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Shatranj

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SHATRANJ

by

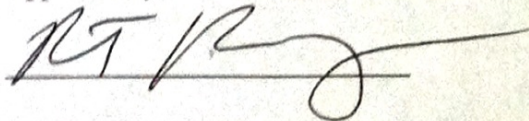
Anushka Mehrotra

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in English (Creative Writing)

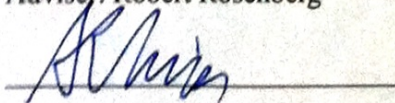
December, 2015

Approved by:



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Abstract

Shatranj contains the prologue and first five chapters of an in-progress novel completed as an Honors Thesis in Creative Writing. The story is set in Mumbai, India and tells the story of a fictional assassin company called the *Fireflies*. The story is told through the perspectives of multiple characters; Ishan, the protagonist, a new recruit to the group; Rhea a former *Firefly* who left the group and joined a group of other *Firefly* deserters; Tahiliani, one of the heads of the group; and Akash, a senior member of the *Fireflies* who desperately wants to prove himself and replace Tahiliani as head of the group.

The prologue and the first five chapters serve to set the scene, hint at past events, as well as explain the function of the *Fireflies* and the hierarchy within the group. Ishan's story begins with his first assassination and continues every alternate chapter. The rest of the chapters deal with each of the POV side characters and their situations. Akash, unsatisfied with his life, yearns to take over from Tahiliani, who is shattered by events of the past. Rhea, who is forming a group of *Firefly* runaways returns to Mumbai in the hopes of turning some of the *Fireflies* to their side. Tensions rise, secrets are highlighted, and each character's position on the chessboard is established.

These chapters serve to showcase the skills and techniques the author has learned after four years of writing classes at Bard College and Bucknell University. It can be classified as a work of fiction.

Prologue

It had been years since Tahiliani had stayed in the office so late, but he was there that night, just Akash and him in one of the meeting rooms, their shirts loosened, the window open and the fan spinning in sluggish circles. Akash was on the phone with Dr.Mehta, his voice low and hushed, his fingers tracing the lines on the wooden table before him. Tahiliani could barely hear him, and his advanced age and the muffled noise from the cricket celebrations certainly didn't provide much help. Instead, he wondered when he'd last watched a cricket match.

It was a warm night. Akash wanted to turn on the AC, but Tahiliani had insisted the windows stay open. He liked the hot thick smell of the Mumbai night; the salty whiff of ocean mixed with sun-warmed tar. It was a smell he hadn't really enjoyed in years because the older he got, the more he spent his nights locked in his sprawling air-conditioned flat. It was refreshing to be out at night again. He felt like he was re-living his youth. There had been times, back when he was young, when he'd spent entire nights in the office - innovating new tactics, planning missions, changing the face of the Mumbai criminal world for good. But he was in his sixties now, and during the last four years a heaviness had grown within him that got thicker with each passing day. Some days he felt like his blood was condensed milk running through his veins. The warm air alleviated that weight, and for a minute he was thirty-six again. He half-expected to turn around and see his laughing co-workers eating parathas and throwing greasy balls of tin-foil at him. But then he looked out of the window and he saw the slums that seemed to slump in the heat, their bony bamboo skeletons leaning against the concrete buildings like children clinging to their mothers' legs, and he was crushed by exhaustion. He blamed it on ageing, but he knew it wasn't just that.

It was almost two in the morning when he and Akash came up with a feasible solution to the problem. The Fireflies had had recruits - old and new - mess up assignments in the past. Usually the problem was a passerby who'd witnessed the entire thing who needed to be taken care of, or a case of inaccurate timing. But it was very rare that a new recruit accidentally killed the wrong person. Still, they had thought it was just a small blunder. As they began to unravel the threads that made up the mistake, however, they found that it was worse than they had anticipated. Apparently the person who'd been murdered was a politician's son. Not an ideal situation, particularly not mere months after the 26/11 terror attacks.

