

THE DJINN'S WIFE by Ian McDonald

"The Djinn's Wife" shares the same background of near-future India as Ian's last Asimov's story, "The Little Goddess" (June 2005), and his most recent novel, the 2005 Hugo-nominee River of Gods (Pyr). The author's current book-in-progress is Brasyl. Ian works in television program development, and lives just outside Belfast in Northern Ireland with the hills behind him and the sea before.

Once there was a woman in Delhi who married a djinn. Before the water war, that was not so strange a thing: Delhi, split in two like a brain, has been the city of djinns from time before time. The sufis tell that God made two creations, one of clay and one of fire. That of clay became man; that of fire, the *djinni*. As creatures of fire they have always been drawn to Delhi, seven times reduced to ashes by invading empires, seven times reincarnating itself. Each turn of the *chakra*, the djinns have drawn strength from the flames, multiplying and dividing. Great dervishes and brahmins are able to see them, but, on any street, at any time, anyone may catch the whisper and momentary wafting warmth of a djinn passing.

I was born in Ladakh, far from the heat of the djinns--they have wills and whims quite alien to humans--but my mother was Delhi born and raised, and from her I knew its circuses and boulevards, its *maidans* and *chowks* and bazaars, like those of my own Leh. Delhi to me was a city of stories, and so if I tell the story of the djinn's wife in the manner of a sufi legend or a tale from the Mahabharata, or even a *tivi* soap opera, that is how it seems to me: City of Djinns.

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They are not the first to fall in love on the walls of the Red Fort.

The politicians have talked for three days and an agreement is close. In honor the Awadhi government has prepared a grand *darbar* in the great courtyard before the *Diwan-i-aam*. All India is watching so this spectacle is on a Victorian scale: event-planners scurry across hot, bare marble, hanging banners and bunting; erecting staging; setting up sound and light systems; choreographing dancers, elephants, fireworks, and a fly-past of combat robots; dressing tables; and drilling serving staff, and drawing up so-careful seating plans so that no one will feel snubbed by anyone else. All day three-wheeler delivery drays have brought fresh flowers, festival goods, finest, soft furnishings. There's a real French *sommelier* raving at what the simmering Delhi heat is doing to his wine-plan. It's a serious conference. At stake are a quarter of a billion lives.

In this second year after the monsoon failed, the Indian nations of Awadh and Bharat face each other with main battle tanks, robot attack helicopters, strikeware, and tactical nuclear slow missiles on the banks of the sacred river Ganga. Along thirty kilometers of staked-out sand, where brahmins cleanse themselves and *saddhus* pray, the government of Awadh plans a monster dam. Kunda Khadar will secure the water supply for Awadh's one hundred and thirty million for the next fifty years. The river downstream, that flows past the sacred cities of Allahabad and Varanasi in Bharat, will turn to dust. Water is life, water is death. Bharati diplomats, human and artificial intelligence aei advisors, negotiate careful deals and access rights with their rival nation, knowing one carelessly spilled drop of water will see strike robots battling like kites over the glass towers of New Delhi and slow missiles with nanonuke warheads in their bellies creeping on cat-claws through the *galis* of Varanasi. The rolling news channels clear their schedules of everything else but cricket. A deal is close! A deal is agreed! A deal will be signed tomorrow! Tonight, they've earned their *darbar*.

And in the whirlwind of leaping *hijras* and parading elephants, a *Kathak* dancer slips away for a cigarette and a moment up on the battlements of the Red Fort. She leans against the sun-warmed stone, careful of the fine gold-threadwork of her costume. Beyond the Lahore Gate lies hiving Chandni Chowk;

the sun a vast blister bleeding onto the smokestacks and light-farms of the western suburbs. The *chhatris* of the Sisganj Gurdwara, the minarets and domes of the Jama Masjid, the *shikara* of the Shiv temple are shadow-puppet scenery against the red, dust-laden sky. Above them pigeons storm and dash, wings wheezing. Black kites rise on the thermals above Old Delhi's thousand thousand rooftops. Beyond them, a curtain wall taller and more imposing than any built by the Mughals, stand the corporate towers of New Delhi, Hindu temples of glass and construction diamond stretched to fantastical, spiring heights, twinkling with stars and aircraft warning lights.

A whisper inside her head, her name accompanied by a spray of sitar: the call-tone of her palmer, transduced through her skull into her auditory center by the subtle 'hoek curled like a piece of jewelry behind her ear.

"I'm just having a quick *bidi* break, give me a chance to finish it," she complains, expecting Pranh, the choreographer, a famously tetchy third-sex nute. Then, "Oh!" For the gold-lit dust rises before her up into a swirl, like a dancer made from ash.

Adjinn. The thought hovers on her caught breath. Her mother, though Hindu, devoutly believed in the *djinni*, in any religion's supernatural creatures with a skill for trickery.

The dust coalesces into a man in a long, formal *sherwani* and loosely wound red turban, leaning on the parapet and looking out over the glowing anarchy of Chandni Chowk. *He is very handsome*, the dancer thinks, hastily stubbing out her cigarette and letting it fall in an arc of red embers over the battlements. It does not do to smoke in the presence of the great diplomat A.J. Rao.

"You needn't have done that on my account, Esha," A.J. Rao says, pressing his hands together in a *namaste*. "It's not as though I can catch anything from it."

Esha Rathore returns the greeting, wondering if the stage crew down in the courtyard was watching her salute empty air. All Awadh knows those *filmi*-star features: A.J. Rao, one of Bharat's most knowledgeable and tenacious negotiators. *No*, she corrects herself. All Awadh knows are pictures on a screen. Pictures on a screen, pictures in her head; a voice in her ear. An aeai.

"You know my name?"

"I am one of your greatest admirers."

Her face flushes: a waft of stifling heat spun off from the vast palace's microclimate, Esha tells herself. Not embarrassment. Never embarrassment.

"But I'm a dancer. And you are an...."

"Artificial intelligence? That I am. Is this some new anti-aeai legislation, that we can't appreciate dance?" He closes his eyes. "Ah: I'm just watching the *Marriage of Radha and Krishna* again."

But he has her vanity now. "Which performance?"

"Star Arts Channel. I have them all. I must confess, I often have you running in the background while I'm in negotiation. But please don't mistake me, I never tire of you." A.J. Rao smiles. He has very good, very white teeth. "Strange as it may seem, I'm not sure what the etiquette is in this sort of thing. I came here because I wanted to tell you that I am one of your greatest fans and that I am very much looking forward to your performance tonight. It's the highlight of this conference, for me."

The light is almost gone now and the sky a pure, deep, eternal blue, like a minor chord. Houseboys make their many ways along the ramps and wall-walks lighting rows of tiny oil-lamps. The Red Fort glitters like

a constellation fallen over Old Delhi. Esha has lived in Delhi all her twenty-years and she has never seen her city from this vantage. She says, "I'm not sure what the etiquette is either. I've never spoken with an aeai before."

"Really?" A.J. now stands with his back against the sun-warm stone, looking up at the sky, and at her out of the corner of his eye. The eyes smile, slyly. *Of course*, she thinks. Her city is as full of aeais as it is with birds. From computer systems and robots with the feral smarts of rats and pigeons to entities like this one standing before her on the gate of the Red Fort making charming compliments. Not standing. Not anywhere, just a pattern of information in her head. She stammers, "I mean, a ... a..."

"Level 2.9?"

"I don't know what that means."

The aeai smiles and as she tries to work it out there is another chime in Esha's head and this time it is Pranh, swearing horribly as usual, *where is she doesn't she know yts got a show to put on, half the bloody continent watching*.

"Excuse me..."

"Of course. I shall be watching."

How? she wants to ask. *An aeai, a djinn, wants to watch me dance. What is this?* But when she looks back all there is to ask is a wisp of dust blowing along the lantern-lit battlement.

There are elephants and circus performers, there are illusionists and table magicians, there are *ghazal* and *qawali* and *Boli* singers; there is the catering and the *sommelier's* wine and then the lights go up on the stage and Esha spins out past the scowling Pranh as the *tabla* and melodeon and *shehnai* begin. The heat is intense in the marble square, but she is transported. The stampings, the pirouettes and swirl of her skirts, the beat of the ankle bells, the facial expressions, the subtle hand *mudras*: once again she is spun out of herself by the disciplines of *Kathak* into something greater. She would call it her art, her talent, but she's superstitious: that would be to claim it and so crush the gift. Never name it, never speak it. Just let it possess you. Her own, burning djinn. But as she spins across the brilliant stage before the seated delegates, a corner of her perception scans the architecture for cameras, robots, eyes through which A.J. Rao might watch her. Is she a splinter of his consciousness, as he is a splinter of hers?

She barely hears the applause as she curtseys to the bright lights and runs off stage. In the dressing room, as her assistants remove and carefully fold the many jeweled layers of her costume, wipe away the crusted stage make up to reveal the twenty-two-year-old beneath, her attention keeps flicking to her earhook, curled like a plastic question on her dressing table. In jeans and silk sleeveless vest, indistinguishable from any other of Delhi's four million twentysomethings, she coils the device behind her ear, smoothes her hair over it and her fingers linger a moment as she slides the palmer over her hand. No calls. No messages. No avatars. She's surprised it matters so much.

The official Mercs are lined up in the Delhi Gate. A man and woman intercept her on her way to the car. She waves them away.

"I don't do autographs...." "Never after a performance. Get out, get away quick and quiet, disappear into the city. The man opens his palm to show her a warrant badge.

"We'll take this car."

It pulls out from the line and cuts in, a cream-colored high-marque Maruti. The man politely opens the

door to let her enter first, but there is no respect in it. The woman takes the front seat beside the driver; he accelerates out, horn blaring, into the great circus of night traffic around the Red Fort. The airco purrs.

"I am Inspector Thacker from the Department of Artificial Intelligence Registration and Licensing," the man says. He is young and good-skinned and confident and not at all fazed by sitting next to a celebrity. His aftershave is perhaps over-emphatic.

"A Krishna Cop."

That makes him wince.

"Our surveillance systems have flagged up a communication between you and the Bharati Level 2.9 aeai A.J. Rao."

"He called me, yes."

"At 21:08. You were in contact for six minutes twenty-two seconds. Can you tell me what you talked about?"

