

In the Shadow of Her Wings

Ashok Banker

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Ashok Banker lives in Bombay with his wife and two children. He is the author of nine novels, including Vertigo and Byculla Boy, and many screenplays. He is the author of India's first English TV serial, A Mouthful of Sky. He is also the author of The Pocket Essential Guide to Bollywood, a reference book on India's film industry. In 1990, he quit his job in advertising to write full time. He says in The Week., India's leading news magazine, "Ashok Banker the script writer is subsidizing Ashok Banker the novelist." He has sold scripts for hundreds of TV shows and four Hindi feature films. Banker's first publication in the science fiction and fantasy field was in Altair in 1999. In 2000, he published "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" in Artemis. And in 2001 he published three stories in the field: "Devi Darshan" in Weird Tales, and two in Inter-zone, "www.cyber-whore.com" and "In the Shadow of Her Wings."

In this near-future fantasy, a brutal political story with deep resonance, an assassin is sent by the government to kill the leader of a feminist separatist cult. Of course, things don't work out as planned. It is an interesting contrast to Ted Chiang's story in this volume.

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Dravid expected Kali border security to be much tighter than it was. All he got was a body search that was routinely thorough, and a few old-fashioned tests and checks. It reminded him of a visit he had made as a young right-wing Hindu activist to an Indian nuclear-weapon testing facility back in 1998, after the Pokhran atomic tests. His briefings had been correct in this respect: Kali did not seem to have much use for 21st-century safe-care.

The Border guards finished with him in a few minutes, then led him down into the basement of the Border Post and on through a concrete corridor that was at least a kilometer long in his estimation. Although there were far too many turns to be certain: it could be twice as long, or half. He was surprised at the absence of defences. After all the buildup, it was an anticlimactic letdown. Could the disputed area truly be this easy to infiltrate? A single platoon of Black Cat commandos armed with nominal safe-care weaponry could take this border post and entrance in a few minutes, he estimated. The dozen-odd border guards he had seen above ground had borne no visible weapons. Ridiculously easy.

Then he remembered the first and longest of his briefings.

Shalinitai, the renegade Kaliite-turned-consultant to the Disputed Territories Task Force (DTTF), had commented on this very fact during her lecture on Kali's political history: "Do not be fooled by Kali's apparent lack of defences. Like the Goddess after whom it is named, the disputed region that aspires to nation status under the name of Kali is armed with something far more dangerous than physical weaponry. She is armed with the power of the spirit. The power of faith."

Dravid had resisted the urge to yawn. He had heard this kind of "empty-hand, spirit-power" mania too many times to even give it credence by mocking it. He had also seen any number of similarly deluded cults and spiritual blind-fathers walk like fools into the trajectory of safe-care weapons, only to have their very real physical bodies torn to shreds by unspiritual projectiles and explosives that needed no faith in invisible deities to perform their lethal function. Faith might move mountains; but lasers cut flesh. And without flesh to sustain it, there was nothing left to harbor faith.

Sensing his bored skepticism, the renegade had paused and sighed softly. Almost resigned to his indifference, she had added, “Kali exists only because the people support its existence and because India is still a democracy. That is a far more formidable defence than any safe-care arsenal.” This he found more acceptable. It was a political argument, one of the classic cornerstones of every nationwide cult that was allowed to fester in the armpit of a republic under the guise of freedom of faith and right to political dissension.

There had been an adversarial gleam in her dark eyes as if challenging him to challenge this statement. But Dravid was too much of a cynic to waste time on political arguments either. As far as he was concerned, they could dispense with the briefings and motivational lectures. He didn’t need the comfort of political conviction to help him do his job. Assassination was murder no matter what the justification. The only motivation he needed was the paycheck.

As if sensing this from his lack of risibility, Shalinitai had paused in her briefing. Deviating unexpectedly from her subject, she had poured herself a glass of plain water and said, “You will find no resistance when you go to assassinate Durga Maa. It will be the easiest assassination you have ever committed.”

Dravid had waited for the punchline he knew was coming. Moral lectures always had a punchline.

“It’s living with the knowledge of your act that will make the rest of your life unbearable,” she said. He hadn’t smiled. He hadn’t needed to. She knew the smile was there, behind his inscrutable face. He read the awareness in her eyes and sought the inevitable frustration she must feel after having made her strongest argument and failed. There was none. Only a faint glimmer of sympathy.