That was why Tahiliani had decided to stay past eight. Akash had told him to go home, but Tahiliani had dealt with time-sensitive problems before. Granted, he hadn't had to for almost seven years, but there was no denying he knew more than Akash did. The company was his child, after all. His real child. He thought it would go faster if the two of them worked together. But soon it was past midnight and Tahiliani's lids were heavy and his body felt like it was trapped under piles of silt at the bottom of the ocean. Nevertheless he stayed till the end, the cogs of his mind creaking as they ironed out the creases in their situation. The Doctor would fudge the reports to make the damage seem less severe, the real target's assassination was postponed to nine months later to make it seem unconnected. They'd come up with another six or seven ideas for how to throw the politician off their scent and make the whole thing look like a simple mistake. As for their recruit... they'd decide what to do about him tomorrow.

Tahiliani was almost asleep when they finished, and Akash said he would drive him home. Tahiliani was standing by the window, waiting for Akash to finish using the bathroom when the office lights gave out.

For a split second there was nothing but electric silence, before a large crack of noise tore through the night. There were around three dozen people working late in the building. Three dozen people who didn't deal well with unexpected darkness

"T!" Akash called from the blackness, and Tahiliani cringed. He didn't like Akash calling him that. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Why isn't the generator coming on?"

"I don't know."

Muted yellow light from the street lamps illuminated Akash's dull gray silhouette as he walked into the room. It took him a moment to find Tahiliani.

"Do you think..." Akash paused and then pulled his gun from his back pocket. "Let me try calling Ravi."

Tahiliani watched him fumble with his phone; tapping the screen and trying to dial it without dropping his gun. The dial tone rang tinnily through the dark room. Tahiliani could hear the noises in the bowels of the building growing louder. There was a rumble, a few screams and then gunshots. But they could have just been the fireworks from the cricket celebrations.

"Fuck." Akash shoved his phone back in his pocket. "He's not picking up. *Fuck.*" He turned to Tahiliani. "Take your gun out."

"What for? Stop acting like you've never seen a power cut before," Tahiliani replied. He rubbed his eyes, exhaustedly. He knew it wasn't a power cut, the street lights were still working. But he didn't point this out to Akash.

"Didn't you hear the shots?"

There was another crash of noise and the sky outside filled with streaks of glitter. Tahiliani turned to Akash, raising an eyebrow. Akash opened his mouth to protest and Tahiliani wearily pulled his gun out. He wasn't in the mood to argue.

“Thank you. I think it's better to just be prep-”

The door of the room banged open and Ravi came running in, sweat dripping down his face.

“Ravi!” Akash began, but he froze when he saw the look on the man's face.

“The Runaways have broken in,” he said. He was a shrivelled little man, and in the oppressive darkness he looked even smaller. His words seem to reverberate in the high-ceilinged room. He was looking straight at Tahiliani.

It took Tahiliani a moment to realise his heart was pounding.

Could it really be true? Were they here? More importantly, was he back? The whole situation seemed absurd. What were the chances that after four years of relentless pain, of consistent praying despite his staunch atheism, his boy had returned? On the one night after seven years that Tahiliani was in the office so late?

This wasn't really happening. And even if it was, he didn't care. It didn't matter if his son had returned. All Tahiliani wanted from him was information. Once he got that, he was none of his business. The other two heads could decide what to do about him. He'd betrayed them, he'd caused him unimaginable shame. Unimaginable pain.

Tahiliani didn't care what happened to him. He wasn't really his son.

“Oh god,” Akash murmured, running a hand through his hair. “How many are there?”

“About forty.”

“Fuck.”

Tahiliani could feel the wave of panic that emanated from both Ravi and Akash. He could see the fear in their eyes and noticed the way Ravi's gun was shaking.

“Are you sure?” Tahiliani asked. “They’re Runaways?”

“Pretty sure. They were wearing masks, but we killed two of them. They were both Runaways. We believe their names were Krishna Seth and Suresh Kothari.”

“Is he there?” Tahiliani demanded. It was out before he could stop himself.

“Who?” Ravi asked. His voice was a whisper.

“Shadow.”

“Oh!” His eyes were watery. “He must be,” he said, weakly.

“Did you see him?” Tahiliani asked. He could barely recognise his own voice, thick and sharp with impatience and desperation.

“They were wearing masks...”

“He’s got gray eyes. He’s pretty bloody recognisable even with a mask.” He was being unreasonable. Absolutely ridiculous. He knew this, but he wanted to be sure. He *needed* to be sure.

“It’s very dark, sir. They were coming at us with guns. We didn’t have time to-”

“Is. He. There?”

Ravi swallowed hard. “He hasn’t been identified, sir.”

