as sex lifting from her skin. All her being seemed drawn into this single moment, as if by herself alone she had found the strength to pluck the New City from the face of the earth and pound it into oblivion.

“This is it,” she told him. “We have to act and we have to act now. It won’t be long before whichever women were captured after the blast will have all they know extracted from them. We have to get our people moved to different safe houses by morning.”

“Whoever they catch, they still won’t learn much about us.”

“Nevertheless, people may fall like dominoes. One knows someone, who knows someone else all the way through the organisation. We could all be rounded up in a matter of weeks, maybe. We will be unravelled, finished, if we don’t come out and fight right now.”

She was using her whole self against what she knew would be his contrary instincts. The touches of his arm, the piercing large-eyed looks, the erect bearing with breasts jutting out.

“It’s not just a matter of vengeance or of pride, although it is those things as well. People are shocked, horrified, there is only so much they can take and I think they are nearing their limit. If we are strong, clear, if we offer a distinct alternative... How long is it that we have waited for this, and here is the opportunity, just needing us to act.” she smiled, radiant with anticipation. “I feel as though some sort of bell has been struck in my head - I don’t know how to describe it, but everything has become so clear. It’s no good being knocked back by this bomb, no good worrying about our survival, all we can do now is fight to win. They won’t be expecting it, for a start they’ll think we’ll want to hit back at the Hands of Mother, and so if we don’t, if we act audaciously and go for the military and the media instead, and if we can take one or two bases quickly, then we will gain the necessary hardware to back us up, and we can show Purana Shahar that we’re here, we’ve taken control, we can beat them.”

She listed her complete plan to him, forcing him to listen to every last detail, trying to make him approve. It showed both the best and the worst in her; tough-minded logistics, clever thinking, unshakeable optimism and sheer audacity on the one hand, whilst on the other an absurd faith in the revolutionary discontent among the people, her mad belief that she could wage a successful guerrilla war she was in reality doomed to lose, and a failure to understand what the fundamental nature was of the body they opposed. Zia did not understand Mother, and so could never completely defeat Her.

But she was unstoppable, dizzy on her own potential and the anticipation of conflict. “The amount of time we have been forced to live under this regime, uncertain of when we could fight back. The amount of time we have *suffered*. And now I know - I really know - it’s in our grasp to end this, to bring about a new age. All we have to do is be bold enough. All we have to do is strike quickly.”

He found it painful to watch her, listen to her, admiring her fierce energy and her passion. The enormity of what Neela wanted him to do struck him, a cold hand clutched around his guts as he watched Zia speak on, almost regardless of him, her clear eyes on a future nearly grasped. You will never see the thing that you have poured your whole life into, he thought. It would never happen, not the way you picture it. Not yourself, bathed in glorious admiration, everyone loving you, everyone wanting the revolution you have brought about. You have been betrayed by your own brilliant delusions; let yourself

believe you could shape the world around you into the form of your dreams. You can't, no one ever can, and this whole struggle cannot fail just because of you, in the same way that it cannot be used just for your ends. He had never met someone so inspiring, so pure, so completely committed to their single vision without any form of compromise. Truly, he thought, you have been blessed.

And you have been cursed.

Zia was still talking, still trying to overwhelm him with her physical presence. This could be, she told him, the only true chance in history. There were unborn generations waiting, there were the ghosts of the past to be avenged. If Jeysh continued along his own path, playing his waiting games, his plotting, he would be caught one night by a bullet and all his plans would be ruined, unfulfilled, the people he sought to liberate only betrayed by him. He would have achieved nothing. Couldn't he see? "I need you," she concluded, "I need you and I can't do it without you, but I'm going to do it anyway, as I've told you before, with or without your help. Do you understand that?"

"I understand. I gave in last time, when you wanted to fight, and look where it has got us. So many dead, and all for what? And now you want more. It's a horrible risk."

She laughed. "What isn't a risk? If the authorities can now begin to track us down, one by one, because one of the women begins to crack, then where is the risk left in anything else we do?"

It was true enough. Even the relations he held with Neela and her political masters would not save him, would not save a single one of the organisation if the military came calling. "Sometimes," Neela had once reminded him, "the left hand must not know what the right hand is doing. We don't know you, we don't have any relations with you; you're just a fantasist." The danger here was very real; they did have to move fast. It just wouldn't, he thought, be quite in the direction Zia expected.

"But you're gambling everything here on a hunch, on the military being unready if we do attack, on the chaos in the New City and in Purana Shahar continuing, on the populace being so unhappy..." just as, he thought, I'm relying on the chaos in the New City being the work of Anil, and on him having done what I needed him to do. And although all the signs seem to suggest he has, I can't be sure, won't know until...

So who was the fantasist? Zia with her slender but solid opportunity, or Jeysh, relying on signs and portents from the New City, possibly shaping events away from reality but into the form he needed? He didn't know.

"And what would you rather?" Zia was asking. "Prepare until we are dead?"

He smiled, almost despite himself, knowing he was going to give in, in words at least. It just had to look realistic, forced; Zia was no fool. But she would be dead before she could appropriate any of his equipment for other ends, and it would be well hidden from her successor, whoever that would be. His words didn't matter. "Do you ever back down?"

She looked at him seriously. "I have backed down twice, both times to you. Never a third time."

Silence hummed between them, a space of inches feeling like the distance between stars. "And if you force me, and I think it's wrong?"

"Just do it. Just - for once - throw caution to the wind. How else do you think we'll win?"

Fuck and damn all of this, he thought. What I would give now just to be able to walk away, to leave all of these questions unanswered.

“Zia, I’ll never forgive you for this. You’re wrong, and you’re making me support you anyway. Don’t you understand how foolish that is?” he shook his head and looked away from her.

“But you will,” she said softly, the light of triumph upon her. She stole close and kissed him on the cheek. They stood facing each other, each with their own sacrifice made. “Now go,” Zia said gently. “Go back to Sarita. She’ll be worried about you.” he couldn’t tell if there was scorn in her voice. “I’ve got things to organise.”

He took a last look at her; her power, her grace, the vitality that flowed from her proud body. He couldn’t do anything but look. He nodded, turned to leave.

“Jeysh?” her voice came as he was crossing the threshold. You could save yourself even now, he thought, turning towards her and wondering at the expectation within himself.

“Thank you,” she said.

He left, into a night that smelled of smoke and blood, wreckage of the day’s violence strewn all around him. It took him a while to find a telephone stall that was still open. But people were hungry, people needed money, there would always be one. He paid his money and telephoned Neela.

38.

Business continued after the riots, more tattered and more uncertain, with vendors selling from carts outside their ruined shops. Prices had risen overnight, with shortages reported of this or that. Workers in the power stations had downed tools, leading to a blackouts in much of Purana Shahar. The postal workers were on strike: letters piled up, bills remained unpaid, thugs from various loan companies had been reported smashing up premises with abandon. The shooting and lynching of liberals, libertarians and women not in traditional dress continued apace. A crowd protesting about the violence had been shot at. And yet still the day-to-day rituals had to go on, the tiny transactions for food or cloth, the worship in temples, the women gossiping at street corners, the dhobiwallahs slapping the bundled laundry against the ghats. How little it changed, and yet how different everything felt. He walked through the streets half elated that so much could survive, and half despairing that so much was lost so quickly.

The great bazaars still hummed with people, the shouts of porters mingling with the cries of hawkers and the babble of commerce. He threaded his way through the crowds, looking for a particular fountain. Long disused, its strange whirling designs and odd lurid colours spelled out an oblique allegory, something that predated Mother. No one knew for sure what it meant, but most assumed it was some sort of love story, and over the years various overblown romances had become associated with it. It was an acknowledged lovers’ spot, a peculiar anomaly among the business hubbub of the bazaar. Jeysh approached it through the mass of stalls, staring along rows of bright fruit, silks, toys and jewellery, clusters of men smoking over a drawn-out deal, ranks of women sorting goods, sweetmeats drawing pale yellow wasps, crushed vegetable carcasses

trampled underfoot, a stench sometimes sweet and sometimes rotten hanging in the air. It was a scene, Jeysh thought, unlikely to inspire feelings of romance, but as the stalls fell away, the aisles converging like the spokes of a wheel and the fountain suddenly revealed, he could see the knots of couples sitting at its base, their backs to the frescoes, or huddled nearby on abandoned boxes. Even in this climate, he thought, even with everything going on. They sat, mostly so close together that they were slightly touching, some talking, some just staring, some sitting stony-faced and looking out in different directions from each other.

There are some things, he thought, that just won't wait, whatever the politics or the religion, whatever threats are made by the Hands of Mother. It was too human, too animal, the coil of DNA and the heat of youth. It would fight anything, unthinking.

There she was, waiting. She was clad as before in a dull salwer kameez, hair unbound, arms crossed, sitting on an abandoned crate as she waited for him, her face impassive. So looked on, so still, she became an alien thing, just flesh, just colours upon a swirling background. Then she looked up, smiled, and his heart quickened. He crossed to where she sat.

"Orange?"

"Oh. Thank you." she took the orange he handed her and began to calmly, methodically strip back the skin. He sat next to her on the crate.

When the orange lay naked in her palm, glistening faintly in its own spray, she split it in two. "Half?"

He accepted silently. They ate without speaking. Around them the bazaar hummed with the shout of porters, the shuffle of beggars, with song and speculation and argument.

"They were two pretty powerful bombs," he said at last.

"Yes."

"Did you see the pictures?"

She laughed, a low and painful sound. "I saw more than you did, I would imagine."

"The first bomb, I need to know about that. Did you deliberately mislead them?"

She didn't answer, staring straight ahead.

He persisted. "Was it down to your information that they decided to bomb the women's refuge?"

She still didn't look at him. "I was afraid you'd be like this."

"Like what? You saw the pictures. Dead bodies are not like pieces on a game board, are they?"

"No."

"So was it a job well done?"

"I do what I'm told. What did you think as you saw the pictures? Did you think that, if it had been you, that you would have placed the bombs a little to the left or a little to the right?" Her voice was harsh, strained.

"I would hope not to be bombing innocents in the first place."

"I'll tell that to the residents of the shanty town who got killed in your exchange with the Hands of Mother, shall I?"

“You still insist on seeing no difference between us? That’s dogma, not reality. You *want* that to be true, and you’re trying to bend your world into a position where it is true. You’ve got to be careful.”

“I don’t need your advice.”

He abruptly felt sorry for her. “Another orange?”

She took the fruit wordlessly, peeled it and pulled it into halves as before, handing half back.

He looked at her with pity. “You can eat it all, you know. I won’t starve.”

She stared at him with thinly-disguised misery. “Please eat.”

He did so.

As she picked slowly at her segments, he watched a beggar approach. A thin, twisted man, one leg grotesquely short and wasted, hips twisted and buckled almost at right angles to the chest, he moved forward upon both hands and one foot, a peculiarly soft and graceful motion. He moved sideways, crabwise, crossing into Neela’s line of vision and holding himself there, bowing his head almost to her feet, touching the thick scabbed stumps of his fingers to his chest, his forehead, staring at her imploringly and uttering his pleas in song, his words those of a dialect so corrupted she would have no hope of understanding them.

She did not avert her gaze, but instead looked straight into his eyes, stripping him down to just the human being beneath the twisted form: watching his pain and his desire, trying to imagine his life, trying to see herself from his eyes. This immeasurable gulf between the woman and the man, in language and birth and education, the things both of them had seen and done, two worlds only drawn together in this single instant. To be here, on an upturned crate by a lovers’ fountain in Purana Shahar, she had crossed so many boundaries and transgressed so many ideas held by her own culture, and yet in the face of this beggar she was still unutterably alone, alien, uncomprehending.