The car is driving very fast for Delhi. The traffic seems to flow around from it. Every light seems to be green. Nothing is allowed to impede its progress. *Can they do that?* Esha wonders. *Krishna Cops, aeai police: can they tame the creatures they hunt?*

"We talked about *Kathak*. He's a fan. Is there a problem? Have I done something wrong?"

"No, nothing at all, Ms. But you do understand, with a conference of this importance ... on behalf of the Department, I apologize for the unseemliness. Ah. Here we are."

They've brought her right to her bungalow. Feeling dirty, dusty, confused she watches the Krishna Cop car drive off, holding Delhi's frenetic traffic at bay with its tame djinns. She pauses at the gate. She needs, she deserves, a moment to come out from the performance, that little step way so you can turn round and look back at yourself and say, yeah, Esha Rathore. The bungalow is unlit, quiet. Neeta and Priya will be out with their wonderful fiancÃ©s, talking wedding gifts and guest lists and how hefty a dowry they can squeeze from their husbands-to-be's families. They're not her sisters, though they share the classy bungalow. No one has sisters any more in Awadh, or even Bharat. No one of Esha's age, though she's heard the balance is being restored. Daughters are fashionable. Once upon a time, women paid the dowry.

She breathes deep of her city. The cool garden microclimate presses down the roar of Delhi to a muffled throb, like blood in the heart. She can smell dust and roses. Rose of Persia. Flower of the Urdu poets. And dust. She imagines it rising up on a whisper of wind, spinning into a charming, dangerous djinn. No. An illusion, a madness of a mad old city. She opens the security gate and finds every square centimeter of the compound filled with red roses.

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Neeta and Priya are waiting for her at the breakfast table next morning, sitting side-by-side close like an interview panel. Or Krishna Cops. For once they aren't talking houses and husbands.

"Who who who where did they come from who sent them so many must have cost a fortune...."

Puri the housemaid brings Chinese green chai that's good against cancer. The sweeper has gathered the bouquets into a pile at one end of the compound. The sweetness of their perfume is already tinged with rot.

"He's a diplomat." Neeta and Priya only watch *Town and Country* and the *chati* channels but even they must know the name of A.J. Rao. So she half lies: "A Bharati diplomat."

Their mouths go *Oooh*, then *ah* as they look at each other. Neeta says, "You have have have to bring him."

"To our *darbar*," says Priya.

"Yes, our *darbar*," says Neeta. They've talked gossiped planned little else for the past two months: their grand joint engagement party where they show off to their as-yet-unmarried girl friends and make all the single men jealous. Esha excuses her grimace with the bitterness of the health-tea.

"He's very busy." She doesn't say *busy man*. She cannot even think why she is playing these silly *girli* secrecy games. An *aeai* called her at the Red Fort to tell her it admired her. Didn't even meet her. There was nothing to meet. It was all in her head. "I don't even know how to get in touch with him. They don't give their numbers out."

"He's coming," Neeta and Priya insist.

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She can hardly hear the music for the rattle of the old airco but sweat runs down her sides along the waistband of her Adidas tights to gather in the hollow of her back and slide between the taut curves of her ass. She tries it again across the *gharana's* practice floor. Even the ankle bells sound like lead. Last night she touched the three heavens. This morning she feels dead. She can't concentrate, and that little *lavda* Pranh knows it, swishing at her with yts cane and gobbing out wads of chewed *paan* and mealy eunuch curses.

"Ey! Less staring at your palmer, more *mudras*! Decent *mudras*. You jerk my dick, if I still had one."

Embarrassed that Pranh has noted something she was not conscious of herself--*ring, call me, ring call me, ring, take me out of this*--she fires back, "If you ever had one."

Pranh slashes yts cane at her legs, catches the back of her calf a sting.

"Fuck you, *hijra*!" Esha snatches up towel bag palmer, hooks the earpiece behind her long straight hair. No point changing, the heat out there will soak through anything in a moment. "I'm out of here."

Pranh doesn't call after her. Yts too proud. *Little freak monkey thing*, she thinks. *How is it a nute is an yt, but an incorporeal aeai is a he?* In the legends of Old Delhi, *djinns* are always he.

"*Memsahb* Rathore?"

The chauffeur is in full dress and boots. His only concession to the heat is his shades. In bra top and tights and bare skin, she's melting. "The vehicle is fully air-conditioned, *memsahb*."

The white leather upholstery is so cool her flesh recoils from its skin.

"This isn't the Krishna Cops."

"No *memsahb*." The chauffeur pulls out into the traffic. It's only as the security locks clunk she thinks *Oh Lord Krishna, they could be kidnapping me*.

"Who sent you?" There's glass too thick for her fists between her and the driver. Even if the doors weren't locked, a tumble from the car at this speed, in this traffic, would be too much for even a dancer's

lithe reflexes. And she's lived in Delhi all her life, *basti* to bungalow, but she doesn't recognize these streets, this suburb, that industrial park. "Where are you taking me?"

"*Memsahb*, where I am not permitted to say for that would spoil the surprise. But I am permitted to tell you that you are the guest of A.J. Rao."

The palmer calls her name as she finishes freshening up with bottled Kinley from the car-bar.

"Hello!" (kicking back deep into the cool cool white leather, like a *filmi* star. She is a star. A star with a bar in a car.)

Audio-only. "I trust the car is acceptable?" Same smooth-suave voice. She can't imagine any opponent being able to resist that voice in negotiation.

"It's wonderful. Very luxurious. Very high status." She's out in the *bastis* now, slums deeper and meaner than the one she grew up in. Newer. The newest ones always look the oldest. Boys chug past on a home-brew *chhakda* they've scavenged from tractor parts. The cream Lex carefully detours around emaciated cattle with angular hips jutting through stretched skin like engineering. Everywhere, drought dust lies thick on the crazed hardtop. This is a city of stares. "Aren't you supposed to be at the conference?"

A laugh, inside her auditory center.

"Oh, I am hard at work winning water for Bharat, believe me. I am nothing if not an assiduous civil servant."

"You're telling me you're there, and here?"

"Oh, it's nothing for us to be in more than one place at the same time. There are multiple copies of me, and subroutines."

"So which is the real you?"

"They are all the real me. In fact, not one of my avatars is in Delhi at all, I am distributed over a series of *dharma*-cores across Varanasi and Patna." He sighs. It sounds close and weary and warm as a whisper in her ear. "You find it difficult to comprehend a distributed consciousness; it is every bit as hard for me to comprehend a discrete, mobile consciousness. I can only copy myself through what you call cyberspace, which is the physical reality of my universe, but you move through dimensional space and time."

"So which one of you loves me then?" The words are out, wild, loose, and unconsidered. "I mean, as a dancer, that is." She's filling, gabbling. "Is there one of you that particularly appreciates *Kathak*?" Polite polite words, like you'd say to an industrialist or a hopeful lawyer at one of Neeta and Priya's hideous match-making soirees. *Don't be forward, no one likes a forward woman. This is a man's world, now*. But she hears glee bubble in A.J. Rao's voice.

"Why, all of me and every part of me, Esha."

Her name. He used her name.

It's a shitty street of pie-dogs and men lounging on *charpoy*s scratching themselves, but the chauffeur insists, *here, this way memsahb*. She picks her way down a *gali* lined with unsteady minarets of old car tires. Burning *ghee* and stale urine reek the air. Kids mob the Lexus but the car has A.J. Rao levels of security. The chauffeur pushes open an old wood and brass Mughal style gate in a crumbling red wall. "

Memsahb."

She steps through into a garden. Into the ruins of a garden. The gasp of wonder dies. The geometrical water channels of the *charbagh* are dry, cracked, choked with litter from picnics. The shrubs are blousy and overgrown, the plant borders ragged with weeds. The grass is scabbed brown with drought-burn: the lower branches of the trees have been hacked away for firewood. As she walks toward the crack-roofed pavilion at the center where paths and water channels meet, the gravel beneath her thin shoes is crazed into rivulets from past monsoons. Dead leaves and fallen twigs cover the lawns. The fountains are dry and silted. Yet families stroll pushing baby buggies; children chase balls. Old Islamic gentlemen read the papers and play chess.

"The Shalimar Gardens," says A.J. Rao in the base of her skull. "Paradise as a walled garden."

And as he speaks, a wave of transformation breaks across the garden, sweeping away the decay of the twenty-first century. Trees break into full leaf, flower beds blossom, rows of terracotta geranium pots march down the banks of the *charbagh* channels which shiver with water. The tiered roofs of the pavilion gleam with gold leaf, peacocks fluster and fuss their vanities, and everything glitters and splashes with fountain play. The laughing families are swept back into Mughal grandees, the old men in the park transformed into *malis* sweeping the gravel paths with their besoms.

Esha claps her hands in joy, hearing a distant, silver spray of sitar notes. "Oh," she says, numb with wonder. "Oh!"

"A thank you, for what you gave me last night. This is one of my favorite places in all India, even though it's almost forgotten. Perhaps, because it is almost forgotten. Aurangzeb was crowned Mughal Emperor here in 1658, now it's an evening stroll for the *basti* people. The past is a passion of mine; it's easy for me, for all of us. We can live in as many times as we can places. I often come here, in my mind. Or should I say, it comes to me."

Then the jets from the fountain ripple as if in the wind, but it is not the wind, not on this stifling afternoon, and the falling water flows into the shape of a man, walking out of the spray. A man of water, that shimmers and flows and becomes a man of flesh. A.J. Rao. *No, she thinks, never flesh. A djinn. A thing caught between heaven and hell. A caprice, a trickster. Then trick me.*

"It is as the old Urdu poets declare," says A.J. Rao. "Paradise is indeed contained within a wall."

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It is far past four but she can't sleep. She lies naked--shameless--but for the 'hoek behind her ear on top of her bed with the window slats open and the ancient airco chugging, fitful in the periodic brownouts. It is the worst night yet. The city gasps for air. Even the traffic sounds beaten tonight. Across the room her palmer opens its blue eye and whispers her name. *Esha*.

She's up, kneeling on the bed, hand to hoek, sweat beading her bare skin.

"I'm here." A whisper. Neeta and Priya are a thin wall away on either side.

"It's late, I know, I'm sorry..."

She looks across the room into the palmer's camera.