“And the other one?” Akash asked. “The gora?”

“We haven’t identified any of the masked people yet.”

They both turned to Tahiliani.

“What do we do?” Akash asked. His voice sounded so small that Tahiliani was reminded of the first time he met him, when he was fifteen and brand new, his clothes baggy, his every movement laced with terror and uncertainty.

They were terrified now too. Both of them. And they had a reason to be.

But in that moment, all Tahiliani felt was hope.

Chapter One: Pawn to D4

Ishan

The vendors had their carts on the road at the crack of dawn, but they didn't start setting up till it was almost eight. Their sluggish set-up, broken by moments when they did nothing but grunt at one another, ensured that the mela opened at nine-thirty and not nine like it was supposed to.

Ishan had predicted this. All the street vendors seemed to be on 'Indian Standard Time,' their internal clocks in sync with an imaginary one a half hour slower than real time. Ishan didn't have the luxury of following his faulty internal clock. He was instructed to get out of bed at six-thirty so that he could park his car at a safe distance from the fair and check out the location. He got there by seven and walked to the clearing to find empty carts cluttering the road but not a single person in sight. It was only on his trudge back to his car when he spotted a small group of the vendors sitting under the banyan tree, talking and chewing tobacco which turned their teeth red and their spit to rust. He returned to his car and dozed off for a few minutes, then awoke sweating and panicking, afraid he'd missed it. He hadn't. It was still obnoxiously early, and he turned on the radio and let the soft voice of Sting croon the nervousness out of him.

Jaya arrived at eight-thirty, and Tej arrived even later, grinning like a langur.

"Hello my friend," he said, sliding into the front seat beside Ishan. Jaya, who had timidly seated herself in the back, was in the process of telling Ishan a terribly boring story about a friend of hers. Ishan had faked a smile which had, much to his chagrin, encouraged her to continue with more gusto. She was laughing as though her friend accidentally stepping into a pile of cow dung was the funniest story she had ever heard when Tej arrived. Ishan was

relieved by the interruption, even though the man with the crooked yellow teeth was hardly better company.

“How long have you been here, yaar?” Tej asked. He knew exactly how long Ishan had been there, and Ishan knew that. But he wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction of laughing at him.

“I just got here.”

“Really?” Tej needled, “Because Akash told us to get here at seven.”

Bastard.

“I knew it wouldn’t start before nine,” Ishan said, breezily. He hummed to a song he didn’t recognise on the radio, looking straight out of the windshield. He’d heard that the senior members often harassed the rookies, and he was determined not to get sucked into their wide, wicked smiles. Even Jaya was giggling in the back of the car - though whether it was because of Tej’s teasing or the memory of her friend and the cow dung, Ishan couldn’t tell.

“Alright then,” Tej said, dusting his hands on his trousers, “let’s get down to business.” He grinned again at Ishan. Ishan didn’t return his smile. “You basically know what to do, na?” Tej continued, sobering up. “I did a quick recce. It doesn’t seem too different from how we planned it. You stand on this side...” he gestured vaguely out the window, “near that big tree. Jaya will stand near the middle... I think there is some lady selling sugarcane juice there. I will stand on the other side...”

“I know what to do,” Ishan snapped, cutting him off. “We’ve gone over this a hundred times. I remember.”

Tej raised his eyebrows and shot Jaya a quick look, but eventually shrugged and slid down on the seat. “Ok. Good.”

Ishan let out an angry exhale. The two of them ignored him. Jaya was now looking out the window, wrapped up in her thoughts, and Tej was whistling to some pop song that was now whining through the speakers. Ishan felt another surge of agitation as he realised that Tej had switched stations. He considering switching it back but decided against it. Instead he continued staring out of the windshield as the car reverberated with the upbeat music. A Taylor Swift song, the only one that Ishan knew, was just beginning when Tej abruptly sat up straight.

“It’s damn hot out there,” he said. His eyes were fixed on the crowd heading towards the fair. He slid out of the car and started strolling down the road, his hands in his pockets. Quietly, Jaya followed suit, her dupatta flapping as she hopped out of the car. She was wearing a cheap red salwar kameez with an unravelling silver border. Ishan watched it flutter in the light breeze as she joined a group of similarly-dressed women walking down the road. The watch on his wrist ticked loudly, reminding Ishan that he’d soon have to leave the cool air of his car and join his companions.