As if in a dream she reached out, the slow deliberation of her action agonising to watch. She placed her remaining segments of orange into the beggar’s outstretched hand. He looked at her with a crushed, defeated hatred and moved silently on.

It was still a game, Jeysh realised. One that Neela could still win. She sat impassively next to him, watching him watching.

“Why did you choose this place?” he asked her curiously.

“You mean you can’t guess?”

They sat side by side, looking at the lovers. He was acutely, unbearably aware of every little contact their bodies made. She was looking down, her face hidden from him by her hair.

“I never know what to make of you.” He hated admitting it, but he felt that maybe the time had come to be truthful with Neela.

“You know, due to the structural peculiarities of this bazaar, where it is and what it’s surrounded by, the communication relays from here to the city are particularly poor. They’re easily overloaded.” she traced abstract patterns across her salwar.

“Meaning?”

She shrugged. “A lot of accidents happen. It would be a useful place to live, no? Especially as, if one or two of the relays get overloaded, the bugs won’t be listening.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“No. Really. Why would I lie?” She looked at him searchingly. “I can say whatever I want to say to you right now, free from them listening in. We can do whatever.” again she shrugged.

She had him. He didn't know what to think, or who she was deceiving. Would she, he thought, risk playing such a game with the New City? And if so, why? Almost certainly, it could not be for his benefit. It was too great a risk: if she was found out, it would almost certainly spell her death. On the other hand, he could not see any reason why she would lie to him, as she had said. He realised that he had little option but to play her game.

“So you're misleading the New City as well as everyone else?”

“There are more people than just the New City involved in this. And like you said, people aren't playing pieces; they have feelings and other needs outside of all of this. Look at them: despite everything, here they are, still courting. It's - I don't know, it *should* be humbling. For anyone.”

“And yet you directed the Hands of Mother to plant those bombs anyway.”

“What else could I do?”

“That isn't enough of an answer.”

She looked away. “I know.”

“Well, it's certainly worked. It did what it was supposed to. There have been riots, rapes, shootings. People are afraid. It worked even better as far as Zia's concerned. She's inconsolable; she's crazy with grief, anger... She's torn up every plan we've ever made together and she just wants blood. She thinks she can destroy you all, and while she won't take down all of us with her, unless you stop her right now she'll cause you damage enough, believe me.”

“You don't need to tell me.” she gave him a thin-lipped smile, and he was shocked to see tears in her eyes. “I persuaded you to go with this, remember?”

“You've made it reality well enough.” he was surprised by the bitterness in his voice. She turned away from him, and he brought himself back under control.

“The only chance,” she said quietly, “the only chance you have of beating us is to take what I offer and hope you're better than we are. If you're going to get sentimental, just remember that you and you alone are far worse than any of us.”

It was true.

“That's just the way it is,” she said flatly. “I had hoped that maybe you would have been a little less self-righteous. I hoped that maybe, well,” she shrugged, “we would both find that we were human.”

He was disgusted with himself. Appalled, finally, by everything he had done. Was about to do. So much fucking bloodshed, he thought to himself.

“I'm sorry,” he told her. “I always presumed you were so much better than I was. That you could handle this, that you wouldn't let yourself care. Maybe I made a mistake.”

She gripped his hand.

They watched the market in silence, like all the other illicit couples around them. Her flesh burned on his. He didn't want to move, didn't want to break this, knowing it couldn't last.

Eventually, she squeezed his hand once more. “I've got something to show you. Come on. We shouldn't let what little time we have just slip away.”

She led him further into the bazaar, moving through the labyrinth of tiny streets with a sureness that surprised him. They passed into the covered section of the market, a somnolent gloom spreading beneath the huge dingy roof, rows of stalls drawn up like soldiers. They passed walls of strange fruit, packaged produce, fancy goods laid upon beds of tinsel, beggar women sat upon clumps of straw, ragged children hiding in the shadows, merchants and maidservants bickering over prices, until finally they reached the far wall, smoke-scorched stone that was badly dressed.

“Neela, what the fuck?”

“I said it was a good place to live, didn’t I?” she nodded at a half-rotten door. Once inside, a dark little stairwell took them up several flights to another door.

“It used to be the rent collector’s office, back before they decided it was easier to live uptown and send their goondas over to collect the rent. It had been derelict for years before it just,” she shrugged, “fell into my hands.”

“I always imagined you living uptown, close to what New City luxuries we can get out here, along with all the rent collectors and their goondas.”

“And what use would that be to me?”

“Does the New City know you’re here?”

She shrugged again. “Officially, I’m somewhere else. There’s no ID pad on the door here, I get my electricity straight from the bazaar’s supply, there’s no sewage, no water, and the surveillance round here isn’t very good, as I told you... So there’s very little to trace me by.” she unlocked the door and let him in.

The rent collector’s old office consisted of two rooms, rather shabby, lit by a grubby window close to the ceiling. Neela flicked the light switch and nothing happened. “Still no electricity. Zia won’t need her revolution soon,” she said, hunting around for a match. “The whole of Purana Shahar’s falling apart around us.”

She lit a storm lamp, the whole room suddenly suffused with a warm glow.

He wasn’t sure how pointed that remark was, so he let it pass. She sat down on the floor next to him. Her eyes shone in the lamp light, framed by her impassive face. “So what do you do here? Watch all the footage, listen to the tapes, everything the birds and bees bring you?”

“No. I do that from the other place. When I come here, I’m usually trying to escape from all of that. From all of this...” she gave him a painful smile.

“I always thought you would spend every spare moment researching. Learning every tiny thing you that you can, so you’d be sure of beating us.”

“I would go mad.” Her eyes didn’t meet his. “Anyway, make yourself comfortable, if you can.” She looked around depreciatingly. “It’s hardly luxury. Do you want a drink?”

“Just water.”

“Nothing stronger?” her back was turned, she rifled through her little store of things.

“I don’t.”

“Why not?” she sounded amused. “Is it a religious objection, or are you just frightened of losing control?”

“Not losing control, if I can, is important to me.”

“Well, we City people mostly drink.”

“You have that privilege. You can afford to lose your heads, poison yourselves. You’ve got a security we don’t have.”

She removed two cups, poured him some water and herself a generous helping from a bottle of amber liquid.

“Don’t you think it’s demeaning to lose control like that, especially in front of other people?”

She sat herself back beside him. “Right now, I don’t care. I’ve got hours in which I’m not going to care.”

“Even in front of me?”

“Especially in front of you.” She stared at him hotly, strangely, her black eyes huge. She took a long gulp of her liquor.

“Won’t you regret that, later?”

“I don’t think so.” She looked down, swirling the liquid in her cup. “When we met by the fountain, you asked me if I had seen the pictures of the bombing and I said I had. You know, you switch the TV on and you watch, sometimes without necessarily realizing the gravity of what it is you’re looking at. And I…”

She lapsed into silence. Distantly, he could hear the roar of the market. Neela stared into her drink.

“We do all these things,” she said quietly, without looking at him. “We say all these words to each other and have these odd abstract notions about what we’re doing and why. We wonder how we can justify it, and what the justification will be - something about happiness maybe, or freedom, or that old idea of just trying to keep as many people as we can alive, in the best way that we can. Wasn’t that what Mother was supposed to be about?”

She took a hurried gulp from her cup. He watched, motionless, wordless.

“And suddenly you switch the TV on and it comes home to you. You realise what those words you said actually mean, what your sentiment and your abstract notions actually add up to. And out there, whatever the words, whatever ideas of love or freedom or whatever, out there people are actually dying as a consequence of it.”

She looked frail and miserable, hunched in upon herself, hair hanging down to obscure her face. She looked up to give him one brief, awful stare, before taking another mouthful of liquor.

“I feel so small. I feel ignorant and small in the face of this thing. Our words and ideas seem to become monsters and run away with us. When you see those pictures, you know, bits of body, mangled children, women screaming or - or any of it, do you wonder whether the appalling weight of all this grief and pain unbalances all these - all these damn ideas we have? Aren’t they just in the end words, and so many lies like words always are, and should be left just as that, as words and never actions?” She sighed, ran her hand through her hair. “I’m talking on and on, while you sit there like a fucking statue and don’t speak.”

“What do you want me to say? That I regret what I’m doing? It’s too late to turn back.”

“Too late? I’m sick of playing with people’s lives. I’m sick of ordering their deaths. I’m sick, it’s a sickness like I don’t know, like I should die through it, vomit myself inside out.”

“You shouldn’t be telling me this. You said yourself that it isn’t a game, it’s real. This could be the end of you, you know, death, like you just said, like the stuff you have caused, like the thing you’ve seen on TV.”

“I’ve got to tell you,” she said. “Who else could I tell? You, out of everyone, and no-one else. What I’ve done now is like a mark on me, I can never go back from it, never return. All I can do is go further.”

She looked across at him, a desperate appeal in her eyes. “And I’m scared. You want to know why I brought you here, well...” she laughed in self-disgust. “Well, that’s it. I’m terrified of what we’re doing. I’m terrified of the deaths, and I’m terrified of how far we’ll go, how much destruction we’ll cause. I just feel - I’m an ordinary girl, and it’s gone too far, it’s too unreal and yet it’s happening, it’s my fault and I’m just so scared...”

She turned her body towards him, her face in shadow, inches from his own, her eyes blazing and her breathing harsh. She reached out to clutch his shoulder, her scent spilling out over him, the smell of alcohol on her breath, breasts half-pressed against him, a rush of intoxication, strands of her hair tickling his skin. Her breath hissing into his mouth, her other arm on his shoulder, pulling him in.

39.

Dusk closed in, the light from the grubby window fading. Every so often, the little flame inside the storm lamp flickered, creating a kink in its otherwise steady glow. They sat together, naked and shameful. Neither had spoken in a long time.

Cold self-realisation had flooded through Jeysh soon after their love-making. He thought of Sarita sitting at home, sewing garments and listening to the news, wondering. The distance between them now seemed further than to any far-flung empire in the stars. I’ve betrayed her now in every way, he thought, and in this last way more unforgivably than any other. The callousness of his action, the wild sweet pleasure of succumbing to his desire, left him frozen to the core. He felt utterly alone in a strange new way.

Neela sat slightly turned away from him, her legs drawn up and her arms about them. She had been crying; he didn’t know if she still was; he could hear her sniffing, awkward gasps of breath.

I don’t understand, he thought, what any of this means. Why we have to do this, why it hurts.

And yet slowly, surely, he saw a pattern emerge. He began to realise what he had betrayed Sarita for.

“I should go,” he said at last, heavily.

She shook her head. “Please don’t.”

“You’ve got what you wanted from me, haven’t you?”

“I don’t understand.”

“It was always part of the plan that you would do this, wasn’t it?”

She put her hands to her face and cried again, but didn’t answer.

“It’s partly why they picked a woman rather than another man. And such a young woman too. It must really have messed with your head, knowing why you were picked and what you had to do.”

She wouldn’t look at him. “It’s not like you think.”

“Isn’t it? Maybe it didn’t mess with your head, maybe you enjoy this. It’s just a game, after all, you’ve been told what to do and you’re doing it. It must give you a big hit to know that it worked.”

“I didn’t lie to you earlier. I meant every word I said.”

“You still did everything they told you to do. Everything you were *paid* to do.”

She laughed bitterly. “So now I’m a prostitute? And it doesn’t matter to you that I’m scared, so damn frightened that I don’t know what to do, and also that I – I –” she broke off abruptly.

“Go on.”

“No.” She shook her head. “No.” She looked up at him, her face stained with tears. “And what about you? Haven’t you been taking my money, my weapons, my advice? And then today, couldn’t you have said no? You knew what you were doing and you wanted me anyway. Go on, deny all of it. Make me that cheap.”

She knew that he couldn’t.