“I pity your task, assassin,” she had said.

He hadn’t smiled at that either. He had been pitied before too. It was one of the most predictable responses, apart from self-righteous rage.

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The corridor curved one final time and ended abruptly in the entrance to a very narrow stairwell. Dravid drew his large frame in to accommodate the inconveniently low ceilings and close walls. As they climbed, their footfalls echoed jarringly in the confined space. The short, lithe, smaller-built female guards moved easily upward, setting a hard pace for him to match. He had visited enough ancient Indian fortresses to understand the principle: Invaders would be forced to attack in single file, crouched awkwardly low. A single guard could defend the stairwell, and the piled bodies of the wounded and dead would make progress even more tortuous. It was a virtually impregnable defence—a thousand years ago. He glimpsed tiny slits in the wall and ceilings, and recalled similar apertures all along the corridor. He had taken them for air vents at first but now understood that they were in fact guard posts. The corridor was lit from above, illuminating him and the guards as they climbed endlessly, but effectively concealing the watching guards stationed behind the walls.

Dravid wasn’t impressed. Medieval subterfuge and manual defences. were no match for modern safe-care. A single safe-care biogas capsule, delivered by any number of methods into the corridor, could wipe out the entire garrison of unseen defenders. The self-consuming biogases would take barely three seconds to render the air safe again and that would be the end of Kali’s stupidly outdated defence system.

He had climbed more than a thousand steps and was suffering from the bent posture and elbow-and-shoulder-bruising closeness of the concrete walls when the stairwell finally widened and rose high enough for him to straighten up.

The alcove resembled a small circular chamber in a stone tower, again of obviously medieval design. It was ironic in a way, he thought as the guards led him through a series of corridors and transitional chambers. Whatever little he had seen of Kali so far was clearly modeled on the architecture of medieval India. Yet Kali itself went to great pains to insist it was not part of India. Not according to the 700,000-odd renegades who had taken refuge in this tiny pocket of disputed territory, defying Indian national laws and international sanctions to declare its independence as a sovereign nation in its own right. To these cultist fanatics, this little area of Central India bordering the legitimate Indian states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa was the nation of Kali, a concept as fiercely independent as the concept of Israel had become after the Nazi pogroms of World War II, almost three-quarters of a century earlier. The world's only all-woman nation. To the Indian Government, though, this was simply Disputed Territory, just as areas of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir had once been designated before the Re-Merger with Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal ten years ago. United India could not afford to sanction a Kali, let alone acknowledge its legitimacy.

That was why he was here now. To end the problem by rooting out the source. Destroy the brood-mother and the species dies out.

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The guards fell back, surprising him. He could not conceive of a reason why he should be allowed to proceed unescorted. Yet when he turned to look at them questioningly, the one who had led the detail, a short, dark-skinned, muscular woman with scar tissue obscuring her left cheek and neck, pointed unmistakably down the corridor. He was to proceed alone. Dravid shrugged, amused at yet another ludicrously amateurish security lapse, and walked on. He had gone several hundred paces before he realized what was odd about this particular corridor. His footfalls made no echoes.

The reason for this became clear when he reached the end of the corridor, another circular chamber. A slit in the wall revealed not the darkness of the subterranean passage or the diffused top-lighting. Instead it exposed a slice of brilliant blue sky. He was undoubtedly in a tower. He realized with a start that this was the very same edifice that he had seen on various sat-images during his briefings. One of several hundred such towers positioned at regular intervals along the border of the besieged territory, ringing the entire disputed territory like giant stone sentinels. They were believed to be guardian outposts constructed to watch over the Line of Control that demarcated Kali's disputed land space from the surrounding Indian territory.

"Envoy Dravid," said the woman who was waiting in the sunlit tower chamber. "Please be seated." She indicated a thin woven mat on the ground, identical to the one on which she was seated cross-legged in the yogic lotus posture. Dravid scanned the room and surrounding area and couldn't believe his luck. No guards, no weapons, no defences. In short, no safe-care at all. Dravid was unable to believe that his mission could be this easy to accomplish. He looked at the woman, who was watching him calmly.

"I am Durga Maa," she said. "The one you seek to assassinate. Tell me, Envoy, would you like to kill me at once, or would you like to maintain the pretense of a diplomatic debate for a while?"

Dravid blinked rapidly.

She smiled. "I suggest that we get the assassination over with first. That way, your mind will be free to discuss the larger issues at stake here, without distraction."