Finally the minute hand reached nine-thirty. Ishan slid out of the car, throwing a look towards the row of dusty cars that had collected in the small parking lot. He melded slowly into the growing crowd, staring straight ahead and attempting not to touch anyone. The heat was merciless, dampening the enthusiasm that had been bubbling within him all morning as well as his moist forehead. He could smell his deodorant struggling against his sweat, producing a sickly sweet smell. He knew he was supposed to act natural, but his discomfort got the better of him and he started walking hurriedly over to his end of the road, looking around for the tree he had seen the vendors milling about that morning. The murmur of the crowd grew into a roar as more people filtered onto the street, and Ishan had to struggle past family after family before he reached the big tree. The cart in front of it was done up with

bright orange marigolds that circled a large pot fizzing with oil, into which a man was spurting thick dough. A jalebi stand. Fucking brilliant.

The man frying the jalebis remained oblivious to Ishan's presence as he walked past him to the tree. He halted beside a woman who was rocking a baby and talking in a loud, shrill voice to a friend of hers. Ducking a low-hanging root, Ishan leaned against the bumpy bark and watched the flustered jalebi vendor trying to appease the hoards of people that were coming up to him, waving crumpled bills in his face. Ishan fidgeted and plucked at the shirt sticking to his chest. He had never felt more uncomfortable. His toes were burning in his faux leather shoes and the cheap cream shirt he had been forced to wear was itchy and rough, but Tej had insisted he wear the tacky ensemble. "You have to blend in, yaar," Tej had said. "And Akash says 'you're not going to do that in a bloody leather jacket.'"

Ishan wasn't an idiot. He wasn't going to wear a leather jacket in the sweltering heat, and he resented Akash for believing that he would. He was also slightly offended that Akash had sent his message through Tej. Granted, Akash was one of the oldest and most respected Fireflies. He'd been working with the organisation before he'd even hit puberty and - if the rumours were to be believed - he was going to take over as head after one of the current heads died or retired. Nevertheless, Ishan didn't understand why Akash kept himself at such a distance from new recruits. Though he was right about the jacket - Ishan couldn't wear anything that looked expensive. Not here. He'd stand out like a beggar in a bookstore. Still, he wasn't happy about it. It had been almost five years since he'd had to wear such cheap clothes, and it didn't help that the cold steel of the knife was pressing uncomfortably against his calf. Though that bit was his fault. He bent down to shift it, chastising himself for his stupidity. Everyone else just carried their knives in a sheath tied to their belts for easy access. But Karan had told him that Shadow kept his knife in an ankle holster he'd made himself. Shadow knew how to use a knife - at least that's what Ishan had been told - and he'd taken

that to mean that hiding his knife in a dirty cloth tucked into his sock was the best way to conceal his blade. It occurred to him that he should have questioned how Karan knew all this information about Shadow, instead of naively believing everything that came out of his friend's mouth.

One of the people waiting to buy a jalebi spotted Ishan hunched over and sent him a peculiar look. Ishan pretended to tie his laces, and the woman turned her attention back to the sweet vendor. That was one of the few things he liked about people. They had extremely short attention spans concerning things they didn't really care about. Ishan wished he could have hidden behind the mehndi stall, or even the overweight woman selling bangles, but he didn't risk moving. Tej had told him to stand here. He didn't want to jeopardise the assignment just because the sizzle that filled the air as the man squirted the batter into the deep vat of oil was distracting.

Ishan kept his attention focused on the narrow lane, made thinner by the multitude of stalls that had sprouted up all along the road. It was starting to fill up with people, and the noise was ungodly. Hawkers shouting on the top of their voices, repeating the same words over and over till they were unconsciously playing in a loop in Ishan's mind: *vada pav*, *masala chai*, *vada paaav*. Circling around to the back of the tree, he leaned against the bumpy bark and scuffed his shoe against it to get rid of the dog-shit he was sure he'd stepped in. Jaya would get a kick out of it if he had, he thought idly. He strained to hear above the crowd, feeling wisps of impatience settle over him.

Assignments like this looked so action-packed in the movies. The night before, when he was pacing up and down in his flat, he'd imagined himself chasing the man through the fair until they reached a narrow alleyway where he challenged him to a fight. But in none of the imagined scenarios had he envisioned there would be so much damn waiting. He'd known, of course, that there was going to be no confrontation. Their target wasn't dangerous.