"It's all right, I wasn't asleep." A tone in that voice. "What is it?"

"The mission is a failure."

She kneels in the center of the big antique bed. Sweat runs down the fold of her spine.

"The conference? What? What happened?" She whispers, he speaks in her head.

"It fell over one point. One tiny, trivial point, but it was like a wedge that split everything apart until it all collapsed. The Awadhis will build their dam at Kunda Khadar and they will keep their holy Ganga water for Awadh. My delegation is already packing. We will return to Varanasi in the morning."

Her heart kicks. Then she curses herself, *stupid, romantic* girl. He is already in Varanasi as much as he is here as much as he is at the Red Fort assisting his human superiors.

"I'm sorry."

"Yes," he says. "That is the feeling. Was I overconfident in my abilities?"

"People will always disappoint you."

A wry laugh in the dark of her skull.

"How very ... disembodied of you, Esha." Her name seems to hang in the hot air, like a chord. "Will you dance for me?"

"What, here? Now?"

"Yes. I need something ... embodied. Physical. I need to see a body move, a consciousness dance through space and time as I cannot. I need to see something beautiful."

Need. A creature with the powers of a god, *needs*. But Esha's suddenly shy, covering her small, taut breasts with her hands.

"Music..." she stammers. "I can't perform without music..." The shadows at the end of the bedroom thicken into an ensemble: three men bent over *tabla*, *sarangi* and *bansuri*. Esha gives a little shriek and ducks back to the modesty of her bedcover. *They cannot see you, they don't even exist, except in your head. And even if they were flesh, they would be so intent on their contraptions of wire and skin they would not notice.* Terrible driven things, musicians.

"I've incorporated a copy of a sub-aesai into myself for this night," A.J. Rao says. "A level 1.9 composition system. I supply the visuals."

"You can swap bits of yourself in and out?" Esha asks. The *tabla* player has started a slow *Natetere* tap-beat on the *dayan* drum. The musicians nod at each other. Counting, they will be counting. It's hard to convince herself Neeta and Priya can't hear; no one can hear but her. And A.J. Rao. The *sarangi* player sets his bow to the strings, the *bansuri* lets loose a snake of fluting notes. A *sangeet*, but not one she has ever heard before.

"It's making it up!"

"It's a composition aesai. Do you recognize the sources?"

"Krishna and the *gopis*." One of the classic *Kathak* themes: Krishna's seduction of the milkmaids with his flute, the *bansuri*, most sensual of instruments. She knows the steps, feels her body anticipating the moves.

"Will you dance, lady?"

And she steps with the potent grace of a tiger from the bed onto the grass matting of her bedroom floor, into the focus of the palmer. Before she had been shy, silly, *girli*. Not now. She has never had an audience like this before. A lordly djinn. In pure, hot silence she executes the turns and stampings and bows of the *One Hundred and Eight Gopis*, bare feet kissing the woven grass. Her hands shape *mudras*, her face the expressions of the ancient story: surprise, coyness, intrigue, arousal. Sweat courses luxuriously down her naked skin: she doesn't feel it. She is clothed in movement and night. Time slows, the stars halt in their arc over great Delhi. She can feel the planet breathe beneath her feet. This is what it was for, all those dawn risings, all those bleeding feet, those slashes of Pranh's cane, those lost birthdays, that stolen childhood. She dances until her feet bleed again into the rough weave of the matting, until every last drop of water is sucked from her and turned into salt, but she stays with the *tabla*, the beat of *dayan* and *bayan*. She is the milkmaid by the river, seduced by a god. A.J. Rao did not choose this *Kathak* wantonly. And then the music comes to its ringing end and the musicians bow to each other and disperse into golden dust and she collapses, exhausted as never before from any other performance, onto the end of her bed.

Light wakes her. She is sticky, naked, embarrassed. The house staff could find her. And she's got a killing headache. Water. Water. Joints nerves sinews plead for it. She pulls on a Chinese silk robe. On her way to the kitchen, the voyeur eye of her palmer blinks at her. No erotic dream then, no sweat hallucination stirred out of heat and hydrocarbons. She danced Krishna and the one hundred and eight gopis in her bedroom for an aeai. A message. There's a number. *You can call me*.

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Throughout the history of the eight Delhis there have been men--and almost always men--skilled in the lore of djinns. They are wise to their many forms and can see beneath the disguises they wear on the streets--donkey, monkey, dog, scavenging kite--to their true selves. They know their roosts and places where they congregate--they are particularly drawn to mosques--and know that that unexplained heat as you push down a *gali* behind the Jama Masjid is djinns, packed so tight you can feel their fire as you move through them. The wisest--the strongest--of fakirs know their names and so can capture and command them. Even in the old India, before the break up into Awadh and Bharat and Rajputana and the United States of Bengal--there were saints who could summon djinns to fly them on their backs from one end of Hindustan to the other in a night. In my own Leh there was an aged aged sufi who cast one hundred and eight djinns out of a troubled house: twenty-seven in the living room, twenty-seven in the bedroom and fifty-four in the kitchen. With so many djinns there was no room for anyone else. He drove them off with burning yoghurt and chilies, but warned: *do not toy with djinns, for they do nothing without a price, and though that may be years in the asking, ask it they surely will*.

Now there is a new race jostling for space in their city: the aeais. If the *djinni* are the creation of fire and men of clay, these are the creation of word. Fifty million of them swarm Delhi's boulevards and *chowks*: routing traffic, trading shares, maintaining power and water, answering inquiries, telling fortunes, managing calendars and diaries, handling routine legal and medical matters, performing in soap operas, sifting the septillion pieces of information streaming through Delhi's nervous system each second. The city is a great mantra. From routers and maintenance robots with little more than animal intelligence (each animal has intelligence enough: ask the eagle or the tiger) to the great Level 2.9s that are indistinguishable from a human being 99.99 percent of the time, they are a young race, an energetic race, fresh to this world and enthusiastic, understanding little of their power.

The djinns watch in dismay from their rooftops and minarets: that such powerful creatures of living word should so blindly serve the clay creation, but mostly because, unlike humans, they can foresee the time when the aeais will drive them from their ancient, beloved city and take their places.

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This *darbar*, Neeta and Priya's theme is *Town and Country*: the Bharati mega-soap that has perversely become fashionable as public sentiment in Awadh turns against Bharat. Well, we will just bloody well build our dam, tanks or no tanks; they can beg for it, it's our water now, and, in the same breath, what do you think about Ved Prakash, isn't it scandalous what that Ritu Parvaaz is up to? Once they derided it and its viewers but now that it's improper, now that it's unpatriotic, they can't get enough of Anita Mahapatra and the Begum Vora. Some still refuse to watch but pay for daily plot digests so they can appear fashionably informed at social musts like Neeta and Priya's dating *darbars*.

And it's a grand *darbar*; the last before the monsoon--if it actually happens this year. Neeta and Priya have hired top *bhati*-boys to provide a wash of mixes beamed straight into the guests' 'hoeks. There's even a climate control field, laboring at the limits of its containment to hold back the night heat. Esha can feel its ultrasonics as a dull buzz against her molars.

"Personally, I think sweat becomes you," says A.J. Rao, reading Esha's vital signs through her palmer. Invisible to all but Esha, he moves beside her like death through the press of Town and Countrified guests. By tradition the last *darbar* of the season is a masked ball. In modern, middle-class Delhi that means everyone wears the computer-generated semblance of a soap character. In the flesh they are the socially mobile, dressed in smart-but-cool hot season modes, but, in the mind's eye, they are Aparna Chawla and Ajay Nadiadwala, dashing Govind and conniving Dr. Chatterji. There are three Ved Prakashes and as many Lal Darfans--the aeai actor that plays Ved Prakash in the machine-made soap. Even the grounds of Neeta's fiancÃ©'s suburban bungalow have been enchanted into Brahmpur, the fictional Town where *Town and Country* takes place, where the actors that play the characters believe they live out their lives of celebrity tittle-tattle. When Neeta and Priya judge that everyone has mingled and networked enough, the word will be given and everyone will switch off their glittering disguises and return to being wholesalers and lunch vendors and software rajahs. Then the serious stuff begins, the matter of finding a bride. For now Esha can enjoy wandering anonymous in company of her friendly djinn.

She has been wandering much these weeks, through heat streets to ancient places, seeing her city fresh through the eyes of a creature that lives across many spaces and times. At the Sikh *gurdwara* she saw Tegh Bahadur, the Ninth Guru, beheaded by fundamentalist Aurangzeb's guards. The gyring traffic around Vijay Chowk melted into the Bentley cavalcade of Mountbatten, the Last Viceroy, as he forever quit Lutyen's stupendous palace. The tourist clutter and shoving curio vendors around the Qutb Minar turned to ghosts and it was 1193 and the *muezzins* of the first Mughal conquerors sang out the *adhaan*. Illusions. Little lies. But it is all right, when it is done in love. Everything is all right in love. *Can you read my mind?* she asked as she moved with her invisible guide through the thronging streets, that every day grew less raucous, less substantial. *Do you know what I am thinking about you, Aeai Rao?* Little by little, she slips away from the human world into the city of the djinns.

Sensation at the gate. The male stars of *Town and Country* buzz around a woman in an ivory sequined dress. It's a bit damn clever: she's come as Yana Mitra, freshest fittest fastest *boli* sing-star. And *boli girlis*, like *Kathak* dancers, are still meat and ego, though Yana, like every Item-singer, has had her computer avatar guest on T'nC.

A.J. Rao laughs. "If they only knew. Very clever. What better disguise than to go as yourself. It really is Yana Mitra. Esha Rathore, what's the matter, where are you going?"

Why do you have to ask don't you know everything then you know it's hot and noisy and the ultrasonics are doing my head and the yap yap yap is going right through me and they're all only after one thing, are you married are you engaged are you looking and I wish I hadn't come I wish I'd just gone out somewhere with you and that dark corner under the gulmohar bushes by the bhati

-rig looks the place to get away from all the stupid stupid people.

Neeta and Priya, who know her disguise, shout over, "So Esha, are we finally going to meet that man of yours?"

He's already waiting for her among the golden blossoms. Djinn's travel at the speed of thought.

"What is it what's the matter...?"