And she opened her arms in the universal Hindu gesture of greeting. "Sva-swagatam, Mrityudaata." Welcome, Angel of Death.

Even if it was a trap, as every meg of data in his mental archives said it must be, Dravid could not let the

opportunity pass. His not to question why. His but to kill and fly.

He hesitated only long enough to run one final scan-check. The result was the same as the previous three times. It was an ID-OK, confirmed through half a dozen crosschecks including a perfect DNA match. This woman seated before him was Durga Maa, the founder and leader of Kali. She was his target.

He used his thumbnail to circumscribe a tiny crescent-shaped incision in his left wrist and withdrew the reinforced silicon needle from his forearm. It was barely ten millimeters in diameter and he had to grip firmly. He drew it across his palm, wiping it clean of the tiny flecks of blood and gristle that coated it. Tinted to resemble a prominent vein, it was a translucent green that caught the sunlight as he moved across the chamber. He was at full alert now, his keenly honed senses prepared for any resistance or ambush. There was none.

She smiled as he inserted the lethal tip of the needle between her ribs. Her breast was yielding and warm against his hand. He pressed hard, brutally, and the entire nine-inch length entered her chest, sliding in easily. He pictured it puncturing her left lower chamber, spilling precious life-fluid. In her eyes, he watched the look of serenity flicker and fade.

“Kali be with you,” she said.

And then she was gone, her body slumped sideways, legs still locked in the yogic position. He kicked at her thighs, releasing their grip, and she sprawled out more naturally. Darkness pooled beneath her body.

He stood and looked around, unable to believe it had been this easy. He felt a qualm of unease. Her attitude, the knowledge that he was to assassinate her, her serene acceptance of her death, these were not things he was equipped to deal with. Even with the most fanatical of cult leaders, there was always the final struggle for survival, the organism’s instinct for self-preservation. But she had been truly ready.

He pushed these thoughts from his head. The most difficult part still lay ahead. Escape. He had analysed the possible options and they were all negative-rated. The least likely to fail (12.67%) was by blasting a hole in the wall of this tower and speed-climbing down the outside. But that was assuming the guards were armed and prepared for violent retaliation, which they didn’t seem to be.

A circular stairway ran around the perimeter of the chamber. Dravid went down the stone stairs quickly and silently, alert for the first sign of armed response.

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He descended to the next level, and found himself in an almost identical chamber. It was as sparsely furnished, with the same chick mats on the floor. And a woman.

He stopped short at the sight of the woman. She was younger than Durga Maa, but premature grayness made her seem older at first glance. She was dressed similarly but not precisely the same way. He found no match for her in his records. She was also very beautiful.

She looked up as if she had been expecting him and indicated a bowl of steaming tea and two earthen cups.

“Greetings, Envoy Dravid. With the demise of our beloved sister, I am now Durga Maa. Would you like to kill me at once, or will you partake of some refreshment first?”

And she opened her arms in that same gesture of acceptance.

Dravid thought it was a ploy at first. A delaying tactic intended to stall him until the guards arrived. But his

internal systems showed nobody else approaching within a hundred-meter radius. No safe-care weaponry in the chamber. Nothing capable of doing him any physical harm.

His system announced an ID match for the woman seated before him. With a rising sense of unease, Dravid checked and rechecked the scan results until he could no longer doubt them. Somehow, in the space of a few seconds, she had changed her DNA structure internally, although her physical appearance remained the same. To all intents and purposes, she had become exactly what she claimed she was: Durga Maa, leader of Kali, down to the smallest twisted strand of genetic composition.

She poured tea for him. “You cannot comprehend how two women could possess the same identity. It is a scientific impossibility, you think.”

She held the clay cup out to him. He made no move to take it. He was still running checks and rechecks to examine every variant possible, tapping into the orbital systems to access greater processing power and other archives.

She set the cup down before the mat intended for him.

“You are right,” she said. “Science cannot explain it. But faith can. There is only one Durga Maa—at a given point in time. But on her demise, her entire personality and being, what we like to call her aatma, passes to a successor. That is I.”

“Aatma,” he repeated scornfully. “You mean, soul?”

She poured tea for herself. Her movements were delicate, assured, and very pleasing to watch. She had a fine bone structure that would have been considered beautiful among North Indians, but far too Aryan and brahminical to South Indian eyes.