He was just an irresponsible man who had made a series of large bets on the wrong horses and now couldn't pay off his debts. There were going to be no challenges or fights, but Ishan couldn't help but wish for some anyway. More than action, he wanted a story. A really good story. Back in the Academy, he hadn't had as many stories as the rest of them had. At least, not stories that he wanted to share. He didn't have stories of wild parties or crazy girlfriends or overbearing parents. He had stories of his brothers. Their pranks, their fights, their conspiracy theories. The time they almost got arrested for robbing a butcher and terrorising people in their neighbourhood by leaving bloody animal parts in their scrappy little gardens, or the time they got drunk and began charging people ten rupees to use the public toilet. But it hurt too much to remember those.

He let his gaze hover over the stalls spread out before him. A timid little stall selling prasad was squished up next to three gaudily decorated stalls selling scarves and cheaply printed images of Vishnu and Shiva. What if he didn't hear the signal? He hadn't realised the fair was going to be so loud. His stomach roiled again. He had a odd feeling like he was in a play, performing the over-rehearsed blocking to a scene he hadn't memorised the lines for. "Start at the jalebi stall," Tej had told him, "then go over to the tree. Try to remain out of sight, ok? Don't talk to anyone, but try to seem natural. You're just an aam aadmi doing shopping. Keep your ears and eyes open. Don't let him leave."

The crowd was growing thicker by the minute, and it was making the heat even more unbearable. Ishan wiped the sweat from his lip, wishing for his air conditioned bedroom or a cold beer. He wondered if everyone felt like this on their first day, panicked and uneasy and wishing to leave.

Then he heard it.

He strained his ears, desperate to hear the noise above the crowd. It was a long tinny tune that, to an oblivious ear, would sound like a hawker attempting to sell one of those

plastic squeaky toys that danced around and broke the minute you took it out of the packaging. But Ishan knew what it really meant - Tej was ready.

He braced himself, bowing his head and entering the crowd. People shoved into him, their hard sweaty bodies leaving moisture marks on his shirt. As though the cream-coloured atrocity wasn't hideous enough. He tried to ignore the smell of coconut oil and powder as he walked straight into the thick of the crowd, pushing his way towards a stall that was either selling sugarcane juice or flies. He stopped a few feet way, noticing Jaya. She was standing beside the stall, the exact place she'd promised she would be. With her was a stranger - the target - a skinny man of average height, with a smattering of moles on his face and a nervous twitch on his lips. Jaya was babbling on about something Ishan couldn't hear, one hand clasping the man's thin wrist as though she was a palm reader, the fingers of the other slipped into his pocket. The target didn't notice. He was staring directly into her eyes, following her words as though she was telling him the secret to everlasting life. Finally she let go and he scurried away, clearly alarmed at her act. She was very good at that. She'd demonstrated her distraction skills for his class in the Academy once. After her presentation, Ishan had asked her how she managed to keep a straight face, and she'd confessed that she had wanted to be in Bollywood movies.

He thought about the Academy again. They were probably done with breakfast right now, and heading to classes. It was a Friday, which meant that they had eggs for breakfast. It also meant that they would have gun training. He imagined all his friends in the shooting range, laughing and making crude jokes, all of them in their matching protective eyewear and dirty orange ear-plugs. He wondered if anyone apart from Karan missed him.

They probably didn't.

He reminded himself to focus. He watched the target hurrying away, wondering what would happen if the man slipped his hand into his pocket. It was impossible to do this job

without risks, he supposed, yet it was strange that they hadn't yet come up with a more elegant solution considering how long the Fireflies had been around. Then again, they weren't getting paid much for this. The extent to which Akash cared about an assignment was directly proportional to how much money they were getting out of it. Ishan's eyes followed the man, noting that he was wearing a black t-shirt. Probably cotton. Plain, with no design on it at all. The most unfortunate choice of clothing; it was hardly prominent in the sea of people. However, as a wave swept him up the street, Ishan caught sight of the smudge of pink chalk on his back. Tej had gotten to him.