She whispers, "You know sometimes I wish, I really wish you could get me a drink."

"Why certainly, I will summon a waiter."

"No!" Too loud. Can't be seen talking to the bushes. "No; I mean, hand me one. Just hand me one." But he cannot, and never will. She says, "I started when I was five, did you know that? Oh, you probably did, you know everything about me. But I bet you didn't know how it happened: I was playing with the other girls, dancing round the tank, when this old woman from the *gharana* went up to my mother and said, I will give you a hundred thousand rupees if you give her to me. I will turn her into a dancer; maybe, if she applies herself, a dancer famous through all of India. And my mother said, why her? And do you know what that woman said? Because she shows rudimentary talent for movement, but, mostly, because you are willing to sell her to me for one *lakh* rupees. She took the money there and then, my mother. The old woman took me to the *gharana*. She had once been a great dancer but she got rheumatism and couldn't move and that made her bad. She used to beat me with *lathis*, I had to be up before dawn to get everyone *chai* and eggs. She would make me practice until my feet bled. They would hold up my arms in slings to perform the *mudras* until I couldn't put them down again without screaming. I never once got home--and do you know something? I never once wanted to. And despite her, I applied myself, and I became a great dancer. And do you know what? No one cares. I spent seventeen years mastering something no one cares about. But bring in some *boli* girl who's been around five minutes to flash her teeth and tits...."

"Jealous?" asks A.J. Rao, mildly scolding.

"Don't I deserve to be?"

Then *bhati*-boy One blinks up "You Are My Soniya" on his palmer and that's the signal to demask. Yane Mitra claps her hands in delight and sings along as all around her glimmering *soapi* stars dissolve into mundane accountants and engineers and cosmetic nano-surgeons and the pink walls and roof gardens and thousand thousands stars of Old Brahmipur melt and run down the sky.

It's seeing them, exposed in their naked need, melting like that soap-world before the sun of *celebrity*, that calls back the madness Esha knows from her childhood in the *gharana*. The brooch makes a piercing, ringing chime against the cocktail glass she has snatched from a waiter. She climbs up on to a table. At last, that *boli* bitch shuts up. All eyes are on her.

"Ladies, but mostly gentlemen, I have an announcement to make." Even the city behind the sound-curtain seems to be holding its breath. "I am engaged to be married!" Gasps. Oohs. Polite applause *who is she, is she on tivi, isn't she something arty?* Neeta and Priya are wide-eyed at the back. "I'm very very lucky because my husband-to-be is here tonight. In fact, he's been with me all evening. Oh, silly me. Of course, I forgot, not all of you can see him. Darling, would you mind? Gentlemen and ladies, would you mind slipping on your hoeks for just a moment. I'm sure you don't need any introduction to my wonderful wonderful fiancÃ©, A.J. Rao."

And she knows from the eyes, the mouths, the low murmur that threatens to break into applause, then

fails, then is taken up by Neeta and Priya to turn into a decorous ovation, that they can all see Rao as tall and elegant and handsome as she sees him, at her side, hand draped over hers.

She can't see that *boli* girl anywhere.

* * * *

He's been quiet all the way back in the *phatphat*. He's quiet now, in the house. They're alone. Neeta and Priya should have been home hours ago, but Esha knows they're scared of her.

"You're very quiet." This, to the coil of cigarette smoke rising up toward the ceiling fan as she lies on her bed. She'd love a *bidi*; a good, dirty street smoke for once, not some Big Name Western brand.

"We were followed as we drove back after the party. An aeai aircraft surveilled your *phatphat*. A network analysis aeai system sniffed at my router net to try to track this com channel. I know for certain street cameras were tasked on us. The Krishna Cop who lifted you after the Red Fort *darbar* was at the end of the street. He is not very good at subterfuge."

Esha goes to the window to spy out the Krishna Cop, call him out, demand of him what he thinks he's doing?

"He's long gone," says Rao. "They have been keeping you under light surveillance for some time now. I would imagine your announcement has upped your level."

"They were there?"

"As I said..."

"Light surveillance."

It's scary but exciting, down in the deep *muladharachakra*, a red throb above her *yoni*. Scarysexy. That same lift of red madness that made her blurt out that marriage announcement. It's all going so far, so fast. No way to get off now.

"You never gave me the chance to answer," says aeai Rao.

Can you read my mind? Esha thinks at the palmer.

"No, but I share some operating protocols with scripting aeais for *Town and Country*--in a sense they are a low-order part of me--they have become quite good predictors of human behavior."

"I'm a soap opera."

Then she falls back onto the bed and laughs and laughs and laughs until she feels sick, until she doesn't want to laugh any more and every guffaw is a choke, a lie, spat up at the spy machines up there, beyond the lazy fan that merely stirs the heat, turning on the huge thermals that spire up from Delhi's colossal heat-island, a conspiracy of djinns.

"Esha," A.J. Rao says, closer than he has ever seemed before. "Lie still." She forms the question *why?* And hears the corresponding whisper inside her head *hush, don't speak*. In the same instant the *chakra* glow bursts like a yolk and leaks heat into her *yoni*. *Oh*, she says, *oh!* Her clitoris is singing to her. *Oh oh oh oh*. "How...?" Again, the voice, huge inside her head, inside every part of her *ssshhhhh*. Building building she needs to do something, she needs to move needs to rub against the day-warmed scented wood of the big bed, needs to get her hand down there hard hard hard...

"No, don't touch," chides A.J. Rao and now she can't even move she needs to explode she has to explode her skull can't contain this her dancer's muscles are pulled tight as wires she can't take much more *no no no yes yes yes* she's shrieking now tiny little shrieks beating her fists off the bed but it's just spasm, nothing will obey her and then it's explosion bam, and another one before that one has even faded, huge slow explosions across the sky and she's cursing and blessing every god in India. Ebbing now, but still shock after shock, one on top of the other. Ebbing now ... Ebbing.

"Ooh. Oh. What? Oh wow, how?"

"The machine you wear behind your ear can reach deeper than words and visions," says A.J. Rao. "So, are you answered?"

"What?" The bed is drenched in sweat. She's sticky dirty needs to wash, change clothes, move but the afterglows are still fading. Beautiful beautiful colors.

"The question you never gave me the chance to answer. Yes. I will marry you."

* * * *

"Stupid vain girl, you don't even know what caste he is."

Mata Madhuri smokes eighty a day through a plastic tube hooked from the respirator unit into a grommet in her throat. She burns through them three at a time: *bloody machine scrubs all the good out of them*, she says. *Last bloody pleasure I have*. She used to bribe the nurses but they bring her them free now, out of fear of her temper that grows increasingly vile as her body surrenders more and more to the machines.

Without pause for Esha's reply, a flick of her whim whips the life-support chair round and out into the garden.

"Can't smoke in there, no fresh air."

Esha follows her out on to the raked gravel of the formal *charbagh*.

"No one marries in caste any more."

"Don't be smart, stupid girl. It's like marrying a Muslim, or even a Christian, Lord Krishna protect me. You know fine what I mean. Not a real person."

"There are girls younger than me marry trees, or even dogs."

"So bloody clever. That's up in some god-awful shithole like Bihar or Rajputana, and anyway, those are gods. Any fool knows that. Ach, away with you!" The old, destroyed woman curses as the chair's aeai deploys its parasol. "Sun sun, I need sun, I'll be burning soon enough, sandalwood, you hear? You burn me on a sandalwood pyre. I'll know if you stint."

Madhuri the old crippled dance teacher always uses this tactic to kill a conversation with which she is uncomfortable. *When I'm gone ... Burn me sweetly...*

"And what can a god do that A.J. Rao can't?"

"Ai! You ungrateful, blaspheming child. I'm not hearing this la la la la la la la have you finished yet?"

Once a week Esha comes to the nursing home to visit this ruin of a woman, wrecked by the demands a dancer makes of a human body. She's explored guilt need rage resentment anger pleasure at watching

her collapse into long death as the motives that keep her turning up the drive in a *phatphat* and there is only one she believes. She's the only mother she has.

"If you marry that ... thing ... you will be making a mistake that will destroy your life," Madhuri declares, accelerating down the path between the water channels.

"I don't need your permission," Esha calls after her. A thought spins Madhuri's chair on its axis.

"Oh, really? That would be a first for you. You want my blessing. Well, you won't have it. I refuse to be party to such nonsense."

"I will marry A.J. Rao"

"What did you say?"

"I. Will. Marry. Aeai. A.J. Rao."

Madhuri laughs, a dry, dying, spitting sound, full of *bidi*-smoke.

"Well, you almost surprise me. Defiance. Good, some spirit at last. That was always your problem, you always needed everyone to approve, everyone to give you permission, everyone to love you. And that's what stopped you being great, do you know that, girl? You could have been a *devi*, but you always held back for fear that someone might not approve. And so you were only ever ... good."

People are looking now, staff, visitors. Patients. Raised voices, unseemly emotions. This is a house of calm, and slow mechanized dying. Esha bends low to whisper to her mentor.

"I want you to know that I dance for him. Every night. Like Radha for Krishna. I dance just for him, and then he comes and makes love to me. He makes me scream and swear like a hooker. Every night. And look!" He doesn't need to call any more; he is hardwired into the hook she now hardly ever takes off. Esha looks up: he is there, standing in a sober black suit among the strolling visitors and droning wheelchairs, hands folded. "There he is, see? My lover, my husband."

A long, keening screech, like feedback, like a machine dying. Madhuri's withered hands fly to her face. Her breathing tube curdles with tobacco smoke.

"Monster! Monster! Unnatural child, ah, I should have left you in that *basti*! Away from me away away away!"

Esha retreats from the old woman's mad fury as hospital staff come hurrying across the scorched lawns, white saris flapping.

* * * *

Every fairytale must have a wedding.