“I didn’t have to meet you this time,” she continued. “I didn’t have to take you here. I didn’t have to knock out the relays so they would have no idea...” she gripped his arm, desperation seeming to flood through her. “I’m not *just* a puppet. I don’t *just* do what they want, or feel whatever they tell me to feel. Please believe me. Whatever they told me to do, they didn’t tell me to want you, they didn’t tell me to - to fall in love.”

She turned her head away again, as if in shame.

Truth or lie, he thought, it all amounts to the same now. Whatever either of their intentions or beliefs, that meant nothing; it had been obliterated by the ugly fact of action. That, and in the end only that, had meaning.

It could be that the New City has won over both of us, he thought.

“Please stay,” she asked him again. “I don’t think I can cope being with myself. Whether you believe what I’ve said to you or not, please believe me when I tell you this. I don’t want you to leave.”

“But Sarita...”

“So you’re just going to go back to her? Like none of this has ever happened, like nothing in your life has happened and this is just more lies? Do I mean so little to you that it’s over now, you can just go home and tell Sarita nothing?” she looked away.

“Whatever dreadful things I’ve done, I’ve never wanted Sarita to suffer from them.”

“But she will, anyway. If it’s the way of things, shouldn’t she know it?”

He didn’t answer.

“And then you accuse me of prostituting myself and telling you what you want to hear? What have you done to her all these years? Maybe it’s time for you to be honest.”

“I can’t bear the thought of leaving her alone. She hasn’t done anything to deserve it. It would be - it would be unfair.”

“And this isn’t? What are you doing with me if you want to be with her?”

Something inside him hardened, crystallised. After all this time, he thought, maybe it’s at an end. A sense of destruction taking hold of him.

“You’re right,” he said, “it’s gone too far. I don’t think there’s any way back now. Perhaps I made my decision the first time I met you, I don’t know.”

“You’ll stay?”

He nodded.

Her hand closed gratefully over his own, and she reached over to kiss him. As he returned her embrace, the storm lantern guttered, and went out.

40.

Sarita woke up aware that Jeysh’s side of the bed was still cold, and had not been slept in. He had not come home. She had waited long into the night, listening to the chanting from the temple outside, soft voices on the radio, bursts of car horns, firecrackers, dogs yowling for the smothered moon. It all seemed to her terribly cold, meaningless, the pointless action of machines without any true purpose, pushing their insistent rhythms beyond endurance. Her heart felt heavy as stone within her as she waited and waited, and when she knew for sure that he would not come, she had welcomed the oblivion of sleep.

Now the alarm woke her and she had to get up. Had to; she had to work, had to eat, would have to find a new roof to sleep beneath. I can maybe afford this flat until the end of the month, she thought, but after that I will have to find somewhere cheaper. Much cheaper. She had wondered briefly at the possibility of going back to live with her parents in the rural north, but they were already struggling with so many mouths to feed, and would not appreciate the additional burden, not to mention the shame of her position. No, she thought, it has to be here, somewhere, somehow.

It was seductively easy not to think about it, to just concentrate on the daily routine and pretend everything was all right. She went to the bathroom. No water in the taps. She washed herself using the spare bucketful from last night, leaving enough for Jeysh should he return. Back to the bedroom to dress, looking about her for signs of her husband but seeing only his spare clothes. Otherwise, she thought, he might never have been here, for all the traces he has left. She dug out something for herself to wear, clean bright patterns cutting across the fabric, shimmering hopeful sunshine colours like armour against the world.

Breakfast. The radio was giving the death toll from last night’s violence. She prepared chapattis (for two) and fried them in butter. It was so easy to spin out stories explaining why Jeysh had not come home, glib stories and little fantasies to ease her heart, wondering if Jeysh had lied so easily and thoughtlessly to her as she now lied to herself. If he didn’t love me, she thought, then why did he go to the bother of keeping me for so long? Especially to cast her off now, just at the time that she needed him most.

She ate her meal in silence, then washed up, tidied, performed her morning puja in front of the shrine, taking out the old incense stick and lighting a new one.

Dear Mother deliver me from this, she thought fervently, staring at the crudely pictured face staring back. I’ve lost him, and it’s left me with what?

Life goes on anyway. People wanted clothes mending, altering, embroidering. She would have to buy food. Dust would settle on her cleaned surfaces, and the food would

make them dirty. The buyers and sellers would still be outside waiting, richer children would go to school while poorer children would work or beg. Water would have to be collected if the taps stayed off; a long line of women waiting at the pump, brightly-coloured, trading gossip back and forth as they stood, then after their pots were full slipping back through the crowds, water-pots on heads, millennia upon millennia of the same actions.

I'm not anything, she thought, that the world hasn't seen before.

She put on her make-up in a vague, unthinking ritual, tied on her sandals, knotted up her hair, wrapped the shawl that Jeysh had bought her about her shoulders. People die, she thought. And more people are born, crawling through this eating fighting fucking to their point of obliteration.

The fruit and vegetables she would buy would be dropped into her basket, she would chat with stallholders, drink in the rush of scents, of sights, everything the same, herself in the same clothes saying the same things, like nothing ever happened, nothing ever changed.

And yet Jeysh had left her. This thing inside her grew, swelling her belly and her breasts in a way that would soon be obvious.

He doesn't love me, she thought. She had maybe known for a while, but his absence made it true, opened up a great gaping void at her core. She had joined her love, her life, her future onto him, and he had gone. At the same time, the world about her seemed convulsed in madness, in hate and bloodletting, blow and counter blow without reason and without end, each atrocity only serving to justify the next, and each action destroying what remained of her hopes and beliefs, one by one by one.

What, she thought, could I tell my child? That this world isn't worthy of you? That it has failed you, even before you are born? How can I give you succour in the middle of all this?

She didn't want to think on it. Couldn't allow herself to.

She went out, to collect her day's work.

42.

It had started, Ayla said, so well.

She sat, fierce and proud, a dreamlike intensity about her. The left side of her face was a mess of light burns and scabbed blood, lost her left eyebrow, eyelashes and probably her looks, great chunks missing from her hair where it had caught fire and been pulled away. But in her grief, her cold rage and unbending determination she had gained something more. Jeysh watched it take hold as she spoke.

"We were after a munitions convoy. It should have been easy. We killed the outriders and then took out the first and last cars with grenades. They didn't have any choice but to stop, and we hit them with more grenades, armour-piercing rounds, smoke and flares. They were shooting everywhere, hitting buildings and stalls and passers by. They panicked, didn't know who to aim for, there were people running and screaming, smoke, fire, it made it difficult to see what was going on. We rushed them and they didn't know what was happening to them, so we managed to kill them pretty quickly. We had

only lost two, maybe three people, better than we thought. It was quite a success and Zia looked happy. She said to me several times how now it had really started, and this act meant that we couldn't stop it any more, even if we wanted to."

So, thought Jeysh, both Zia and Neela had made their moves. He had been outmanoeuvred twice, and on the same night. I'm losing it, he thought. After so long, I'm losing it. What he had thought was his iron grip of the situation had proved to be as inflexible and fragile as glass. I was a fool to trust either of them, he told himself.

And yet he was still alive. It wasn't over, not quite, not yet. He forced himself to stop thinking and just listen.

"Most of our fighters started to leave. They had done what we needed them to do. There were six of us left, which we would need to break into the weapons truck and get the munitions to the autos we had brought along. You know how these things work. We knew we didn't have long before the army would have someone on the scene, so we worked fast, backing up the two autos and burning through the doors of the van. Everyone else had left. We got through the doors of the van quickly and just as I was about to enter the compartment our welder fell back dead.

"I was covered with his blood. The whole back of the van was. I could see parts of his brain, and bone. I didn't know what to do, I just stood and stared. I don't think any of us would have survived if it had been down to me. We would have been surrounded, captured, I don't know, I don't like to think of it. But we had Zia, and while I couldn't think she had already looked round to see what was happening.

"We were almost surrounded already. Troops on foot were beating back the civilians and moving through. I could see snipers at some of the windows. In the air in front of us were two helicopters, hovering over the buildings with ropes hanging out and troops still descending from them. I don't know if you know - we were taught at the compound about this situation, something of course I'd never seen before, but I knew it from the description, it was an army rapid response unit. We'd fallen into a trap."

Jeysh tried not to let alarm stiffen his body. That familiar feeling, skin crawling, expecting to be exposed, expecting the sharp pain of a bullet in his back. He almost longed for it, tired of waiting, knowing it lay ahead somewhere. To get it over with would be a relief; he couldn't carry on much longer, his strength and will ebbing away.

Ayla stared through bloodshot eyes, expecting him to have grasped her meaning. He watched her impassively, forcing her to continue without any sign of his having been given.

"Of all the things, we hadn't guessed that. It seemed so unlikely that such a small munitions consignment would be wired to a rapid response unit, at least until afterwards, when I had a chance to think, when I looked at it as you would. And then it seemed obvious to me. It was only the small munitions consignments that we had the resources to attack, and with the situation between us and the Hands of Mother being what it is, we would obviously need to attack one soon. So I guess that it would be worth keeping a whole unit on standby just in case we did. And we were stupid enough to play into their hands." She shrugged. "It won't happen again. It's just sad; if only they had chosen to strike at us on the next mission, we would have been ready, we could have fought back in a way that would have beaten them. But we have to learn."

Something in her calmness impressed him deeply. Zia had been right, Neela had been right. And both of them outwitted me, he thought. He extinguished any relief he had felt over her understanding of the event. Don't presume, he told himself, just listen.

"There were five of us left and maybe one hundred of them. They called on us to surrender. Next to me Zia was calm, no emotion, there wasn't even death in her eyes. She knew we could take them all on. We were stuck by the doors at the back of the truck, with the two autos in front of us, and we could guess troops were closing in from our blind sides. We didn't have long to act, and we knew that as soon as any of us moved the firing would start. We had to guess what Zia wanted us to do, and any of us that got it wrong would be dead. We all looked at each other in those few seconds, wondering who knew and who didn't. It was-"

She broke off, making as if to rub her face, her hand twitching away in disgust at the last moment.

"We knew that some of us wouldn't make it. I looked round and tried to remember, to always have that picture with me, like I can still see my mother and my sister, what my father did to them, or the girls at the compound..." she stopped again, staring at her hand in fascination. "Why it has to be like this I don't understand, but I can't forget, can't forgive. Who could? It's too horrible. So we waited, with the troops closing in on us. And at last Zia acted. She screamed and moved, and three of us guessed right, forcing our way to the back of the truck with Zia. The fifth jumped into one of the autos, which drew all the gunfire and, I don't know, maybe saved some of us others. Maybe Zia knew that, maybe that's partly why she didn't say; someone would go wrong and then at least she hadn't ordered it, at least it had happened in the natural way of things. I don't know." She smiled, slightly cruelly, slightly painfully, a depreciating twist to her lips. "I've got a lot to learn about leadership."

"We all find some rationale for making sacrifices acceptable. We'd go mad, otherwise."

"I'm not -" she sighed, "I'm not clever enough to know, one way or the other. But I was saying - where was I? Yes, the auto, and how maybe the fifth - Sita, I think her name was - maybe she was the only reason we didn't die right then. The Auto was riddled with gunfire and the fuel tank must have exploded. There were flames and smoke and so the troops couldn't see in, they were shooting blind. We managed to push the doors to, and then we gathered up all the munitions. It would have been quite a haul: rocket grenades, heavy weapons, ammunition. We piled it all together, hearing the bullets hit the outside of the van, watching the metal start to bend. I was taught in training how to count the steps of people you can't see as they head towards you, but I think we just guessed, it was too terrifying, there was too much noise, I was crying. I don't know about the rest. We timed as many of the grenades as we could to detonate, and then with about three seconds to go we kicked open the doors and jumped out, firing."