Ishan's hands felt damp. Exhaling loudly, he slipped into the crowd, his eyes fixed on the target before him. Booming music exploded as he passed a small, gaudily decorated temple and he cringed, his ears throbbing. As if on cue, an explosion of orange overtook his line of vision. A procession of sadhus dressed in bright orange robes had materialised, their matted gray hair toppling down onto their shoulders. Their turmeric smeared faces and chants of *Hare Ram Hare Krishna* seemed to eclipse everything else, and Ishan found himself disoriented as they paraded through the crowd with an air of self-importance that came from being part of a large group. Ishan hung around the periphery of the crowd, waiting until the unwelcome visitors melted into the sea of people before looking around the jam-packed road and noticing that the man was gone.

Terror shot through him and he turned both ways, getting more and more flustered. He saw nothing but men in off-white shirts and women in faded salwar kameezes. The sadhus' chanting could be heard clearly as the temple's music waned, and he felt a flush of anger at them. A cold finger ran up his back, heading towards his neck.

No. This couldn't be happening. Not now. Not on his first day. He couldn't be that guy who messed up his trial round.

His forehead was completely damp now, but he remained steady, trying to calm his thoughts. He'd been through this a thousand times in training. He just had to think objectively. He just had to be calm. A buzz from his pocket sent another bolt of fear through him, but he maintained a cool drawl as he answered the phone.

"Just saw your man," Tej's thick accent poured through the device, "he's at the back, near the chaiwalla. I felt like you probably would have lost him since all those babas suddenly came through."

Ishan let out a small gasp of a laugh. "Yeah, they surprised me. But I didn't lose him."

"Oh, well good for you, yaar. I would definitely have lost him. I think my power is getting worse. I may need chashma soon." Tej paused, and Ishan hung up the phone before he could say anything else. Skirting around a bullock-cart, Ishan picked his way through the crowd, thinking about Tej's skewed concept of urgency. Here Ishan was chasing down their target, and Tej was talking about how he needed bloody glasses. This was probably the reason why Ishan had been given the task of actually killing the man. Darting past a beggar woman who sent him a wounded look, he finally caught sight of the man. He was leaving the mela now, heading towards where the crowd was thinning. Jaya must have scared him too much. What an idiot. Now Ishan had to act immediately, or else ruin the entire mission. He felt another ripple of panic, but pushed it down. He'd been promoted from the Academy, not any of the others. Obviously he was capable enough. Reaching down, he pulled the knife from his sock.

The sleeves of the ugly shirt were too long for him. He'd assumed initially that that had been a mistake. But when he had brought it up, Tej had given him a look so full of disbelief that Ishan had understood that it was intentional. It had taken him a few days to understand just *how* it was intentional, but he refused to ask anyone else for help. He already had a lot of flack from the others as it was. His hand now hung by his hip, the rough cream-

coloured fabric hiding the blade of the knife. This was it. He just had to duck his head, walk past him, do the thing and leave. That was it. Nothing to be nervous about. Ishan licked his lips and started walking towards the target.

Ishan's eyes were fixed on the man, watching as his narrow body slid between the throngs of people. His eyes didn't stray from the pink smudge on the man's back, which is why it took him a few seconds to realise that the target had frozen in the middle of the crowd. Ishan's heart began hammering in his chest, but he continued forward. Abruptly, the target turned, his eyes landing straight on Ishan. Ishan felt his throat starting to close up, but he reminded himself to keep walking. He was just a regular man who had come to attend the mela. That was all. He was just passing the target, his eyes wandering manically past the people and the trees, his mind in a whirr of panic, when he felt thin fingers on his wrist. He jerked to a stop.

"Excuse me," the target said in Marathi. Ishan pretended not to notice. He tried to concentrate on the pattern of tar soaked rocks that made up the road, the white stitch marks that divided the lanes, a hand in his pocket and the other on the back of his neck. The target's hand landed on his shoulder, jolting him to attention. The knife scraped the fabric of his pocket.

"Oh, sorry," Ishan said in English. Tej had to be nearby, watching them. Oh God. He was probably calling backup right now.

"I was just wondering," the man continued in Marathi, "if you knew whether there is a pujari in the temple?"

Ishan blinked, his mind spitting out bits of information like a broken television. Backup was going to come. He was going to be pushed to the side. Akash was going to call him incompetent, and he was going to be forced back into the Academy.

“What?” Ishan asked, blankly. The man wrung his hands, two rat-like teeth protruding from his mouth even when his lips were shut.