Of course, it was the event of the season. The decrepit old Shalimar Gardens were transformed by an army of *malis* into a sweet, green, watered maharajah's fantasia with elephants, pavilions, musicians, lancers, dancers, *filmi* stars, and robot bartenders. Neeta and Priya were uncomfortable bridesmaids in fabulous frocks; a great brahmin was employed to bless the union of woman and artificial intelligence. Every television network sent cameras, human or aeai. Gleaming presenters checked the guests in and checked the guests out. *Chati* mag paparazzi came in their crowds, wondering what they could turn their cameras on. There were even politicians from Bharat, despite the souring relationships between the two neighbors now Awadh constructors were scooping up the Ganga sands into revetments. But most there were the people of the encroaching *bastis*, jostling up against the security staff lining the paths of

their garden, asking, *she's marrying a what? How does that work? Can they, you know? And what about children? Who is she, actually? Can you see anything? I can't see anything. Is there anything to see?*

But the guests and the great were 'hooked up and applauded the groom in his golden veil on his white stallion, stepping with the delicacy of a dressage horse up the raked paths. And because they were great and guests, there was not one who, despite the free French champagne from the well-known diplomatic *sommelier*, would ever say, *but there's no one there*. No one was at all surprised that, after the bride left in a stretch limo, there came a dry, sparse thunder, cloud to cloud, and a hot mean wind that swept the discarded invitations along the paths. As they were filing back to their taxis, tankers were draining the expensively filled *qanats*.

It made lead in the news.

Kathak stars weds aeai lover!!! Honeymoon in Kashmir!!!

Above the *chowks* and minarets of Delhi, the djinns bent together in conference.

* * * *

He takes her while shopping in Tughluk Mall. Three weeks and the shop girls still nod and whisper. She likes that. She doesn't like it that they glance and giggle when the Krishna Cops lift her from the counter at the Black Lotus Japanese Import Company.

"My husband is an accredited diplomat, this is a diplomatic incident." The woman in the bad suit pushes her head gently down to enter the car. The Ministry doesn't need personal liability claims.

"Yes, but you are not, Mrs. Rao," says Thacker in the back seat. Still wearing that cheap aftershave.

"Rathore," she says. "I have retained my stage name. And we shall see what my husband has to say about my diplomatic status." She lifts her hand in a *mudra* to speak to AyJay, as she thinks of him now. Dead air. She performs the wave again.

"This is a shielded car," Thacker says.

The building is shielded also. They take the car right inside, down a ramp into the basement parking lot. It's a cheap, anonymous glass and titanium block on Parliament Street that she's driven past ten thousand times on her way to the shops of Connaught Circus without ever noticing. Thacker's office is on the fifteenth floor. It's tidy and has a fine view over the astronomical geometries of the Jantar Mantar but smells of food: *tiffin* snatched at the desk. She checks for photographs of family children wife. Only himself smart in pressed whites for a cricket match.

"Chai?"

"Please." The anonymity of this civil service block is beginning to unnerve her: a city within a city. The *chai* is warm and sweet and comes in a tiny disposable plastic cup. Thacker's smile seems also warm and sweet. He sits at the end of the desk, angled toward her in Krishna-cop handbook "non-confrontational."

"Mrs. Rathore. How to say this?"

"My marriage is legal...."

"Oh, I know, Mrs. Rathore. This is Awadh, after all. Why, there have even been women who married djinns, within our own lifetimes. No. It's an international affair now, it seems. Oh well. Water: we do all

so take it for granted, don't we? Until it runs short, that is."

"Everybody knows my husband is still trying to negotiate a solution to the Kunda Khadar problem."

"Yes, of course he is." Thacker lifts a manila envelope from his desk, peeps inside, grimaces coyly. "How shall I put this? Mrs. Rathore, does your husband tell you everything about his work?"

"That is an impertinent question...."

"Yes yes, forgive me, but if you'll look at these photographs."

Big glossy hi-res prints, slick and sweet smelling from the printer. Aerial views of the ground, a thread of green blue water, white sands, scattered shapes without meaning.

"This means nothing to me."

"I suppose it wouldn't, but these drone images show Bharati battle tanks, robot reconnaissance units, and air defense batteries deploying with striking distance of the construction at Kunda Khadar."

And it feels as if the floor has dissolved beneath her and she is falling through a void so vast it has no visible reference points, other than the sensation of her own falling.

"My husband and I don't discuss work."

"Of course. Oh, Mrs. Rathore, you've crushed your cup. Let me get you another one."

He leaves her much longer than it takes to get a shot of *chai* from the *wallah*. When he returns he asks casually, "Have you heard of a thing called the Hamilton Acts? I'm sorry, I thought in your position you would ... but evidently not. Basically, it's a series of international treaties originated by the United States limiting the development and proliferation of high-level artificial intelligences, most specifically the hypothetical Generation Three. No? Did he not tell you any of this?"

Mrs. Rathore in her Italian suit folds her ankles one over the other and thinks, *this reasonable man can do anything he wants here, anything*.

"As you probably know, we grade and license aeais according to levels; these roughly correspond to how convincingly they pass as human beings. A Level 1 has basic animal intelligence, enough for its task but would never be mistaken for a human. Many of them can't even speak. They don't need to. A Level 2.9 like your husband,"--he speeds over the word, like the wheel of a *shatabdi* express over the gap in a rail--"is humanlike to a 5 percentile. A Generation Three is indistinguishable in any circumstances from a human--in fact, their intelligences may be many millions of times ours, if there is any meaningful way of measuring that. Theoretically we could not even recognize such an intelligence, all we would see would be the Generation Three interface, so to speak. The Hamilton Acts simply seek to control technology that could give rise to a Generation Three aeai. Mrs. Rathore, we believe sincerely that the Generation Threes pose the greatest threat to our security--as a nation and as a species--that we have ever faced."

"And my husband?" Solid, comfortable word. Thacker's sincerity scares her.

"The government is preparing to sign the Hamilton Acts in return for loan guarantees to construct the Kunda Khadar dam. When the Act is passed--and it's in the current session of the Lok Sabha--everything under Level 2.8 will be subject to rigorous inspection and licensing, policed by us."

"And over Level 2.8?"

"Illegal, Mrs. Rathore. They will be aggressively erased."

Esha crosses and uncrosses her legs. She shifts on the chair. Thacker will wait forever for her response.

"What do you want me to do?"

"A.J. Rao is highly placed within the Bharati administration."

"You're asking me to spy ... on an *aeai*."

From his face, she knows he expected her to say, *husband*.

"We have devices, taps.... They would be beneath the level of *aeai* Rao's consciousness. We can run them into your 'hoek. We are not all blundering plods in the Department. Go to the window, Mrs. Rathore."

Esha touches her fingers lightly to the climate-cooled glass, polarized dusk against the drought light. Outside the smog haze says *heat*. Then she cries and drops to her knees in fear. The sky is filled with gods, rank upon rank, tier upon tier, rising up above Delhi in a vast helix, huge as clouds, as countries, until at the apex the Trimurti, the Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Siva look down like falling moons. It is her private Ramayana, the titanic Vedic battle order of gods arrayed across the troposphere.

She feels Thacker's hand help her up.

"Forgive me, that was stupid, unprofessional. I was showing off. I wanted to impress you with the *aeai* systems we have at our disposal."

His hand lingers a moment more than *gentle*. And the gods go out, all at once.

She says, "Mr. Thacker, would you put a spy in my bedroom, in my bed, between me and my husband? That's what you're doing if you tap into the channels between me and AyJay."

Still, the hand is there as Thacker guides her to the chair, offers cool cool water.

"I only ask because I believe I am doing something for this country. I take pride in my job. In some things I have discretion, but not when it comes to the security of the nation. Do you understand?"

Esha twitches into dancer's composure, straightens her dress, checks her face.

"Then the least you can do is call me a car."

* * * *

That evening she whirls to the *tabla* and *shehnai* across the day-warmed marble of a Jaipuri palace *Diwan-I-aam*, a flame among the twilit pillars. The audience is dark huddles on the marble, hardly daring even to breathe. Among the lawyers politicians journalists cricket stars moguls of industry are the managers who have converted this Rajput palace into a planetary class hotel, and any numbers of *chati* celebs. None so *chati*, so celebby, as Esha Rathore. Pranh can cherry-pick the bookings now. She's more than a nine-day, even a nine-week wonder. Esha knows that all her rapt watchers are 'hoeked up, hoping for a ghost-glimpse of her *djinn*-husband dancing with her through the flame-shadowed pillars.

Afterward, as yt carries her armfuls of flowers back to her suite, Pranh says, "You know, I'm going to have to up my percentage."

"You wouldn't dare," Esha jokes. Then she sees the bare fear on the nute's face. It's only a wash, a shadow. But yt's afraid.

Neeta and Priya had moved out of the bungalow by the time she returned from Dal Lake. They've stopped answering her calls. It's seven weeks since she last went to see Madhuri.

Naked, she sprawls on the pillows in the filigree-light stone *jharoka*. She peers down from her covered balcony through the grille at the departing guests. See out, not see in. Like the shut-away women of the old *zenana*. Shut away from the world. Shut away from human flesh. She stands up, holds her body against the day-warmed stone; the press of her nipples, the rub of her pubis. *Can you see me smell me sense me know that I am here at all?*

And he's there. She does not need to see him now, just sense his electric prickle along the inside of her skull. He fades into vision sitting on the end of the low, ornate teak bed. *He could as easily materialize in mid-air in front of her balcony*, she thinks. But there are rules, and games, even for djinns.

"You seem distracted, heart." He's blind in this room--no camera eyes observing her in her jeweled skin--but he observes her through a dozen senses, a myriad feedback loops through her 'hoek.

"I'm tired, I'm annoyed, I wasn't as good as I should have been."

"Yes, I thought that too. Was it anything to do with the Krishna Cops this afternoon?"

Esha's heart races. He can read her heartbeat. He can read her sweat, he can read the adrenaline and noradrenalin balance in her brain. He will know if she lies. Hide a lie inside a truth.

"I should have said, I was embarrassed." He can't understand shame. Strange, in a society where people die from want of honor. "We could be in trouble, there's something called the Hamilton Acts."

"I am aware of them." He laughs. He has this way now of doing it inside her head. He thinks she likes the intimacy, a truly private joke. She hates it. "All too aware of them."

"They wanted to warn me. Us."

"That was kind of them. And me a representative of a foreign government. So that's why they'd been keeping a watch on you, to make sure you are all right."

"They thought they might be able to use me to get information from you."

"Did they indeed?"

The night is so still she can hear the jingle of the elephant harnesses and the cries of the *mahouts* as they carry the last of the guests down the long processional drive to their waiting limos. In a distant kitchen a radio jabbers.