“It does exist,” she said. “No matter that science cannot prove it does. I now possess Durga Maa’s soul, which makes me Durga Maa.”

She gestured at herself. “This physical shell is immaterial. It is the person within that matters. I am the avatar of Kali, just as Durga Maa herself was while she lived.”

Dravid chuckled softly. “Avatars and aatma. What is this? A TriNet Fiction? Save the spiritual rant for blind-fathers.”

She held the bowl up in both hands, Asian style. “You are skeptical,” she said, sipping tea. “It is to be expected. But I can establish this as a scientific fact which your technology can verify beyond doubt.”

She set the tea down on the floor and spread her arms in the same universal gesture of acceptance.

“Assassinate me too. And see for yourself.”

He hesitated for barely a fraction of a second. Then decided he had nothing to lose. This time, he used the instrument at hand, smashing the tea cup and drawing the jagged clay edge across her jugular, severing it on the first try. He watched her bleed to death, spraying her life across the stone floor. The beam of sunlight shining through the jet-ting arc turned vermilion briefly.

Because he was curious and because it was the easiest option, he proceeded to the next lower level.

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There was another woman waiting in another chamber. This one was much older, with the wizened

semi-oriental features of a Northeastern Indian. A Mizo or a Naga. Descendant of the head-hunting tribes of the Indo-Burmese hills that had been converted to Christianity by relentless American Baptist missionaries a few generations ago. She did not speak as much as the earlier one. But his scans showed once again that impossible change in DNA even while her physical appearance remained the same.

He killed her with vicious efficiency, snapping her neck with a fierce twist of his powerful arms. This time, he observed the change after death closely. His scans showed a change to another DNA structure. Not a change, he realized. A reversion to the woman's original identity before she became the avatar of the Goddess.

A rage swept through him, replacing the initial sense of bewilderment. This could not be happening. It was not part of the plan. It was a scientific impossibility.

He took the stairs with athletic speed, reaching the next level an instant before the change occurred, and through the "eyes" of his system he watched the conversion in progress, the very molecular structure of the ribonucleic strands altering. Then he killed the fourth avatar—for want of a better term—before she could even speak. She had a mole on her left eyebrow and the darkened skin and sallow features of a Malayalee. There was coconut oil on her hair and it smeared on his fingers as he held her skull and smashed it against the stone wall repeatedly.

This went on for several more levels. Chasing the "aatma" as it flew from woman to woman. Assassinating each new avatar of Durga Maa as she was genetically re-birthed.

By the 23rd level, he found himself tiring. His clothes and body were soiled with blood and gristle as well as traces of each woman's individual identity. Tea, coconut oil, sweater yarn, pooja threads, rangoli powder... His systems showed that the tower was precisely one hundred stories high. Seventy-seven more levels to go. And the sat scans had analysed his first batch of data transmission: one hundred such towers ringed the perimeter of the disputed territory, each with a hundred levels. Assuming that each housed a successor, that meant a sum total of 10,100 women to be assassinated.

He stopped and reexamined his options.

"It will be easier if you accept it," said the 23rd avatar. A very diminutive young woman, barely more than a girl. A Maharashtrian, with the dark skin and black pupils of the Dalits of the Deccan Plain, descendants of the ostracized scheduled castes of the 20th century, the "untouchables" that Mahatma Gandhi had renamed "harijans, children of God" and whom Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had renamed Dalits. She was weaving a shawl on a charka, using her feet to grip the wooden spinney, and working steadily as she spoke. "The more you fight it, the harder it will be for you later."

He spoke with barely concealed anger, his frustration getting the better of his legendary self-control. "How do you do it? You transmit the genetic coding through orbitals? But then how do you effect the morphing? This kind of technology doesn't exist! It has to be some kind of illusion." But no illusion could deceive the massive processing power that he had accessed to check and recheck the 22 "impossible" transformations.

She worked the spinney, weaving the red, white and saffron strands of wool expertly as she spoke. "Is it so hard to accept, Envoy? You are Indian, like us. Not a Westerner with a mind fogged by science. You know that some things cannot be explained, only accepted."

He sat down wearily, his blood-splashed feet staining a pile of spotless white wool, not caring. She clucked her tongue and moved the wool aside, picking out the stained strands and putting them in a separate pile for cleaning later,

“All right,” he said, deciding there would be no harm in a brief theoretical discussion while his systems sought a more scientific explanation. “Assume for the moment that you are all avatars of the Devi. But—”

“Nako re, baba,” she said. “No, my brother. We are only women. Ordinary mortal women. Only when the living avatar of the Devi dies, then the next of us in line takes her place. Samjhe? Understood now?”