“A pujari,” the man repeated.

“A whole bunch of sadhus just passed by a few minutes ago,” Ishan said. He responded in Hindi, his tongue not used to curling around the Marathi words. The man frowned, and for a second Ishan wondered whether he could understand him. But then the man straightened his shoulders and squinted into the crowd, bracing himself to re-enter the teeming masses. “That’s so strange. I must have missed that,” he murmured. He turned to Ishan, a thin smile on his face. “Thank you.”

Ishan nodded, and the man began walking towards the orange group that had just turned a corner. Ishan looked to his right and caught sight of Tej standing before a vegetable cart, his face impassive. He widened his eyes as Ishan shot him a helpless look, and mouthed something Ishan couldn’t understand. But he didn’t look panicked. He gestured for Ishan to come stand beside him.

Ishan’s stomach dropped. Tej had called backup already.

Ishan began walking grudgingly towards Tej. It was like Tej had anticipated this. Like he’d known the target was going to come up to Ishan out of all the damn people in the street. What kind of man was unlucky enough to lose lakhs of rupees in horse races, but lucky enough to pinpoint his assassin in a crowd of people? Ishan looked away from Tej in anger, and noticed the people around him. Everyone was so caught up in their own purchases and conversations, that they had no idea what was happening. None of them had seen Ishan talking to the man, and if they had, they simply didn’t care.

His heart leapt. Ignoring Tej’s hand motions, Ishan turned around and was swept up in a crowd that was walking towards the middle of the fair.

The target didn't notice him. He was just a few inches ahead of Ishan, getting jostled by the crowd. Pulling his hand from his pocket, his heart in his throat, Ishan slipped past the target. With the flick of his wrist, Ishan jammed the knife into the man's abdomen, and it seemed like entire minutes had passed before he twisted and pulled it out. Some of the blood splattered on Ishan's shirt. But it was a clean kill. Just like he'd wanted. He had done it so fast, and so smoothly, that it took the target a second to cry out. And then the target crumpled to his knees. Immediately, there was a burst of confusion. People were screaming, someone tripped over the man and a line of people were abruptly halted. With the bloody knife hidden in his sleeve, Ishan turned away. He clasped the metal handle tightly as he slipped through the crowd, sweat pouring down his face. Tej rushed down the road, inconspicuously taking the knife from him and handing him a wet napkin. Ishan refused to turn around or look at Tej's face. The commotion around the man was almost deafening. Not a soul seemed to notice them.

"Who did this to you?" He could hear someone asking the man.

The man was gasping and from the corner of his eye Ishan could see him shaking his head blearily, "I didn't... I didn't..."

Everyone's attention was stolen by the scene before them, their mouths agape. In the tumult no one seemed to see Tej round the corner and drop the knife into the vat of sugarcane juice, or Ishan who was throwing away the now-red napkin into a tobacco spit stained oil can full of trash. The noise was almost unbearable. Ishan's head was throbbing as he walked out to the main road, straight into his waiting car. Jaya drove wildly, and the wind from the open window whipped at his hair and made his stomach curdle.

* * *

The *Times of India* covered the story the next morning. It said that the man died at two in the morning in the hospital. Ishan had hit the liver - probably even the hepatic artery he had been aiming for - and even though the man had been rushed to the hospital as soon as possible, he had died of blood loss. The nearest hospital was forty minutes away and the ambulance that had been called was stuck in traffic for an hour. As predicted, the unruly crowd hadn't done a very good job of managing to suppress the blood flow in the meantime. Ishan was surprised to realise the planning of the mission was a lot more meticulous than he had initially assumed.

Aaj Tak, the news channel, covered the story as well. They were the ones who announced that drugs were found on his body, and that the police had set their eyes on the city's drug dealers (particularly the Worli-based group, who marked their targets with a streak of pink as a way of warning). Instantly, Ishan was in the clear. The police didn't care much about the drug cases. The police didn't care much about anything, really.

Ishan followed the news coolly from the minute he woke up. He spent the day in a sleepy haze, alone and antsy in his apartment. Even though he knew he was in the clear, he still felt a vague, worried restlessness hovering over him. It wasn't guilt. He'd been preparing for his first kill for years in the Academy; you don't learn how to fire a gun without knowing that you'd have to shoot somebody some day. No, it was something else. Something that made him feel disconnected from the rest of the world from the moment he took the man's life. It took him half the morning to conclude that it was the lack of consequences that made him uncomfortable. It didn't seem right that his life was continuing as though nothing had happened. The thought plagued him until almost six in the evening when he got a call from a cool dry voice.