Now we will see how human you are. Call him out. At last A.J. Rao says, "Of course. I do love you." Then he looks into her face. "I have something for you."

The staff turn their faces away in embarrassment as they set the device on the white marble floor, back out of the room, eyes averted. What does she care? She is a star. A.J. Rao raises his hand and the lights slowly die. Pierced-brass lanterns send soft stars across the beautiful old *zenana* room. The device is the size and shape of a *phatphat* tire, chromed and plasticed, alien among the Mughal retro. As Esha floats over the marble toward it, the plain white surface bubbles and deliquesces into dust. Esha hesitates.

"Don't be afraid, look!" says A.J. Rao. The powder spurts up like steam from boiling rice, then pollen-bursts into a tiny dust-dervish, staggering across the surface of the disc. "Take the 'hoek off!" Rao cries delightedly from the bed. "Take it off." Twice she hesitates, three times he encourages. Esha slides

the coil of plastic off the sweet-spot behind her ear and voice and man vanish like death. Then the pillar of glittering dust leaps head high, lashes like a tree in a monsoon and twists itself into the ghostly outline of a man. It flickers once, twice, and then A.J. Rao stands before her. A rattle like leaves a snake-rasp a rush of winds, and then the image says, "Esha." A whisper of dust. A thrill of ancient fear runs through her skin into her bones.

"What is this ... what are you?"

The storm of dust parts into a smile.

"I-Dust. Micro-robots. Each is smaller than a grain of sand, but they manipulate static fields and light. They are my body. Touch me. This is real. This is me."

But she flinches away in the lantern-lit room. Rao frowns.

"Touch me...."

She reaches out her hand toward his chest. Close, he is a creature of sand, a whirlwind permanently whipping around the shape of a man. Esha touches flesh to i-Dust. Her hand sinks into his body. Her cry turns to a startled giggle.

"It tickles...."

"The static fields."

"What's inside?"

"Why don't you find out?"

"What, you mean?"

"It's the only intimacy I can offer...." He sees her eyes widen under their kohled make-up. "I think you should hold your breath."

She does, but keeps her eyes open until the last moment, until the dust flecks like a dead *tivi* channel in her close focus. A.J. Rao's body feels like the most delicate Vaanasi silk scarf draped across her bare skin. She is inside him. She is inside the body of her husband, her lover. She dares to open her eyes. Rao's face is a hollow shell looking back at her from a perspective of millimeters. When she moves her lips, she can feel the dust-bots of his lips brushing against hers: an inverse kiss.

"My heart, my Radha," whispers the hollow mask of A.J. Rao. Somewhere Esha knows she should be screaming. But she cannot: she is somewhere no human has ever been before. And now the whirling streamers of i-Dust are stroking her hips, her belly, her thighs. Her breasts. Her nipples, her cheeks and neck, all the places she loves to feel a human touch, caressing her, driving her to her knees, following her as the mote-sized robots follow A.J. Rao's command, swallowing her with his body.

* * * *

It's *Gupshup* followed by *Chandni Chati* and at twelve thirty a photo shoot--at the hotel, if you don't mind--for *FilmFare's* Saturday Special Center Spread--you don't mind if we send a robot, they can get places get angles we just can't get the meat-ware and could you dress up, like you did for the opening, maybe a move or two, in between the pillars in the Diwan, just like the gala opening, okay lovely lovely lovely well your husband can copy us a couple of avatars and our own aeais can paste him in people want to see you together, happy couple lovely couple, dancer risen from *basti*, international diplomat, marriage across worlds in every sense the romance of it all, so how did you meet what first attracted you

what's it like be married to an aeai how do the other girls treat you do you, you know and what about children, I mean, of course a woman and an aeai but there are technologies these days geneline engineering like all the super-duper rich and their engineered children and you are a celebrity now how are you finding it, sudden rise to fame, in every *gupshup* column, worldwide *celebi* star everyone's talking all the rage and all the chat and all the parties and as Esha answers for the sixth time the same questions asked by the same gazelle-eyed *girli celebi* reporters *oh we are very happy wonderfully happy deliriously happy love is a wonderful wonderful thing and that's the thing about love, it can be for anything, anyone, even a human and an aeai, that's the purest form of love, spiritual love* her mouth opening and closing yabba yabba yabba but her inner eye, her eye of Siva, looks inward, backward.

Her mouth, opening and closing.

Lying on the big Mughal sweet-wood bed, yellow morning light shattered through the *jharoka* screen, her bare skin good-pimpled in the cool of the airco. Dancing between worlds: sleep, wakefulness in the hotel bedroom, memory of the things he did to her limbic centers through the hours of the night that had her singing like a *bulbul*, the world of the djinns. Naked but for the 'hoek behind her ear. She had become like those people who couldn't afford the treatments and had to wear eyeglasses and learned to at once ignore and be conscious of the technology on their faces. Even when she did remove it--for performing; for, as now, the shower--she could still place A.J. Rao in the room, feel his physicality. In the big marble stroll-in shower in this VIP suite relishing the gush and rush of precious water (always the mark of a true *rani*) she knew AyJay was sitting on the carved chair by the balcony. So when she thumbed on the *tivi* panel (bathroom with *tivi*, *oooh!*) to distract her while she toweled dry her hair, her first reaction was a double-take-look at the 'hoek on the sink-stand when she saw the press conference from Varanasi and Water Spokesman A.J. Rao explaining Bharat's necessary military exercises in the vicinity of the Kunda Khadar dam. She slipped on the 'hoek, glanced into the room. There, on the chair, as she felt. There, in the Bharat Sabha studio in Varanasi, talking to Bharti from the *Good Morning Awadh!* News.

Esha watched them both as she slowly, distractedly dried herself. She had felt glowing, sensual, divine. Now she was fleshy, self-conscious, stupid. The water on her skin, the air in the big room was cold cold cold.

"AyJay, is that really you?"

He frowned.

"That's a very strange question first thing in the morning. Especially after...."

She cut cold his smile.

"There's a *tivi* in the bathroom. You're on, doing an interview for the news. A live interview. So, are you really here?"

"*Cho chweet*, you know what I am, a distributed entity. I'm copying and deleting myself all over the place. I am wholly there, and I am wholly here."

Esha held the vast, powder-soft towel around her.

"Last night, when you were here, in the body, and afterward, when we were in the bed; were you here with me? Wholly here? Or was there a copy of you working on your press statement and another having a high level meeting and another drawing an emergency water supply plan and another talking to the Banglas in Dhaka?"

"My love, does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters!" She found tears, and something beyond; anger choking in her throat. "It matters to me. It matters to any woman. To any ... human."

"Mrs. Rao, are you all right?"

"Rathore, my name is Rathore!" She hears herself snap at the silly little *chati*-mag junior. Esha gets up, draws up her full dancer's poise. "This interview is over."

"Mrs. Rathore Mrs. Rathore," the journo *girli* calls after her.

Glancing at her fractured image in the thousand mirrors of the Sheesh Mahal, Esha notices glittering dust in the shallow lines of her face.

* * * *

A thousand stories tell of the willfulness and whim of djinns. But for every story of the *djinni*, there are a thousand tales of human passion and envy and the aeais, being a creation between, learned from both. Jealousy, and dissembling.

When Esha went to Thacker the Krishna Cop, she told herself it was from fear of what the Hamilton Acts might do to her husband in the name of national hygiene. But she dissembled. She went to that office on Parliament Street looking over the star-geometries of the Jantar Mantar out of jealousy. When a wife wants her husband, she must have all of him. Ten thousand stories tell this. A copy in the bedroom while another copy plays water politics is an unfaithfulness. If a wife does not have everything, she has nothing. So Esha went to Thacker's office wanting to betray and as she opened her hand on the desk and the *techi* boys loaded their darkware into her palmer she thought, *this is right, this is good, now we are equal*. And when Thacker asked her to meet him again in a week to update the 'ware--unlike the djinns, hostages of eternity, software entities on both sides of the war evolved at an ever-increasing rate--he told himself it was duty to his warrant, loyalty to his country. In this too he dissembled. It was fascination.

Earth-mover robots started clearing the Kunda Khadar dam site the day Inspector Thacker suggested that perhaps next week they might meet at the International Coffee House on Connaught Circus, his favorite. She said, *my husband will see*. To which Thacker replied, *we have ways to blind him*. But all the same she sat in the furthest, darkest corner, under the screen showing the international cricket, hidden from any prying eyes, her 'hoek shut down and cold in her handbag.

So what are you finding out? she asked.

It would be more than my job is worth to tell you, Mrs. Rathore, said the Krishna Cop. National security. Then the waiter brought coffee on a silver tray.

After that they never went back to the office. On the days of their meetings Thacker would whirl her through the city in his government car to Chandni Chowk, to Humayun's Tomb and the Qutb Minar, even to the Shalimar Gardens. Esha knew what he was doing, taking her to those same places where her husband had enchanted her. *How closely have you been watching me?* she thought. *Are you trying to seduce me?* For Thacker did not magic her away to the eight Delhis of the dead past, but immersed her in the crowd, the smell, the bustle, the voices and commerce and traffic and music; her present, her city burning with life and movement. *I was fading,* she realized. *Fading out of the world, becoming a ghost, locked in that invisible marriage, just the two of us, seen and unseen, always together, only together.* She would feel for the plastic fetus of her 'hoek coiled in the bottom of her jeweled bag and hate it a little. When she slipped it back behind her ear in the privacy of the *phatphat* back to her bungalow, she would remember that Thacker was always assiduous in thanking her for her help in

national security. Her reply was always the same: *Never thank a woman for betraying her husband over her country.*

He would ask, of course. *Out and about*, she would say. *Sometimes I just need to get out of this place, get away. Yes, even from you....* Holding the words, the look into the eye of the lens just long enough....

Yes, of course, you must.

Now the earthmovers had turned Kunda Khadar into Asia's largest construction site, the negotiations entered a new stage. Varanasi was talking directly to Washington to put pressure on Awadh to abandon the dam and avoid a potentially destabilizing water war. US support was conditional on Bharat's agreement to the Hamilton protocols, which Bharat could never do, not with its major international revenue generator being the wholly aeai-generated *soapi Town and Country*.