She reminded him irritatingly of his mausi, a paternal aunt who was always completely self-assured and unplaceable. He gritted his teeth in frustration.

“But how many times can it possibly happen? There has to be a limit!”

“Kashasaati limit?” she asked him in the matter-of-fact Maharashtrian way. “You know your religious mythology. A Goddess can be reborn infinite times, because a Goddess on the mortal plane is aatma, pure spirit. And an aatma cannot be killed. Read your *Bhagwad Gita* again. Weapons cannot cleave it, wind cannot blow it away, fire cannot burn it, water cannot dissolve it, earth cannot consume it, it is the soul immortal.”

He was silent. The very same mausi had taught him this exact same verse from the *Gita*, in the original Sanskrit. With very little effort he could recall her sitting cross-legged before the wooden chaupat propping up the oversize hand-calligraphed copy of the *Bhagwad Gita*, chanting the Sanskrit slokas in that maddening, unforgettable singsong manner.

“Then there is only one solution,” he said at last. And stood up.

She looked at him over the rims of her spectacles, pausing in her weaving.

“I have to nuke you all. Wipe out the whole of Kali in one shot. That way, there won’t be any more bodies left for your damned Goddess to take refuge in.”

He walked away from her, then paused. He really should kill her. He had said too much. Perhaps she had some way of informing her compatriots, of mounting a defence against the genocide he proposed.

But for some reason he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He consoled himself with the thought that he would be killing them all anyway in a few moments.

As he walked away, the sound of the charka whirring began again behind him.

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It took surprisingly long for him to secure the necessary permission to “salinate” the disputed territory. It was a final alternative listed in his command menu, and as the official Envoy to the rebels, he had the authority to take the decision. Kali had become a sore on the belly of United India over the last decade. The noises of commiseration from overseas had begun to sound more like rumbles of discontent, especially after so many American and European women had emigrated to the renegade “nation.” His superiors had anticipated the need for a final solution and had sent him in with all the necessary preparations in place. They wanted this problem solved now, one way or the other, before the tri-annual summit of Non-Aligned Independent Nuclear Nations the following week in New Delhi.

He filed a charge of discovery of nuclear weapons and testing on Kali territory, proof of the renegades’ terrorist intentions and capacity. He initiated a program that simulated a crisis situation developing on his arrival in the disputed territory. Reviewed later by the inevitable Human Rights panel, it would perfectly simulate a series of events in which all his accompanying officers and staffers were successively tortured and brutally killed by Kali terrorist troops and then he himself was taken on a tour of their formidable nuclear facility in order to inform and warn the world of Kali’s intention to strike blind at India. There

would be holes unfilled, and gaps, but they would only add to the authenticity of the whole charade.

The nuclear orbitals were positioned and armed, ready for release on his command.

He had retreated through the tunnel by this time, almost at the peripheral guard base from which he had entered. The guards had offered no resistance at all, not even an attempt to stop him. He smiled at the absurdity of these people. And felt a rush of joy at their imminent destruction.

He triggered the nuclear orbital the moment he reached MSCD (minimum safe-care distance). In an instant, the gaudy afternoon sky over the flatlands was obscured by the familiar blinding flash and then the rising mushroom cloud. He whistled as he walked to the Rimmer he had left parked on the Indian side of the Line of Control. There was a welcoming committee waiting to greet him, to shake the hand of the man who had finally "solved" the Kali problem.

He allowed himself a smug smile of triumph and was about to offer his hand in greeting when the change took him.

"Agent Dravid?" said the PM-General, his smile wavering as he saw his most celebrated safe-care executive stagger and raise a hand to his forehead. "Are you feeling quite well?"

Dravid swung around, staring at the billowing cloud that marked the 230 square kilometers of land that had housed 700,000 renegade women until a few seconds ago. He raised his fist and shook it, his mouth opening in the rictus of a soundless scream.

"Damn you," he managed to choke out. And then the change was done. When he turned back to the PM-General, the anger and hate were replaced by an expression of such calm serenity that it startled the supreme leader of United India far more than any act or gesture of violence would have done.

"I am Durga Maa," said the man formerly known as Envoy Dravid.