She took a deep breath and looked, bloodshot eyes but clear gaze. "There was nothing else we could do. Sometimes you have to hope for luck. As we jumped from the van, Zia was hit. I saw one bullet pass through her neck and another enter her chest. She fell, still shooting, still not afraid. I guessed that she couldn't have survived that; no one could."

She turned her head away again. "If I could have stopped it, if it could have been me instead..." She shrugged uncomfortably. "It wasn't, and now we have to go on

anyway. I thought that then, and I felt determined as I watched her fall. I *had* to survive; I had to make sure Zia's dream didn't end there, with her dead and these troops closing in. I felt the weight of it, I thought that if I could survive this, then I knew I had a chance to bring about what she wanted. If anything got me through, it was that.

“And so I threw myself into the wreckage of the auto. It seemed the best way not to get shot. It was still burning, and I could smell my skin burning, my hair, I had my eyes closed and thought I would go blind, at the least. It was a heat so unbearable I - I couldn't breathe, I couldn't let it into me, it was like a hammer. Then the grenades blew and the blast hit me.

“I think the autos shielded me from a lot of it. Most of the people running towards us were cut apart by shrapnel. There was glass, metal, bits of flesh and bone, arms and legs...” She closed her eyes briefly, took several breaths. He followed the contours of her damaged face, the incredible violence it suggested, the impossible distance from the shop assistant she had once been. From the children, he thought, that we have all been. It was a path that could only be walked in one direction. “All the windows from all the buildings nearby had gone, and the ground seemed to be a mess of glass and blood, bodies, no one moving unless they were in pain, screaming and kicking and bleeding. I pulled my hair out where it was burning, got to my knees and crawled until I could walk again. The helicopters had retreated, one was on fire, the other, well, I don't know, maybe it was afraid of more explosions. The street was filled with smoke and dust, dead and dying, spilled goods, wounded people. No one noticed me; I looked like another victim, lost already. I heard gunfire behind me, maybe one of the others had survived. Maybe even Zia, maybe for a little longer. I don't know. It didn't last for long, and I suppose they would have counted it a victory, however many men they lost themselves.” she paused, rubbing her good eye with a shaking hand.

“But it wasn't. It was the beginning of their end. I promise that now, I promised that when I saw her fall. I am going to fight her war, and I'm going to win.”

42.

Jeysch was effectively without a decision to make.

Ayla had taken control of the organisation without any dissent. Her survival - her third miracle - had seen to that. It had transformed the death of Zia into something redemptive, religious, a light shining in their darkest hour. That's what people want, he thought. Miracles. They would not have accepted anyone else. Through the survival of Ayla, Zia had promulgated herself beyond death. Ayla would fight to carve Zia's dreams into the reality of Purana Shahar; she would make Zia herself into the cause, the meaning. She would deify Zia for the sacrifices she had made.

We turn into what we fight, he thought. Neela's prophecy is coming true.

Zia's killing had come too late. Zia had already arranged, without his knowledge, a series of co-ordinated attacks upon weapons and munitions deliveries, as well as the wiping out of some small army outposts. Looking at it now, her intentions were clear. The army could not ignore such provocation, it forced warfare, and Jeysch, fighting for his own survival, would have to side with Zia's plans.

All he had worked for, his careful attempts to undermine the basis upon which this society worked, suddenly counted for nothing. Not what I'm doing, he thought, not what Anil may be doing in the New City. Years of planning, of investigating how to pick apart the fabric of trust, had been undone by Zia's romanticism and stubbornness.

And now, he thought, we're backed into a fight that we can't win. Even if Anil could bring about enough of a collapse in the New City, even if we won here, it would be replacing Mother with her own likeness, with Zia. Ayla's ruthlessness, her need for revenge, would know no bounds.

Jeysh had at first thought that Neela's choice of time to assassinate Zia had simply been unfortunate. It had hardened the organisation around Zia's ideas, and catapulted Ayla into the leadership, all of which would seem to play into the hands of those Neela claimed wished Purana Shahar to be destroyed. But the more he thought about it, the more the opposite seemed to be true. The army, he realised, would be fighting a group weakened by the attack of the Hands of Mother, its leader dead and an inexperienced fanatic chosen to replace her. Whilst the insurrection by the organisation would no doubt be a cause for alarm in the New City, and would appear initially ferocious and dangerous, he imagined that Neela would not have taken this risk without believing that the army could overcome it easily enough. That would reassure the New City into thinking the army had control, and whatever revolutionary forces there were in Purana Shahar were weak and badly organised, barely any threat at all apart from to their own people.

At least, that was if Neela really believed what she had told him, and did want Purana Shahar to survive. He didn't know, was unsure now if he believed anything about her. When they had made love, when afterwards she sat and cried, he thought that at last he had penetrated to her heart. She had no more veils before her, frail and naked; there seemed nothing left for her to hide. Touching her skin, seemingly touching upon her honesty, her terror, he had fallen in love with her completely. The shadow of Sarita had silently faded from his heart.

But then this, and the realisation that however close he felt to Neela, his feelings were only an illusion, a mirror held up to his desire for her. Every time, he thought, it seems we have truly been honest with each other, she has used me the more deeply. And so with this. Her seduction had been carefully timed to coincide with Zia's assassination. As they made love, Ayla had fought her way through the carnage, and in the morning while they made love again, Ayla had already established herself as leader, and turned the entire organisation onto a war footing. He had not been there, had not been able to do anything. All he had worked for destroyed, in one brilliant stroke.

And whatever Neela's reasons, he knew it would lead to the obliteration of the organisation, the killing of every one of them. She had acted so only in the interests of her employer, her own clan. She had won.

He did not wish to believe it of Neela, like he did not wish to believe she had directed the bombing of the women's refuge. Some part of him still thought of her with love, as a woman who shared his own fears and doubts and anguish, a woman who, in her own way, wanted to do the right thing, and with whom he shared a unique understanding, a unique position in the world. And yet...

I was a fool. I was wrong. It left him feeling flat, empty. A lifeless carcass, meat and bone, animated but little else, little left.

So much for all my dreams, he thought. And maybe, anyway, they aren't possible. Maybe, whatever the intentions, it always ends up like this, like it's always been. Maybe we aren't capable of anything else. Give us the freedom and we will turn into what we always hated, because we have no choice, it's happened already to those above us and will happen to us in turn, a quirk of human nature, inescapable.

Too awful to believe, and yet too possible. Everything around him seemed to shriek that it must be this way. Everything except hope.

Hope. Locked away maybe in the heart of Sarita, the woman he had abandoned. There maybe, or else nowhere. Nowhere else around him.

And he still had one thing left, the one terrible thing bequeathed him by his lost dead comrade in the desert; carried to him across the endless undulating waves of sand, borne by him down the river and then by Anil into the New City, the last of a hideous legacy, a final option, a morning star waiting to be born on the horizon of Purana Shahar.

He knew what he had to do.

43.

Neela had transformed herself. She wore bright, cheap cotton clothes and was heavily made-up. He had barely recognised her when they met, and now in her rooms above the market she seemed ever more distant and alien.

She served him tea and then sat herself on floor opposite him, hands neatly folded in her lap. "I thought," she said, "that when you realised what had happened, you'd want to see me. Possibly only to kill me."

She didn't look at him.

He shrugged. "Would that do any good?"

"That depends what you came here wanting."

"Not that." her expression didn't change as he spoke. "You didn't have to see me anyway. Not now you've won. I'm surprised you agreed."

"You shouldn't be."

"Every time you say something like that, every time I think you're expressing yourself personally, it turns out to be just another part of the plan. I wanted it to be personal, but I was just flattering myself, wasn't I? It was just words."

She didn't reply.

"Well, I'm beaten now, anyway. So it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters now is what will happen to Purana Shahar."

"You said it yourself: I won. That means your organisation will have its little rebellion, which we'll easily overcome. We'll be able to say that we have rooted out the insurgents, and that the army can deal with any armed insurrection. I don't think after this there can be any talk of destroying Purana Shahar. We've showed we're in control."

"Or you could just as easily prove the opposite. You could say that this shows we're irreversibly reprobate, and that the only way the New City can guarantee security is to destroy us completely."

"No." She shook her head. "That's never been what I wanted."

"How can I know that?"

“Do you think I could have done these things otherwise?” she bit her lip and was silent for a long time, staring at her tea. “Maybe you do, I don’t know. But I told you the truth, before. The only way I can possibly face myself is to know that even the worst of what I’ve done, whatever you think that is, has been in the attempt to save more lives than I’m killing. If I didn’t think that, then I couldn’t live. It would be too awful. You have to believe me.”

“I don’t know what to believe.”

She nodded. “I can understand that, but it’s the truth anyway.”

“And would it matter if it wasn’t?”

“Of course it would. Because - because I need you to understand why I’ve done what I have. I’m not just a vessel; I’m not a pliable thing that the New City can do anything with. I have my own feelings. I wanted this job, remember, I *wanted* it. I couldn’t go back to the New City, not from the first moment I set foot in this place.”

“And so the clothes, no? Now you’ve done what you have to do, you just want to become another woman, part of the place. Is that it?”

“I want to disappear, yes.”

He laughed harshly. “With your hair, your skin, your voice, your walk...”

“So you think it’s a mockery?”

“You stand out, is all. There’s a divide that can’t be crossed.”

She looked down. “Didn’t we make the attempt to bridge it?”

“I thought so. But then it seemed I was just a piece in a game, and you did what you had to, you said what you must, to make me do what the New City wanted me to. And that divide between us seemed larger than ever.”

“Part of the reason I was picked was because they realised you would probably fall in love with me. No one seemed interested in what I might feel.” she shrugged. “They certainly don’t care. It sounds like you don’t either. But I can’t switch off my emotions from all of this. I didn’t lie to you; I love you.”

“You’ve said this before. Every time it’s been some sort of manipulation. How can I believe you now?”

“You said yourself that I didn’t have to see you this time. I’ve got nothing to gain from it except - except the pain of what you’re saying. I still love you, and that’s my free sentiment, nothing to do with the job, nothing to do with anything but myself.” She spoke quietly, still looking away from him, hands stills folded in her lap. “And if you want me, well, there are no strings attached, no implications anymore.”

“So this is my reward, no? For losing everything?”

“This is from no one but myself.”

He said nothing. She sat opposite him: bright lipstick, heavy shading about her eyes, cheap perfume rising from her, bright clothes half disguising her shape. The memory of their previous encounter was unbearable, flashes of her body and her taste jarring vividly through him, almost as if she were two people, one sitting here now and the other clutched to him in fragments like dream.

“Kiss me,” she said, her voice cracked and barely audible. “Kiss me or go. I can’t stand not knowing any longer.”

She watched him and waited.

44.

He forced himself to stay awake while, next to him, he heard Neela's breath deepen into sleep. He waited until she had been completely still for some time, the regular rush of her breathing marking time, in out in out, over and over, beautiful, insistent and maddening. Then he carefully picked himself up, pulled a little device from his kameez pocket, and crept across the sparse little room, every sound seeming to resonate, every motion far too loud. He found the familiar little bag he had seen the Lal Qila security guards search through, and he rifled through it himself, fingers shaking, the sound of tissues, make-up, pens, his breath the shallow breath of a thief, sweat prickling his back. Here it was; her phone. He slipped out the SIM card, pushed it into the little device he carried. Five seconds later and it was done. He put the SIM card back in her phone, gently and noiselessly returned the phone to her bag. The little device went back into his kameez pocket, he lay himself back down next to Neela.

Her phone, he knew, would be let through the New City's firewall by virtue of its SIM. He had cloned its identity, for the one call he would have to make. If, he thought, if Anil's done his job, then it will work. If not... The rumours of chaos in the City, which Neela and Zia had both seemed to confirm, the power outages at the agreed times, it all suggested to Jeysh that Anil was still alive, or at least *had* been alive, for long enough to do what he had to. It could all be coincidence, he thought. It could all be Neela, leading me on, fooling me one last time. He had no way of knowing; he could only make the one telephone call before the New City would work out what was happening, block the access.