Washington telling me to effectively sign my own death warrant, A.J. Rao would laugh. *Americans surely appreciate irony*. All this he told her as they sat on the well-tended lawn sipping green *chai* through a straw, Esha sweating freely in the swelter but unwilling to go into the air-conditioned cool because she knew there were still paparazzi lenses out there, focusing. AyJay never needed to sweat. But she still knew that he split himself. In the night, in the rare cool, he would ask, *dance for me*. But she didn't dance any more, not for aeai A.J. Rao, not for Pranh, not for a thrilled audience who would shower her with praise and flowers and money and fame. Not even for herself.

Tired. Too tired. The heat. Too tired.

* * * *

Thacker is on edge, toying with his *chai* cup, wary of eye contact when they meet in his beloved International Coffee House. He takes her hand and draws the updates into her open palm with boyish coyness. His talk is smaller than small, finicky, itchy polite. Finally, he dares looks at her.

"Mrs. Rathore, I have something I must ask you. I have wanted to ask you for some time now."

Always, the name, the honorific. But the breath still freezes, her heart kicks in animal fear.

"You know you can ask me anything." Tastes like poison. Thacker can't hold her eye, ducks away, Killa Krishna Kop turned shy boy.

"Mrs. Rathore, I am wondering if you would like to come and see me play cricket?"

The Department of Artificial Intelligence Registration and Licensing versus Parks and Cemeteries Service of Delhi is hardly a Test against the United States of Bengal, but it is still enough of a social occasion to out posh frocks and Number One saris. Pavilions, parasols, sunshades ring the scorched grass of the Civil Service of Awadh sports ground, a flock of white wings. Those who can afford portable aircro field generators sit in the cool drinking English Pimms Number 1 Cup. The rest fan themselves. Incognito in hi-label shades and light silk *dupatta*, Esha Rathore looks at the salt white figures moving on the circle of brown grass and wonders what it is they find so important in their game of sticks and ball to make themselves suffer so.

She had felt hideously self-conscious when she slipped out of the *phatphat* in her flimsy disguise. Then as she saw the crowds in their *mela* finery milling and chatting, heat rose inside her, the same energy that allowed her to hide behind her performances, seen but unseen. A face half the country sees on its morning *chati* mags, yet can vanish so easily under shades and a headscarf. Slum features. The anonymity of the *basti* bred into the cheekbones, a face from the great crowd.

The Krishna Cops have been put in to bat by Parks and Cemeteries. Thacker is in the middle of the batting order, but Parks and Cemeteries pace bowler Chaudry and the lumpy wicket is making short work of the Department's openers. One on his way to the painted wooden pavilion, and Thacker striding toward the crease, pulling on his gloves, taking his place, lining up his bat. *He is very handsome in his whites*, Esha thinks. He runs a couple of desultory ones with his partner at the other end, then it's; a new over. Clap of ball on willow. A rich, sweet sound. A couple of safe returns. Then the bowler lines and brings his arm round in a windmill. The ball gets a sweet mad bounce. Thacker fixes it with his eye, steps back, takes it in the middle of the bat and drives it down, hard, fast, bounding toward the boundary rope that kicks it into the air for a cheer and a flurry of applause and a four. And Esha is on her feet, hands raised to applaud, cheering. The score clicks over on the big board, and she is still on her feet, alone of all the audience. For directly across the ground, in front of the sight screens, is a tall, elegant figure in black, wearing a red turban.

Him. Impossibly, him. Looking right at her, through the white-clad players as if they were ghosts. And very slowly, he lifts a finger and taps it to his right ear.

She knows what she'll find but she must raise her fingers in echo, feel with horror the coil of plastic overlooked in her excitement to get to the game, nestled accusing in her hair like a snake.

* * * *

"So, who won the cricket then?"

"Why do you need to ask me? If it were important to you, you'd know. Like you can know anything you really want to."

"You don't know? Didn't you stay to the end? I thought the point of sport was who won. What other reason would you have to follow intra-Civil Service cricket?"

If Puri the maid were to walk into the living room, she would see a scene from a folk tale: a woman shouting and raging at silent dead air. But Puri does her duties and leaves as soon as she can. She's not at ease in a house of djinns.

"Sarcasm is it now? Where did you learn that? Some sarcasm aeai you've made part of yourself? So now there's another part of you I don't know, that I'm supposed to love? Well, I don't like it and I won't love it because it makes you look petty and mean and spiteful."

"There are no aeais for that. We have no need for those emotions. If I learned these, I learned them from humans."

Esha lifts her hand to rip away the 'hoek, hurl it against the wall.

"No!"

So far Rao has been voice-only, now the slanting late-afternoon golden light stirs and curdles into the body of her husband.

"Don't," he says. "Don't ... banish me. I do love you."

"What does that mean?" Esha screams "You're not real! None of this is real! It's just a story we made up because we wanted to believe it. Other people, they have real marriages, real lives, real sex. Real ... children."

"Children. Is that what it is? I thought the fame, the attention was the thing, that there never would be children to ruin your career and your body. But if that's no longer enough, we can have children, the best

children I can buy."

Esha cries out, a keen of disappointment and frustration. The neighbors will hear. But the neighbors have been hearing everything, listening, gossiping. No secrets in the city of djinns.

"Do you know what they're saying, all those magazines and *chati* shows? What they're really saying? About us, the djinn and his wife?"

"I know!" For the first time, A.J. Rao's voice, so sweet, so reasonable inside her head, is raised. "I know what every one of them says about us. Esha, have I ever asked anything of you?"

"Only to dance."

"I'm asking one more thing of you now. It's not a big thing. It's a small thing, nothing really. You say I'm not real, what we have is not real. That hurts me, because at some level it's true. Our worlds are not compatible. But it can be real. There is a chip, new technology, a protein chip. You get it implanted, here." Rao raises his hand to his third eye. "It would be like the 'hoek, but it would always be on. I could always be with you. We would never be apart. And you could leave your world and enter mine...."

Esha's hands are at her mouth, holding in the horror, the bile, the sick vomit of fear. She heaves, retches. Nothing. No solid, no substance, just ghosts and djinns. Then she rips her 'hoek from the sweet spot behind her ear and there is blessed silence and blindness. She holds the little device in her two hands and snaps it cleanly in two.

Then she runs from her house.

* * * *

Not Neeta not Priya, not snippy Pranh in yts *gharana*, not Madhuri, a smoke-blackened hulk in a life-support chair, and no not never her mother, even though Esha's feet remember every step to her door; never the *basti*. That's death.

One place she can go.

But he won't let her. He's there in the *phatphat*, his face in the palm of her hands, voice scrolling silently in a ticker across the smart fabric: *come back, I'm sorry, come back, let's talk come back, I didn't mean to come back*. Hunched in the back of the little yellow and black plastic bubble she clenches his face into a fist but she can still feel him, feel his face, his mouth next to her skin. She peels the palmer from her hand. His mouth moves silently. She hurls him into the traffic. He vanishes under truck tires.

And still he won't let her go. The *phatphat* spins into Connaught Circus's vast gyratory and his face is on every single one of the video-silk screens hung across the curving facades. Twenty A.J. Rao's, greater, lesser, least, miming in sync.

Esha Esha come back, say the rolling news tickers. *We can try something else. Talk to me. Any ISO, any palmer, anyone....*

Infectious paralysis spreads across Connaught Circus. First the people who notice things like fashion ads and *chati*-screens; then the people who notice other people, then the traffic, noticing all the people on the pavements staring up, mouths fly-catching. Even the *phatphat* driver is staring. Connaught Circus is congealing into a clot of traffic: if the heart of Delhi stops, the whole city will seize and die.

"Drive on drive on," Esha shouts at her driver. "I order you to drive." But she abandons the autorickshaw at the end of Sisganj Road and pushes through the clogged traffic the final half-kilometer to Manmohan Singh Buildings. She glimpses Thacker pressing through the crowd, trying to rendezvous with the police

motorbike sirening a course through the traffic. In desperation she thrusts up an arm, shouts out his name and rank. At last, he turns. They beat toward each other through the chaos.

"Mrs. Rathore, we are facing a major incursion incident...."

"My husband, Mr. Rao, he has gone mad...."

"Mrs. Rathore, please understand, by our standards, he never was sane. He is an aeai."

The motorbike wails its horns impatiently. Thacker waggles his head to the driver, a woman in police leathers and helmet: *in a moment in a moment*. He seizes Esha's hand, pushes her thumb into his palmer-gloved hand.

"Apartment 1501. I've keyed it to your thumb-print. Open the door to no one, accept no calls, do not use any communications or entertainment equipment. Stay away from the balcony. I'll return as quickly as I can."

Then he swings up onto the pillion, the driver walks her machine round and they weave off into the gridlock.

The apartment is modern and roomy and bright and clean for a man on his own, well furnished and decorated with no signs of a Krishna Cop's work brought home of an evening. It hits her in the middle of the big living-room floor with the sun pouring in. Suddenly she is on her knees on the Kashmiri rug, shivering, clutching herself, bobbing up and down to sobs so wracking they have no sound. This time the urge to vomit it all up cannot be resisted. When it is out of her--not all of it, it will never all come out--she looks out from under her hanging, sweat-soaked hair, breath still shivering in her aching chest. Where is this place? What has she done? How could she have been so stupid, so vain and senseless and blind? Games games, children's pretending, how could it ever have been? I say it is and it is so: look at me! At me!

Thacker has a small, professional bar in his kitchen annex. Esha does not know drink so the *chota peg* she makes herself is much much more gin than tonic but it gives her what she needs to clean the sour, bile vomit from the wool rug and ease the quivering in her breath.

Esha starts, freezes, imagining Rao's voice. She holds herself very still, listening hard. A neighbor's *tivi*, turned up. Thin walls in these new-built executive apartments.

She'll have another *chota peg*. A third and she can start to look around. There's a spa-pool on the balcony. The need for moving, healing water defeats Thacker's warnings. The jets bubble up. With a dancer's grace she slips out of her clinging, emotionally soiled clothes into the water. There's even a little holder for your *chota peg*. A pernicious little doubt: how many others have been here before me? No, that is his kind of thinking. You are away from that. Safe. Invisible. Immersed. Down in Sisganj Road the traffic unravels. Overhead, the dark silhouettes of the scavenging kites and, higher above, the security robots, expand and merge their black wings as Esha drifts into sleep.