One chance, maybe.

And, he thought, if it doesn't work, what then?

Nothing. Nothing at all. Ayla's insurrection would fail, the New City would tighten its grip, the organisation would be wiped from the face of the earth.

Jeysh knew he was relying on hope - only the slenderest hope - that his plan would work. But that was all that he had.

He closed his eyes, folded himself over Neela and tried to sleep.

45.

They lay together in the fading heat. Purana Shahar hummed and crawled outside the walls. Insects watched, maybe broadcast back pictures. Would the viewers at the other end feel satisfied or mystified by Neela's behaviour, he wondered. Was this the completion they had planned for her narrative?

If so, then he was being pensioned off with her, their reward for good service. They could live quietly together, maybe have kids, fade away.

If not, it was likely that the next time he returned here Neela would be dead, a bullet through her temple. Or worse, he thought, she could be disappeared. He would never know for sure, but could guess what they would, under such circumstances, have done to her.

He hoped she was still acting under orders, that she would get her reward.

She shifted under him, her flesh pushing against his. Her hands folded over the back of his head and she kissed him. "Do you believe me yet?"

"I believe you're serious in what you say."

"And you didn't believe that before?"

"I don't know."

"But it was enough to leave Sarita for."

"You understood. Whether or not you were sincere, you understood, and that was a position it was impossible for Sarita to put herself in. Maybe you can't understand how attractive that is, how much power that's given you over me." He looked away from her eyes. "I hate knowing how well the New City has seen into me. It makes me feel... Not alive, but like a machine whose buttons can be pressed and all the right actions come out. Is that all we are, do you think?"

She shook her head.

"I'm surprised you don't despise me. I did everything that I was supposed to, even this..."

"As did I," she murmured. "And yet still you left your beautiful wife for me." She swallowed, looking at her nails. "You know, when we're growing up in the City, we're all taught like you are to believe in Mother, in her ideals and dogma. We're taught that she is the only way by which we can do good, and that her ideals are the only things that save us from utter chaos, from the whole race wiping itself out. I grew up knowing that it was a good and noble thing to want to help the human race. I've been used, much as you have, like I'm just a tool, like in myself I'm worthless, not a human being. And even so I still believe it; I don't think that's wrong."

"And you still believe that Mother's way is the right one?"

She was silent for a long time. "If it isn't, then... Well, then there isn't a reason, is there? There isn't a reason for doing anything at all. If there isn't a guiding force of humanity, if Mother's love is only fictional, then we are just animals, we all do just act as you said, like machines with our buttons pushed by whatever. We eat, we make love, we give birth and we fight in a kind of daze, not really ourselves and not really anything. Just... Empty."

"But there's still the mute attraction beyond any of that, beyond any rationale or any idea of Mother. The bit of us that's only DNA, chemicals. The bit of me that looks at you and just feels bottomless want. Stupidly, wordlessly, completely without any language of any kind I want your skin, I want your hair, I want your eyes, I want your body. It doesn't have any meaning and yet - and yet it possesses everything else. It makes me go on, it makes me fight to create some sort of sense from the world. Something decent I could live with. Or maybe, I don't know, maybe the fact of being told what to do, what you should do and what *I* should do, you never got that. Maybe it all made sense, like an architect's plan."

"No," she said. "No."

She bit her lip, staring into his eyes. "You haven't given up, have you?"

"There's - I'm - nothing else."

"Don't go back. If you fight, you can't win."

"Who knows? Maybe Zia was right. If the New City is in as much of a mess as she thought it was, maybe they will be too paralysed by their own problems."

Neela shook her head. "It's bad, but not that bad. Not so that it would mean losing Purana Shahar, one way or another. They would destroy it, but they could never just let go of it. They couldn't let it go, however bad the other problems. That would come first."

"So the rumours have been true, then? The New City is in crisis?" Anil, he thought, it must be Anil. His heart rose, wild hope surging through him.

"There have been difficulties," she admitted reluctantly. "But," clutching his shoulder urgently, pressing her body to him, "not so that it will make any difference. The insurrection will be hopeless, please, believe me. Don't fight, not like this. Stay here with me, I can protect you, I can even get us out after the fighting's over. We could leave Purana Shahar, live our lives like we wanted, anywhere, the New City wouldn't know, wouldn't care."

"And wouldn't they suspect something in the organisation, if I wasn't there? Maybe they would realise and call the whole thing off. Maybe you do love me," he tried to be flippant, but the attempt failed. "You're allowing it to cloud your judgment."

There were tears in her eyes.

46.

There was one last thing he must do.

Purana Shahar had been ripped apart by another night of violence. Shop fronts smashed, houses and temples burnt, dead-eyed people sitting lost in the streets, looking about them in bewilderment. Dead bodies still littered street corners, swarmed upon by flies, picked at by dogs.

Some stalls warily opened for business. Many did not. There was little enough traffic on the streets. Everyone seemed to be waiting.

The electricity was off again; no water from the pumps; Jeysh heard from a chaat seller that the postal service had collapsed under a weight of bombs, both real and hoaxes; there were no rickshaw wallahs, Purana Shahar been deemed too dangerous to work in, mobs still rumoured to be on the rampage in various districts. Life appeared to be cheap, and easily lost. He picked his way through the flotsam covering the roads, smashed things dead things scraps of clothes trails of blood, wailing from upstairs rooms, promises of vengeance, a locked door, gaping holes, wood and windows torn away, warehouses gutted, tenements consumed and blackened by flame, smoke still rising, terror at the eerie stillness, the pause, like an intaken breath, before there would be more.

Through the Friday Gate and on towards home, everything so familiar and yet so dreamlike. These narrow streets that had mapped so much of his life, the tangle of electrical wires overhead, the cafes and workshops, motorcycles and wagons, shops normally bright with silk suddenly become geriatric toothless holes, the press of bodies and the blare of music replaced with stillness, silence.

I'm dead, he thought, already gone. This city like bones scattered about me.

He passed into the courtyard. The temple resounded to the prayer bell being shaken, amplified mantras squawking into the air, the supplication of beggars outside the gates. He paused to look around him, and was relieved to see that the riots had not passed into this shabby corner. The shopkeepers sat in front of their shuttered shops, sharing

cigarettes between them and gossiping in low tones. The customary washing did not hang from the balconies, but the women still stood, wary now, looking down into the yard and wondering, children playing obliviously at their feet.

So much of his life. He remembered bringing Sarita here, a bride, determined that he could bridge the chasm between his love of her and his life. And, he thought, as in so much else, I failed. Leading her, step by step, red footprints trailing her, all these details: the split wood and missing railings, peeling paint and faded carvings, plastic flowers by one door, the childish script of the barely literate scrawled upon walls, the same women looking, whispering, showering them with petals that day. Its solidity and surety he found unbearably painful, as if he could open the door and find himself back with his new bride, all this erased.

He climbed the steps with that older image of himself, stopping briefly to answer the questions of those standing watching, almost fleeing, almost disintegrating under the weight he felt within him. But he had to go on. He heard the same televisions, the radios and arguments and chatter, children crying, telephones ringing. A whole world he had excluded himself from.

His door as before, key still working, opening onto the same corridor, the piles of papers, letters, bills. Sarita's shoes and shawls, the crudely painted face of Mother staring out from the shrine at him, a half-burned incense stick, smoke curling upwards and carrying with it the devotions and pleas, a life together caught by the flames, consumed and borne upwards upon this little trail of waste matter.

She was where he knew she would be: in the kitchen, at her work. Bundles of bright clothes lay about her, abandoned as she looked upwards, her wide eyes suddenly lit in the warmth of love at seeing him, a brief moment before the memory clamped over her heart, she dropped her gaze and her face froze, as if carved from stone. He stood, longing to touch her, wanting to give her some form of comfort.

All the trust she had put in him. The future she had dreamed, stretching on and on. The thing she thought she had consented to when she agreed to marry him. And now two bodies, silent, an impossible distance between them. She raised her eyes and he saw in them everything that he had destroyed.

"So," she said simply. She sat like some graven image, graceful yet forgotten. "So I've lost you."

He watched her, remembering his terrible desire for her. Recalling the beautiful way she worked with her hands, her concentration, bringing beauty into the fabric before her.

"You should never have married me," she continued, "rather than do this."

"I never wanted this, any more than you did. When I married you, I wasn't trying to deceive you, not like that. I loved you, truly I did."

"And now you don't."

"No..." He was at a loss over how to begin. "No, I still do, but..."

"But what? You've found yourself someone new, haven't you? I can see it in you."

He hadn't wanted to admit it so bluntly. "Sarita, you don't understand, that's a tiny, tiny part -"

"I don't understand?" she was almost screaming, her voice breaking, face wet with tears. "I don't? You just leave, and I - I'm left sitting here, not knowing anything,

not knowing whether you had died or deserted me... How I prayed and prayed that you would come back, how every minute of waiting ran through me, and now here you are, and you say these things..." She slipped from the stool to her knees, hunched over in front of him. "Every time I sleep I have dreams where this happens, and now, in front of me, you're telling me these words. Please don't leave me; you can't, not now..."

He knelt down next to her and gently raised her to face him. "You don't understand-" he repeated gently.

"No, *you* don't understand," she told him heatedly. "I'm pregnant. I'm bearing your child."

He stared at her. She had covered her face and was sobbing.

"I'm not a proud woman; I could bear the shame, just in itself. But how am I going to eat? How am I going to keep a roof over my head? How will I - how will the child survive?"

"Sarita, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" she raised her hand as if to hit him, then let it drop, looking away. "It's meant to be a blessing for a married couple. Instead..." she was speaking softly now. "It's easy for you to run away, no? When you're bored, or sick of things. You don't have this thing inside you. What's left for me? I'm terrified," she wiped the tears from her face, "so so scared of how I will end up. I'd beg you to stay, I'd let you love this other woman, anything other than that."

"You maybe wouldn't think so, if you knew more about me."

She looked at him intently. "You're just saying things. Trying to make me hate you. Trying to make it easy for yourself."

"No, really, it's not that. It's too late for me to worry about that. Listen, please listen to me. I - I've never been entirely honest with you. In what I felt, yes, most of the time, but there's other things, other areas of my life that you haven't known anything about. It's never been fair on you. When I married you I thought that I could keep this side of my life separate from everything else. I was wrong, but it's too late now..."

"What are you saying?"

"I've been involved in... Bad things. Things I - I don't know how to say. This," pressing a data cube into her hand, folding her fingers about it, "this will tell you almost everything. I've spent years talking into it, telling it everything I haven't told you. All the things that maybe I should have told you. But you won't be able to open it within five hundred miles of Purana Shahar. And only you can open it, Sarita, only you."

"Did you just come back to mock me?" she asked him quietly.

"Listen to me, please. I wouldn't leave you, not pregnant but not childless either. Whatever else I've done, I've loved you, and I haven't come here to mock you. I've given you the data cube because I think you have a right to know everything, but that's not why I'm here. Sarita, I'm trying to save your life, and if I do, then Mother help me, it will be the first thing of any good I will have done in my life. So listen, please listen. You've got to leave. Not just this apartment, but Purana Shahar. You could be killed just for having known me, or you could be killed anyway, I don't know. A lot of people are going to die, and I wouldn't want you to be here during it. Especially now." He gripped her shoulders, staring intently into her eyes and trying to burn her image into his memory. "Don't waste even a minute. Pack the least you can afford and just take a bus to

anywhere, and then another, then another... Don't stop, for as long as you can keep going."

She looked at him levelly. "And it's going to be that bad?"