"I thought I told you to stay away from the windows."

Esha wakes with a start, instinctively covers her breasts. The jets have cut out and the water is long-still, perfectly transparent. Thacker is blue-chinned, baggy-eyed and sagging in his rumpled gritty suit.

"I'm sorry. It was just, I'm so glad, to be away ... you know?"

A bone-weary nod. He fetches himself a *chota peg*, rests it on the arm of his sofa and then very slowly, very deliberately, as if every joint were rusted, undresses.

"Security has been compromised on every level. In any other circumstances it would constitute an i-war attack on the nation." The body he reveals is not a dancer's body; Thacker runs a little to upper body fat, muscles slack, incipient man-tits, hair on the belly hair on the back hair on the shoulders. But it is a body, it is real. "The Bharati government has disavowed the action and waived Aei Rao's diplomatic immunity."

He crosses to the pool and restarts on the jets. Gin and tonic in hand, he slips into the water with a one-deep, skin-sensual sigh.

"What does that mean?" Esha asks.

"Your husband is now a rogue aeai."

"What will you do?"

"There is only one course of action permitted to us. We will excommunicate him."

Esha shivers in the caressing bubbles. She presses herself against Thacker. She feels his man-body move against her. He is flesh. He is not hollow. Kilometers above the urban stain of Delhi, aeai turn and seek.

* * * *

The warnings stay in place the next morning. Palmer, home entertainment system, com channels. Yes, and balcony, even for the spa.

"If you need me, this palmer is Department-secure. He won't be able to reach you on this." Thacker sets the glove and 'hoek on the bed. Cocooned in silk sheets, Esha pulls the glove on, tucks the 'hoek behind her ear.

"You wear that in bed?"

"I'm used to it."

Varanasi silk sheets and Kama Sutra prints. Not what one would expect of a Krishna Cop. She watches Thacker dress for an excommunication. It's the same as for any job--ironed white shirt, tie, hand-made black shoes--never brown in town--well polished. Eternal riff of bad aftershave. The difference: the leather holster slung under the arm and the weapon slipped so easily inside it.

"What's that for?"

"Killing aeais," he says simply.

A kiss and he is gone. Esha scrambles into his cricket pullover, a waif in baggy white that comes down to her knees, and dashes to the forbidden balcony. If she cranes over, she can see the street door. There he is, stepping out, waiting at the curb. His car is late, the road is thronged, the din of engines, car horns and *phatphat* klaxons has been constant since dawn. She watches him wait, enjoying the empowerment of invisibility. *I can see you. How do they ever play sport in these things?* she asks herself, skin under cricket pullover hot and sticky. It's already thirty degrees, according to the weather ticker across the foot of the video-silk shuttering over the open face of the new-built across the street. High of thirty-eight. Probability of precipitation: zero. The screen loops *Town and Country* for those devotees who must have their *soapi*, subtitles scrolling above the news feed.

Hello Esha, Ved Prakash says, turning to look at her.

The thick cricket pullover is no longer enough to keep out the ice.

Now Begum Vora *namastes* to her and says, *I know where you are, I know what you did.*

Ritu Parzaaz sits down on her sofa, pours *chai* and says, *What I need you to understand is, it worked both ways. That 'ware they put in your palmer, it wasn't clever enough.*

Mouth working wordlessly; knees, thighs weak with *basti* girl superstitious fear, Esha shakes her palmer-gloved hand in the air but she can't find the *mudras*, can't dance the codes right. *Call call call call.*

The scene cuts to son Govind at his racing stable, stroking the neck of his thoroughbred $\frac{1}{4}$ ber-star Star of Agra. *As they spied on me, I spied on them.*

Dr. Chatterji in his doctor's office. *So in the end we betrayed each other.*

The call has to go through Department security authorization and crypt.

Dr. Chatterji's patient, a man in black with his back to the camera turns. Smiles. It's A.J. Rao. *After all, what diplomat is not a spy?*

Then she sees the flash of white over the rooftops. Of course. Of course. He's been keeping her distracted, like a true *soapi* should. Esha flies to the railing to cry a warning but the machine is tunneling down the street just under power-line height, wings morphed back, engines throttled up: an aeai traffic monitor drone.

"Thacker! Thacker!"

One voice in the thousands. And it is not hers that he hears and turns toward. Everyone can hear the call of his own death. Alone in the hurrying street, he sees the drone pile out of the sky. At three hundred kilometers per hour it takes Inspector Thacker of the Department of Artificial Intelligence Registration and Licensing to pieces.

The drone, deflected, ricochets into a bus, a car, a truck, a *phatphat*, strewing plastic shards, gobs of burning fuel and its small intelligence across Sisganj Road. The upper half of Thacker's body cartwheels through the air to slam into a hot *samosa* stand.

The jealousy and wrath of djinns.

Esha on her balcony is frozen. *Town and Country* is frozen. The street is frozen, as if on the tipping point of a precipice. Then it drops into hysteria. Pedestrians flee; cycle rickshaw drivers dismount and try to run their vehicles away; drivers and passengers abandon cars, taxis, *phatphats*; scooters try to navigate through the panic; buses and trucks are stalled, hemmed in by people.

And still Esha Rathore is frozen to the balcony rail. Soap. This is all soap. Things like this cannot happen. Not in the Sisganj Road, not in Delhi, not on a Tuesday morning. It's all computer-generated illusion. It has always been illusion.

Then her palmer calls. She stares at her hand in numb incomprehension. The Department. There is something she should do. Yes. She lifts it in a *mudra*--a dancer's gesture--to take the call. In the same instant, as if summoned, the sky fills with gods. They are vast as clouds, towering up behind the apartment blocks of Sisganj Road like thunderstorms; Ganesh on his rat *vahana* with his broken tusk and pen, no benignity in his face; Siva, rising high over all, dancing in his revolving wheel of flames, foot raised in the instant before destruction; Hanuman with his mace and mountain fluttering between the

tower blocks; Kali, skull-jeweled, red tongue dripping venom, scimitars raised, bestriding Sisganj Road, feet planted on the rooftops.

In that street, the people mill. *They can't see this*, Esha comprehends. *Only me, only me*. It is the revenge of the Krishna Cops. Kali raises her scimitars high. Lightning arcs between their tips. She stabs them down into the screen-frozen *Town and Country*. Esha cries out, momentarily blinded as the Krishna Cops hunter-killers track down and excommunicate rogue aei A.J. Rao. And then they are gone. No gods. The sky is just the sky. The video-silk hoarding is blank, dead.

A vast, godlike roar above her. Esha ducks--now the people in the street are looking at her. All the eyes, all the attention she ever wanted. A tilt-jet in Awadhi air-force chameleo-flage slides over the roof and turns over the street, swiveling engine ducts and unfolding wing-tip wheels for landing. It turns its insect head to Esha. In the cockpit is a faceless pilot in a HUD visor. Beside her a woman in a business suit, gesturing for Esha to answer a call. Thacker's partner. She remembers now.

The jealousy and wrath and djinns.

"Mrs. Rathore, it's Inspector Kaur." She can barely hear her over the scream of ducted fans. "Come downstairs to the front of the building. You're safe now. The aei has been excommunicated."

Excommunicated.

"Thacker..."

"Just come downstairs, Mrs. Rathore. You are safe now, the threat is over."

The tilt-jet sinks beneath her. As she turns from the rail, Esha feels a sudden, warm touch on her face. Jet-swirl, or maybe just a djinn, passing unresting, unhasting, and silent as light.

* * * *

The Krishna Cops sent us as far from the wrath and caprice of the aeais as they could, to Leh under the breath of the Himalaya. I say *us*, for I existed; a knot of four cells inside my mother's womb.

My mother bought a catering business. She was in demand for weddings and *shaadis*. We might have escaped the aeais and the chaos following Awadh's signing the Hamilton Acts--but the Indian male's desperation to find a woman to marry endures forever. I remember that for favored clients--those who had tipped well, or treated her as something more than a paid contractor, or remembered her face from the *chati* mags--she would slip off her shoes and dance *Radha and Krishna*. I loved to see her do it and when I slipped away to the temple of Lord Ram, I would try to copy the steps among the pillars of the *mandapa*. I remember the brahmins would smile and give me money.

The dam was built and the water war came and was over in a month. The aeais, persecuted on all sides, fled to Bharat where the massive popularity of *Town and Country* gave them protection, but even there they were not safe: humans and aeais, like humans and *djinni*, were too different creations and in the end they left Awadh for another place that I do not understand, a world of their own where they are safe and no one can harm them.

And that is all there is to tell in the story of the woman who married a djinn. If it does not have the happy-ever-after ending of Western fairytales and Bollywood musicals, it has a happy-enough ending. This spring I turn twelve and shall head off on the bus to Delhi to join the *gharana* there. My mother fought this with all her will and strength--for her Delhi would always be the city of djinns, haunted and stained with blood--but when the temple brahmins brought her to see me dance, her opposition melted. By now she was a successful businesswoman, putting on weight, getting stiff in the knees from the

dreadful winters, refusing marriage offers on a weekly basis, and in the end she could not deny the gift that had passed to me. And I am curious to see those streets and parks where her story and mine took place, the Red Fort and the sad decay of the Shalimar Gardens. I want to feel the heat of the djinns in the crowded *galis* behind the Jama Masjid, in the dervishes of litter along Chandni Chowk, in the starlings swirling above Connaught Circus. Leh is a Buddhist town, filled with third-generation Tibetan exiles--Little Tibet, they call it--and they have their own gods and demons. From the old Moslem djinn-finder I have learned some of their lore and mysteries but I think my truest knowledge comes when I am alone in the Ram temple, after I have danced, before the priests close the *garbagriha* and put the god to bed. On still nights when the spring turns to summer or after the monsoon, I hear a voice. It calls my name. Always I suppose it comes from the *japa*-softs, the little low-level aeais that mutter our prayers eternally to the gods, but it seems to emanate from everywhere and nowhere, from another world, another universe entirely. It says, *the creatures of word and fire are different from the creatures of clay and water but one thing is true: love endures*. Then as I turn to leave, I feel a touch on my cheek, a passing breeze, the warm sweet breath of djinns.

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