"One way or another, I can promise you that, at least. Look, here, it's all the money I have." He pressed it into her hands. "It'll keep you going for a while."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"I've been lying all my life. Now," he shrugged, "now it has to stop."

"I'll never see you again?"

He shook his head, unable, briefly, to speak.

She embraced him, then kissed him carefully on the lips. "I love you anyway," she said.

She sat and watched him as, for the last time in his life, he cried.

47.

When her husband had left, my mother gathered up her things. She remembered back to leaving her family, out in the dusty countryside, and feeling the same sense of numb loss, the known and the comfortable slipping from her. "I could have been anyone," she told me, years later. Just another woman, with all the infinite possibilities such a thing implies. The world opened, dizzying.

She collected together her sewing kit, a spare change of clothes, the shawl my father had bought her upriver, his cash, the data cube. She cleaned the kitchen, lit an incense stick before her shrine and prayed one last time. Then she left, locking the door behind her.

The way she told it to me, she first returned all the clothes that she had gathered in for alterations, repairs or embroidery. Then she walked through the noisy, stinking chaos of another Purana Shahar day, watching the crowds and the vehicles, the animals, the bartering and fighting and begging and leering, temple mantras blasted over loudspeakers, pop music sighing and shimmying from stall radios. When she at last reached the bus station she did as my father had suggested, climbing aboard the first bus she could find heading out of town.

Something died. And something else was born.

48.

He had never been physically involved in a military operation before. He planned and organised them, made sure of their timings and their geographical locations, but had never taken part. It was coldly fascinating to see his ideas translated into the physical world, with all the faults, panics and unpredictability of men. Watching the preparations beforehand, he had doubted the operation could ever work. It seemed too much of a mess, too human, his words and diagrams unable to be translated into actions. But as things

progressed, he began to see the raw logic of his planning underpinning movements and decisions. It fell into the correct pattern. It worked.

Several units were already engaged in a fierce, but ultimately diversionary, street battle with the Hands of Mother militia. Strikes by power and water workers in the south of Purana Shahar had provoked rioting. Several bomb hoaxes had been issued in crowded areas; the New City authorities would take a while to sort these out.

The main attacks happened at three in the morning. Five electricity sub-stations were simultaneously bombed, and with the strike in the South exacerbating the situation, most of the grid went down. In the Broadcasting building ahead of him, Jeysh saw the lights flicker out right on cue, and heard the stuttering roar of the generators kicking in. The power they supplied was only enough to keep the control room, the main studio and the transmitters working, with much of the rest of the building plunged into darkness.

Ayla gave the signal and the group moved in. The guards at the gate were cut down in a hail of gunfire, and the gates swiftly dismantled. Mortars were launched a second squad of advancing soldiers. Jeysh was finding it difficult to think under the storm of noise, the confusion of people, shouted orders, radio reports coming in from other attacks. Beside him, Ayla seemed calm. He took his cue from her, composing himself outwardly and hoping this external being would seep inwards, allowing him to think clearly. Ayla was not wearing battle fatigues, and was instead in formal dress, her hair pulled back and pinned up, her face carefully painted to cover the damage she had suffered. "This is a liberation, not a coup," she had told him. "We are not soldiers. The people must not see us as such."

The fight by the gates was brief; mortar and sniper fire had accounted for the advancing troops, and the way into the broadcasting complex was now clear. Leaving a detachment behind to rebuild and then guard the gates, they moved through. Jeysh looked at the remains of the soldiers as he passed: mostly young, still in their teens, recruited locally and paid little. They lay crumpled awkwardly in pools of their own blood, nothing now but pain to their relatives, parents, wives maybe, children maybe. What did you do wrong? He wondered. Nothing more than be in the wrong place at the wrong time; the music of chance that rules every life, every death. It was as meaningless as that.

Nothing seemed to make sense anymore.

The advanced party moved inside, then Jeysh, Ayla, the technicians and system crackers. The noise of gunfire always preceded them, their path strewn with the corpses of both sides, the stink of blood and smoke, the sharp taste of fear. Jeysh remembered clearly the maps he had obtained of this building and the timing of security patrols. He imagined himself walking through the plan, its perfect lines, everything revealed to him like he had the eyes of Mother looking down and seeing all, evaluating, judging, moving pieces of her game hither and thither. Dim corridors, torchlight, shouting, the stutter of guns, radio reports. Everything happened more quickly than Jeysh had expected.

A small group held out in the main broadcasting suite. A pile of dead troops and organisation fighters lay by the door, their discarded bodies attracting attention only as markers, a warning sign for what lay ahead. It was a difficult room to attack because the transmitting equipment was wanted intact. It would be from here that Ayla would make her speech to the world, signalling the organisation's intentions and asking the people of Purana Shahar to rise up in support. It was the hope of the technicians that this particular facility, often used by the New City military, would have the transmission power to

broadcast above any frequency jam the military tried to place over Purana Shahar. This would mean that not only could Ayla's message reach the people, but she could keep transmitting instructions to the other groups across Purana Shahar currently attacking various installations.

The two sides exchanged fire; valuable minutes passed.

He listened to the reports coming in, the status of each attack, plotting them one by one on his mental map. He weighted each success and failure, wondering if they had a chance, wondering if it could work. Any advantage they gained now, with the element of surprise, had to be pressed home quickly.

Two military bases had fallen more easily than expected, a third was resisting strongly and a fourth had caused so many casualties that the attack had been abandoned. An airfield outside Purana Shahar had been destroyed, but the group sent to disable another had not been heard from, and Jeysh consequently waited for reports of airborne movements. If, at this stage, the helicopters came in, the insurrection would be doomed. The only thing that could tip the balance away from the military would be a large degree of popular unrest, and as yet, outside of the southern suburbs, the populace seemed quiet. Maybe daybreak will see more response, he thought.

By now, reports should be reaching the New City. It should be slowly shifting attention from itself and its own crippling bomb hoaxes, strikes and infrastructure collapses. Does Anil know? He wondered. Has he guessed? If he had, then this was the moment he should be letting off bombs in the New City itself: create panic and confusion, divert attention away from Purana Shahar. It would be an almost suicidal gesture, as the authorities there would surely track him down swiftly enough. But they had always known, the three of them, that this journey would not see them survive.

He wondered if Neela was awake, watching events unfold, sifting through all the thousands of pictures sent by micro-cameras, CCTV and insect spies, descriptions from radio reports, email and webcasts, frequency surfing as she tried to discover what was happening, how deeply Jeysh had deceived her, how far he was willing to go.

Will they kill you for it, he wondered, if you've got it wrong? If you're not in control, if this is real. He didn't know what price her failure would have.

More messages were coming through: another military base fallen, a tank depot destroyed, the rioting spreading out from the southern suburbs. A bomb left in a car outside what they felt sure was a Hands of Mother nerve-centre had gone off, and reports were coming in of dead and wounded, many of them women and children. Jeysh felt sick of it all. Life, he thought, that thing, tea-drinking and idle gossip, back-breaking work for little pay, endless desires, the fucking and shopping and eating, the washing up, praying, Sarita's worship over her little shrine, eating chaat by the side of the road and just passing the day, everything seemed to be swallowed in this giant conflagration, this hate.

"What's happening?" Ayla asked him, her calm eyes still focused on the sporadic firefight ahead.

"Overall, less resistance than we had expected. But less rioting."

"When we take this thing on air. When we broadcast. Then. Has the city acted?"

"Not yet. I imagine the three bases that we haven't captured will have tried to contact it. I don't imagine we'll be able to jam them for long."

She frowned. "Maybe the New City is waiting to see how serious we are. Well--"

Abruptly, she turned from him and broke cover, walking with calm authority into the middle of the broadcasting suite, unafraid. A bullet passed near her and she did not flinch.

“Surrender,” she told its occupants. Nothing moved, no one fired. She moved to one of the mixing desks, behind which one of the guards was crouched. She held out her hand. “Give me your gun. Come.”

Wide eyed, spellbound, terrified, he did not move.

“Come,” she said more gently. “This isn’t your time to fight. There will be killing enough without you. Give me your gun; go home.”

Hands shaking, he obeyed her, handing her his rifle and standing motionless in front of her. The others slowly followed, breaking cover, looking sick with fear at the guns pointed at them. They handed their rifles over and huddled pathetically together. Ayla had a magical effect over them, their eyes dilated, their bodies shivering. She bowed her head in thanks to every one, and then they were led away. After they were gone, Jeysh watched her eyes shine, her nostrils flare. “The world is changing,” she said. “Can’t you feel it? We are changing it forever.”

On her word, the power workers in the southern district were told to switch back on the electricity. The dark patches of Purana Shahar sprang back into amber light, roads mapping quizzical alphabets, buildings bringing forth constellations, temple interiors shocked back out of dark mystery into Mother’s light. Ayla would record her message, and it would play endlessly on, repeating, drowning out other broadcasts for as long as possible. Perhaps long enough for her words to become truth.

She reapplied her make-up, smoothed back her hair. Several people fussed round her, sorting the lighting and adjusting the camera, asking her to sit in a different position. She almost - almost - resembled the girl Jeysh had known in Jutta’s shop, the girl that Jeysh had tried to prevent from getting mixed up in all this. She had come so far, so soon.

The studio fell silent, all apart from Jeysh’s radio receiver spitting out garbled and desperate messages from the outside conflict. He muffled it, held it close to his ear, trying to keep a grip upon all the proceedings and watch Ayla at the same time. The lights had paled Ayla but she still appeared resolute, her strong body held upright, her eyes glittering. The camera turned on and she stood silently for seconds, her face unreadable, perfectly still. Then she spoke, the words broadcast out across Purana Shahar, her steady picture, her confidence, her imperturbable calm. Jeysh recalled her horrified stare as he listed the contents and the abuses that had gone into her ice cream, the way she had watched it melt and fall into the dust, uneaten. From stacking shelves to this, voicing her opposition to a deity, to hundreds and maybe thousands of years of crushing power, the intolerable manipulation and cruelty of so many for so long, all in Mother’s name.

And the dead laying everywhere, he thought. The dead in military bases, in housing blocks, shot dead on the streets, lynched out of fear or killed in rioting. These dead used to justify more death, the dream held out of one day stopping all of this, of believing we can change how we live, how we see things, what we do to one another. The promise that, through these deaths, we will bring peace and understanding.

Wasn’t that, he wondered, exactly what Mother had said?

Jeysh couldn’t concentrate properly on Ayla’s speech, having to map some crucial battles around military compounds. She seemed to speak well and with dignity, a depth of emotion to her voice. He heard all the right phrases, the careful list of wrongs he knew

almost everybody would have suffered, or at least have known about, maybe without previously connecting them to Mother. He knew it was carefully rehearsed, but it still sounded human, convincing.

Maybe we do have a chance, he thought to himself.

Ayla's body bowed a little after she finished speaking, her shoulders stooped and a hand placed to her forehead. She walked back to Jeysh, her face ashen, her eyes dilated. She clutched his arm.

All around them banks of monitors were coming to life, showing camera shots from all around the city, other broadcasts trying to be piped through the transmitter, radio voices babbling from speakers. Traffic cameras, CCTV, the feed from reporters in precarious situations. Pictures of flames, the delicate blossom of explosions hanging in garlands over the town. Tanks, soldiers, bodies, blood. Empty streets and chains of light, dark bodies and smashed windows, the twitching of the dying, Ayla's face, mouths surrounding words that were not heard, bands of interference shooting through her, bleaching her skin, her clothes.

He sat her down and for long moments she stared at the flickering panoply, the pre-meditated violence and the thoughtless brutality sitting side by side with fear and indescribable pain. Women screamed as cars were stopped, the inhabitants burned alive or taken out to be shot or raped. Police fired on insurgents and rioters, killing them in waves. Officers on patrol were ripped apart limb from limb. Temples ransacked, shops destroyed, homes torched.

Ayla buried her head in her hands. He could hear her unsteady breathing.

"I spoke," she said, "and the words seemed to be meaningless. Just noise. I didn't believe myself as I was talking. Do we really have the power to change everything? As I said it, it didn't feel like it was true. I just felt like I did as a child, pretending that I knew things when really, really, I don't know anything at all."

She raised her head to stare at the screens, at the burning and the death boxed behind glass, broken into bits, bite-sized and comprehensible, controlled by the turning of crystals and the passing of electric current. It was so ordered, so rational. Unmanned cameras automatically programmed to follow certain movements, focus on certain actions. Microphones snapping to life over certain dialogues or certain tones of voice. A whole world created to keep the visceral bloody mess, the confusion and uncertainty, the pain and the casualties and everything that was real at enough distance, split into enough discrete parts to make it certain, morally comprehensible, a fantasy narrative where good and evil could be pretended, asserted. Only the convicted moment would be seen, and would be committed as reality, safely boxed, giving meaning to the people dying in front of them.

Ayla cried, a brief harsh interlude that was quickly stubbed out. "You plan for this, hope for this, and then when it comes it is unbearable. Has there been any change?"

"More riots. I think your broadcast is having its effect."

"But it was just words. Nothing. Anyone could say anything."

"The world is built on such foundations. Intangibles. Strands of logic. Nonsense. Whatever."

She shook her head. "It's grotesque."

More reports all the time. Slower progress, but the shock of their attacks and the speed of their execution seemed to count for them. The New City still had not responded. Maybe it was negotiating with Neela. He wondered what she would do.

“That may be so, but by now it’s unstoppable. From here, it has to run its course.”

“That’s hideous.”

“Right now, there isn’t another way.”

She let her gaze wander across the banks of television screens, the violence spilling out seeming to well up from inside her, inside him. “I understand Mother. I understand Her doctrine, the will it must take to try to prevent this all of the time, the love. If there really are other worlds and other peoples spread throughout space, I would try, I think, just the same to keep hold of them all, and enforce peace whatever the cost.”

“You think there are other worlds? You think there is a real Mother somewhere, pulling all the strings, planning and ordering us towards some blissful, beautiful future?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. She’s just the same, though, as the rest of us, isn’t she? All the blood has to make her decisions right. You can’t stop when you’ve started.”

“No.” It was true. It had its own logic, independent of whatever spawned it. It would grow to consume everything in its path. “And what if we win? Will you act like Her?”

“I’m not here to dictate. People should have their own ideas. Not mine.”

“But what do you yourself believe?”

“Let’s win first. Then maybe I can believe in something. Come, the sun will be rising. We should watch.”

It seemed a peculiar demand. Romantic, he thought, like her whole rebellion. But it made things easier for him. He assented, following her up a flight of steps and out onto a balcony. They looked out over Purana Shahar.

The sun lay like a bloodied, bloated clot on the horizon, its luminescence poisoning the sky. Lights lined Purana Shahar’s arteries, illuminated billboards punctuated blocks of deep shadow. Smoke hung in unhealthy palls here and there, distant rattles of gunfire and the low thuds of explosions tore at the dawn, but in the streets in front of them everything seemed quiet. The gates to the broadcasting complex had been repaired and further barricaded by cars. Ayla’s troops stood by their positions within the complex, waiting for what they hoped would never happen.

Beyond the low, messy whorls of Purana Shahar rose the New City wall, the glass spires within gleaming serenely as they reached up for heaven. Unreachable. Unknown.

Just about now, Anil’s bombs should be going off. Not that there would be any sign from here. He just had to hope. Soon, soon enough I’ll find out whether I’ve been a fool, whether my trust has been misplaced. He checked his phone, the one holding Neela’s cloned SIM card. A clear signal. Good.

“After all these years of Zia’s work,” Ayla said. “All the planning, all the dreaming...”

“You don’t just think the New City will nuke us?”

She shook her head. “Without us, how will they get their food, their cheap labour, their natural resources? They can’t survive without us.” She said it confidently enough. Who had she obtained her information from he wondered. Zia?

“I don’t know. Maybe they’ll think we’re too much trouble.”

“It’s a risk they will have to take, if they want their food and their goods. They will have to negotiate with us, or they will have to fight us, street by street and building by building. Otherwise what do they have? Nothing.”

“I often used to watch the night fall with Zia, out by the city wall. Back then this was all fantasy. Now we’re standing here, watching parts of Purana Shahar burn, not quite knowing how all of this will turn out.”

Except I do know, he thought. We will be crushed. This is all playacting, distant dreams, a romantic posture. All this hatred they had kindled, the people shot or burned or raped, would remain long after the rebellion itself had faded. It would scar future generations, lead to sectarianism where there had been none before. There was only one hope of a way out, just the one possibility.

If his act worked, then they would have broken the New City’s rule and lifted the population out from Mother’s harsh yoke. Whether for good or for ill, he thought, at least then our lives will hang by our decisions, and ours alone.

He would have committed a greater crime than the destruction of the Dead City. He stopped himself from thinking about it further.

Ayla looked like she had been waiting. Her face strange, doll-like, unreal under her heavy TV make-up. He imagined her lonely thoughts ranging across the smoke and dust, the fires hidden in narrow streets and dark courtyards, the unheard screams of rioting and fighting, the bloody birth of a new day. She was as distant from him as the firmament, as the stories of other worlds and other peoples. Where once he felt he could see into her heart, where he could manipulate and change her, she had now grown huge and distant from him, working strings of her own, manipulating the lives of women and men.

It never changes. These endless tricks, this eternal manipulation. If it wasn’t one side, it would be the other. Just human nature, he thought, just the way we are. No hope at all, not really, that it could ever be any different. Not us, not now, we’re implicit in it all. And so we all have to die. We must, if Sarita and her unborn child are going to have any future. He was suddenly certain, and easy with the decisions he had made.

“We should go back in,” Ayla said abruptly.

She walked back into the building. Jeys pulled out his phone to dial the number into the New City.

Abruptly, the signal cut out.

Shit, he thought.

He waited several seconds, alternately watching the phone and scanning Purana Shahar’s horizon. Nothing.

He had a very bad feeling about all of this. He headed back into the building, perturbed, trying to slow his heart rate, trying to think clearly. Replaying everything, trying to figure what had triggered this sudden shift.

Ayla, he thought with shock, pain stabbing through his chest. It has to be. That’s why she was standing on the balcony. She was waiting for something.

Ayla. She had survived shoot-outs against impossible odds, she had been absent when the compound had been bombed, she had walked unafraid through a hail of gunfire. He had believed her, like they had all believed her, because they had wanted such miracles to happen. But really, he thought, they don’t.

Neela told me to watch her. I was taken in by my own fantasy, but now at last I understand what she really said.

Of everybody, Ayla's betrayal hurt him the most. He almost howled. He had never wanted to induct her, never wanted to lead her along this path. And she had followed it further than anyone. It seemed so extraordinary, a profound move against everything he remembered her being, something in opposition to the very grain of her soul. And yet, it must be so.

He wondered if he could slip away, maybe take an alternative route that would avoid the studio, but Ayla had not descended the stairs. Rather, she was just the other side of the glass, watching him with her made up doll's face, a shimmering formal attractiveness about her. Without hesitation, he walked back through the door to follow her.

"The mobile frequency's been jammed," he told her.

She nodded and swallowed. "We knew they would counter attack. It must be about to begin. Is the radio still working?" he switched it back on, listened to report still coming in: casualty lists, ammunition counts, successes and failures. He nodded.

"We'd better get back downstairs and tell everybody to prepare."

She walked down the stairs back into the studio, either unafraid of him or unsuspecting. Jeysh followed, trying to work out what to do.

49.

One by one, the television screens winked off, leaving a row of dead eyes staring out into the studio. The reports from several garrisons cut dead. Lone troops made contact, their voices shaking with hysteria as they reported positions destroyed, defences overrun, heavy casualties. Rioters were being shot, or gassed, or crushed by swift columns of armoured vehicles. Several of the occupied military bases held out, describing black shapes overhead, possibly helicopters, enemy forces already penetrating the perimeters. It became clear by the middle of the morning that the military were reasserting control, with only one or two places still holding out, and several riots still raging in some of the suburbs.

Then the radio cut out. Then the power.

Silence suddenly reigned. Absolute stillness. Jeysh could hear the scrape of his breathing, the pounding of his heart, the ringing of his ears. With no natural light into the studio, they were plunged into pitch dark, reeling in the nothing. Blobs and ghosts drifted in his vision. It was perfect, absolute. He waited for the bullet to snap through his flesh.

Instead, Ayla's torchlight. "They must be attacking us," she said, no hint of panic in her voice. "I don't think we have any hope if we try to stand up against them. We'll all be killed, and nobody will have gained anything from it. It would be better for us to escape from here and then regroup. Unless we're all dead they can't defeat us; we can carry on fighting, recruiting until at last we overwhelm them. So we leave; fall in behind me."

Jeysh took his place behind her, checking his pistol and then his phone. Still no signal. He tried to work Ayla out in the scant time allowed to him. If she is a double

agent, he thought, she had her chance to kill me when the lights went out. He had expected it, and had spent those beautiful moments anticipating it. Maybe, he thought, they want me alive. Maybe they have guessed my plan, maybe Neela realised that I had something to do with the disturbances in the New City. If that's the case, then I've got a chance. They won't want to kill me.

If Ayla is the other double agent. If.

It would make sense for her to be. If Neela didn't trust him, or if she felt she needed a safeguard in case he failed to act in the way she had directed him to, Ayla was the obvious choice.

She could have been a New City plant from the beginning. His blood ran cold with the idea that he may have been so easily fooled.

Maybe I was, he thought. And maybe she is. Even so, there was still one thing she didn't know, one thing that nobody else knew.

If they wanted him alive, if they suspected he had one more trick up his sleeve, he had hope. After all, he thought, Ayla didn't kill me when she had the chance. Which either means they want me, or she isn't an agent. Any doubt over her was something that he could not risk. It was time for him to think only at and purely of the end. Strip away everything else. He could still kill all of them. Ayla's betrayal had only made it easier. Everything was clear and he knew what he had to do.

He raised his pistol and, without any time to take proper aim, shot Ayla in the back. It was from point-blank range, the muzzle of his gun touching the silk of her sari. The shock shuddered through him, noise reverberating in his head. Her body spasmed, her arms half-raised, a neat smouldering hole left in the silk. She seemed to hang, silent and motionless like a single frame of film, the beam of her torch pointing straight up, the echo still rebounding in the confined space. Then she twisted and buckled and he could see that her chest was a ruined, bloody mess, her eyes wide caverns, mouth drawn in a horrible little line.

In the instant that she fell, he threw himself sideways and scrambled through one of the studio exits, the other people in the room not sure what was going on, not reacting. He ran, feet clattering, heart pounding, tears streaming down his face.

Remember the layout, he thought. Move through it like it was the map. There were shouts now, and shots rang out after him, sparking off overhead ducting or sinking with dull thuds into walls and floor.

Left turn, forward, right turn, left turn. He could hear them chasing, footfalls and harsh breathing. He couldn't hold back and try to force them away, couldn't try to lose them. The military, if they were not already in the building, soon would be. He had to get out, and as quickly as possible.

Two more turns and he was at a ground floor window. He shot through the glass and then flung himself at the screen. It gave, wood tearing and glass breaking all around him as he fell through, crashing down on to concrete, wood splinters and glass slivers biting into him as he rolled, gained his feet. He was at the rear of the complex, little more than a concrete car park, the blind backs of apartments hunched away from the building, separated from it by a crumbling brick wall. Five or six New City soldiers had been posted to guard the area, no more, doubtless because if all went to the New City's plan, Ayla would lead her people out through the front entrance and into the arms of a large, well equipped force who could then pacify them quickly.

They reached for their guns but he fired first, hitting one of them and making the others scatter for cover. He ran across the yard to one of the parked cars, firing again to hold the troops back. As he broke into a car, his pursuers appeared at the broken window and immediately started shooting at him. Bullets crashed in to the chassis, cracked the windscreen, dug into the dashboard in front of him. The New City soldiers, wrongly assuming that this new group must be attacking them, started firing at the window, forcing those inside to back off. Jeysh took his chance, hot-wiring the car, reversing it back through another spray of bullets, belting himself in and then accelerating towards the compound wall, foot pushed to the floor.

He was lucky; he had picked the weakest part of the wall. The front of the car crumpled but the wall gave way, only one brick thick, collapsing onto the windscreen and pushing it through in a mess of sagging safety glass and ugly puncture holes. His face was gouged by glass and rubble as the car staggered through, plunging into a foul backstreet quagmire, pigs and goats and mounds of litter, homes made from plastic sheeting, corrugated iron, ramshackle layers of cardboard. Animals, children, hunched old women all desperately scrambling through pig and human shit to get out of his path, a woman screaming as she picked up her child, bullets whining in accompaniment, pinching fabric, shredding cardboard, hissing into shit and raising foul plumes. He rammed open the car door and forced himself out, slipping in the mire, plastic sheeting flapping around him, the zip of bullets only just missing their mark. He made himself run, gun held out to clear away the people, slipping down the first side alley he found, moving on through puddles of filthy stagnant water, mud, pits of rubbish, the curious eyes of Purana Shahar's poorest fastened on him, a strange detached fascination about them. Turn again, another street as before, but now he began to see men like himself: clothing torn, undressed wounds, wild-eyed and limping. He saw rows of buildings that had been gutted, still smouldering, the remains of ransacked goods strewn across the roads. Broken glass, the stink of smoke, young women and old men sitting in the holes of shops, sifting through the wreckage, nursing the shattered bodies of others. He put the gun away and turned several more streets, making himself slow to a walk, and soon he became safely lost in the unmapped maze of Purana Shahar's back streets.

They wouldn't take long to find him, he knew that. Now that he had got away, his face would be everywhere. Spies would know, CCTV and insect monitors would be instructed to search specifically for his features, to listen for his voice, watch for the way he walked, anything to identify him or anyone like him, map a path for the military to follow.

They might follow a few false leads at first. But they would get him eventually.

He tried his phone again, but the signal was still jammed. He had guessed it would be. They probably knew by now that whatever he was trying to do would take some sort of signal by phone or two-way radio. All such frequencies would be out. He only knew of one woman who may be able to get his phone call through.

Neela.

He took a shifting, indirect route to the great bazaars. Black helicopters often hung overhead, rotor blades thundering, public addresses blaring out, a tape on repeat warning people to go home, stay inside. On many streets soldiers stood in groups, sometimes talking, mostly staring warily about them. He occasionally heard gunfire in the distance, while more closely at hand he could smell the stench from innumerable

fires, saw guttering flames lick at the innards of buildings, stray dogs lapping blood from burst bodies, people screaming, dazed or raving, some busy looting whatever they could find. Corpses clothed and not, slumped in streets, needlessly mutilated or beheaded, flesh ripped apart, entrails and organs spilling their horrible offerings across filthy, blood-smeared asphalt. No lovers by the fountain, but several carcasses, the remnants of slaughtered animals, the burning skeletons of market stalls, fruit and vegetables and sweetmeats and silks scattered across the ground, trampled into each other, into the dirt and the dogshit. From somewhere he heard the sound of fighting continuing, pleas and lamentations, shouting.

He found the right door, shot the lock off (the detonation reverberating through the deserted market, scattering birds and dogs and wild cats, the dead unmoved, the stalls still burning, nothing to break the nightmare surrounding him) and stumbled up the steps to her apartment.

He shouted her name repeatedly, banging on her door. At last he heard the bolt go back, and the door opened.

Pain squeezed through him. She stood there staring up at him, her face its customary mask but her hand gripping the door so tightly that her fingers had turned white. All his love for her raging through him.

“You survived,” she said.

His gun was pointing at her midriff, whether deliberately or not he didn't know. He moved forward and she retreated slowly into the apartment. He crossed the threshold, pushed the door shut and bolted it, never taking his eyes off her.

She stood in the middle of the room and watched him. “It won't take them long,” she said, “before they're here.”

“I know.”

She was crying.

“I killed Ayla, “he told her quietly. “She was your guarantee, wasn't she?”

“I pleaded with you not to go. There never was any hope. I may still be able to hide you; we might manage to get away-”

He shook his head. “That's not why I'm here. There isn't any escape anymore. But that doesn't mean I've lost just yet. There's one last throw of the dice.”

She stood perfectly still, hips thrown back and breasts pushed forwards. “Go on.”

“The thing is, I can't do it without your help.” He laughed, sounding to his own ears like a maniac. “That's a good one, isn't it? Every time in the past when I thought you were being honest with me, when I thought I had the *real* you, when I thought you loved me, every time you set me up. Yet here I am, asking for your help again.”

“I was as honest as I could have been.”

“It's just that what, you love these helicopters more? These soldiers killing unarmed civilians maybe? What about the bombs you helped set?”

“And you have done so much better?”

“I might. With your help. I smuggled a nuclear bomb into the New City. I've been waiting for this moment a long time, and now I can't do it without your help. All I have to do is dial a New City number and the bomb goes off. I even cloned your phone, because I knew you would have access through the New City's firewall. Simple, except...” he shrugged. “They seem to be jamming the frequency. As you managed to

bring down the transmitters in this area before, I imagine you'll be able to get a telephone call through. Just one call, that's all you have to do."

"And if I don't?"

He laughed again. "I can hardly make you. But I'm interested how dedicated you are to the New City. You've put it in front of everything and look where it's taken you. If the bomb goes off, we'll probably both die in the blast. If you refuse to help me, I kill you. How has the City served you here? You die or you die, and if I kill you, well what use has your love ever been? You will have been used and then thrown away, just another agent. Whatever you feel, whatever you've done, you mean that little to them. It's what I hate about the New City. You claim to be defending a moral right but what has it done to you?"

She looked down, suddenly broken, a small thing. "Please stop. Just stop. Isn't what has happened enough already? I can't bear it any more."

"I can't bear it either." He passed a hand in front of his eyes, hating to watch her suffer. "That's my whole point. Whatever we do, whatever we try to do, it will all be wrong. Not just us, but anyone. It all leads back to the same thing, every time. It has to end, right here. We don't have another chance."

"You should have pushed me off the Minar when you had the chance." She looked down at her hand. "Just then everything seemed clear. Now... I could tell you how they thought it all up, how I just acted like a robot and did what I was told. I could say that they told me to seduce you, to assassinate Zia, to twist Ayla into a traitor. I could say they directed me to bomb the women's refuge. But I was the one that did it, and I did it freely, in the same way that I loved you freely. I can't pretend that it's anyone else's fault. I wish I had died." She looked at him, feeling her whole being destroyed by the realisation, by this responsibility that was hers alone. In the black light of her eyes he could see the bombs, the corpses, the terrible lies, everything she had become. Her game had opened out and swallowed her life.

She felt herself dissolve, sick meat hung upon bones, a grotesque knot of revulsion hidden by garish layers of cloth. She hid her face in her hands, her chest heaving, her heart a terrible mess of the destruction she had wreaked.

"It isn't enough for me to say I didn't realise, that I was duped. I did it anyway." She wiped her tears, looked up. "It's too much for me to bear. You're right, it has to end."

"You'll do it?"

"You should have killed me. Why didn't you?"

He shrugged. "It's like you said. I had a choice too."

"All those times I duped you. I even tore you away from Sarita."

"I wanted you to."

She pushed back her hair and looked away. "You want me to bring down the jamming transmitters?"

"I only need time enough to make one call."

She nodded. "It'll take me a few minutes. You'll be able to make a call from up on the roof. That's the best place. Down here the signal is too weak, and besides, if they - *when* they come, it'll give you a little more time. Now, give me your gun. Chances are, the military will get here before the process is finished. I might be able to hold them up."

She had composed herself. He looked at her and saw the same impossible, unreadable mask slipped back across her face. It could be one last trick, the one final way of stopping him. He stared into her eyes: the chocolate irises, the hard black pupils, windows onto nothing.

She could send me to the roof and I could be shot down anyway, he realised. She may never lift the jamming field. She still holds all the cards and I can still do nothing but trust her.

He reversed the gun, holding it by its muzzle as he handed it to her. Her hand folded over it, finger on the trigger.

He waited for the report, skin crawling, a dizzying longing for pain.

She smiled, radiant, tragic, reaching forward to softly kiss him. Their touch lingered, fragile and desperately human, then she drew back, her sigh splitting his heart. "Now go," she told him softly.

He walked through the strange tumbled intimacy of her life here, all the pieces of her that he had never really known. What I would have given, he thought, to have shared that life with her. Opening the little door at the back of the room and climbing up a narrow staircase to the roof.

The blue sky hummed, beautiful and sheltering. Purana Shahar shimmered beneath it, scarred by lines of smoke, the black dots of helicopters hanging like lethal birds of prey. The roof fell away to the jumbled streets beyond, the messy ranks of windows and balconies, a forest of aials, electricity and telephone cables wound like heavy vines across walls, roof terraces opening up intimate scenes, doors swinging on hinges, temples and offices and apartments, the universes of millions spread like tiny bubbles before him. Further in the distance, the silver bones of the New City stretched up, shining in the sunlight.

No signal. He held the mobile, watching. Is this where it all ends, he wondered. Here, on the verge of fulfilling the only promise he had been true to, everybody else betrayed for this single, simple moment.

The signal bars suddenly flipped up, one after one after one after one. Perfect reception.

Eyes swimming with tears, he stared at it all. All the minute and terrible detail, the hope and the decay, the hugeness, the incredible heartbreaking endlessness. He wanted to be obliterated, to spread into it.

Shots rang out from below. Several bursts of machine-gun fire punctuated by pistol rounds. Then silence.

Just me, he thought. Everyone else I ever knew is gone. The buildings fell into elaborate symmetry around him. He looked across at the New City and felt the hate rise up through him. Digit by digit, he entered the number.

50.

The sun has come over the horizon and the fire has gone out. I can hear the goatherds calling to their flocks; it is time to leave.

If my mother knew what happened to my father, she never said. “It’s not important, “she would tell me when I was still young enough to ask, her eyes carefully on her stitching. “What’s important is here: the bread that you eat, the sun that looks down at you, the beat of your heart and the blood in your veins. “

She gave me the data cube shortly before she died. I always keep it about me, its smooth surfaces and sharp edges a constant reminder of the distance from her birth to mine. Sometimes at night I lay awake, its coldness heavy in my hand, and I look up at the stars, imagining them to be city lights, imagining I am staring up into my mother’s past. It is a dumb thing, now my mother is dead, and even when she was alive, it told me nothing. I have never heard it speak, and perhaps my mother didn’t either, but I keep it all the same. One day, maybe, someone will come through the desert who knows how to make it talk.

But enough dreaming. For all her stories, my mother could be a harsh woman if she caught me idle, my thoughts in the sky. She would fetch her stick (which I hold now, and with which I must break her skull) and beat me, even when she was old and ill, and I was strong. She hated dreamers.

I raise myself to my feet, stretch out stiff legs and rearrange my shawl. There she lies in front of me, blackened bones and ashes. I walk over to her, circle the body three times, then stand by her head, eyeless and tongueless, no laughter left and no stories. I take the staff in both hands, lift it up and bring it down hard on her skull.

The bone shatters, and something escapes.

©Jethro Perkins
Canning Town
27/07/04
Revised 07/10/04