"Ishan? It's Akash. We're having a small celebration in the bar tonight. To welcome you. At ten. You can call your friends from the Academy if you like."

Ishan had barely choked out a thank you before the man hung up the phone. He hadn't mentioned the name of a bar, but there was a pub called Bombay Whiskey that the Fireflies frequented. It was a dimly-lit underground pub that played smooth jazz and had old Bollywood posters on the walls and clean bathrooms that smelled of rose soap. The bar was owned by a shifty man named Ramu who had hairy tattooed arms and was involved in a series of shady endeavours, including helping The Fireflies launder money. Ishan figured that was the bar Akash meant. The older man wasn't one to spend time explaining things like that.

Ishan spent over an hour getting ready, unwilling to admit - even to himself - how excited he was to receive a phone call from Akash himself. He'd had brief conversations with the man in the past, but nothing even remotely personal. The man had always just been there, a cool spectre who made terse comments and helped them out when they needed help. But Ishan was excited to finally talk to him as an equal; two full-fledged Firefly recruits. This was Ishan's opportunity to find out all the secrets they had kept from the trainees. His opportunity to finally fulfil the promise he'd made to Karan.

However, when he got to the bar at ten, it was empty.

Ishan was on his second beer when people started filtering in. Jaya came first, and then Tej and then some of his trainers from the Academy. Karan, the only person Ishan had invited, came almost half an hour late, dressed like an actor at an award show except for his dirty tennis shoes.

"So where are they?" he asked, as effervescent as the glass of champagne he had ordered. He looked around, hoping to see Akash or one of the other Fireflies from his personal hall-of-fame.

"Why are you drinking that?" Ishan grumbled. He had seated himself on one of the bar stools when he'd arrived, and hadn't bothered to move when Tej and Jaya had come in,

not wanting to hear Tej's angry rant about how he'd jeopardised their mission the previous morning.

"I'm trying to seem sophisticated," Karan said, as though it was obvious. He remained standing, as if contemplating whether he wanted to sit down and risk wrinkling his suit. It occurred to Ishan that this was probably what Karan had been saving his pocket money for. The suit was probably the first suit Karan had ever owned. More than wanting to impress, he probably just wanted to wear it. Jaya came up to them, offering Ishan an awkward smile as she hovered about Karan. Ishan ignored her. Karan offered her a hesitant smile.

"If you wanted to seem sophisticated maybe you shouldn't have worn Converse shoes," Ishan said.

Karan looked down at his shoes, affronted. Someone clapped Ishan hard on the back, making him dribble some of his beer back into the mug. Ishan wiped his mouth with his sleeve, turning to face the man who loudly congratulated him. It was one of his trainers at the Academy. He smiled and mumbled his thanks.

"Where are they?" Karan asked again as the trainer drifted away. "I see these bums all the time."

"I don't bloody know," Ishan muttered. He gestured at the bartender and asked for another green chilli. "They told me to get here at ten. I came at ten."

"Everyone knows that ten really means eleven," a smooth voice said. This time Ishan recognised it at once. Ignoring the excited slap Karan gave him on his elbow, he turned around and smiled at Akash who was standing by the bar, a glass of Scotch in his hand. "I have to admit," Akash continued, "that was a very risky move out there, on the field. Stabbing the man after he talked to you, I mean."

Ishan was always struck by Akash's appearance. His looks were admittedly not striking by any means, which worked in his favour. It helped for assassins to be nondescript. He had an aquiline nose and deep brown eyes that were almost black and sharp cheekbones. Sure, his skin was fairer than that of most people and there was something crepuscular in his eyes, but he didn't have a face that artists would want to draw. Yet, his voice that was laced with a peculiar sharpness, and his teeth that were a little too straight, insured that Akash commanded the appropriate amount of attention when he entered a room.

"I just went for it," Ishan said. "I didn't want to--"

"Most people don't take risks on their first day."

"I wouldn't have normally, but I wasn't briefed properly beforehand." The words were out of his mouth before he realised it wasn't something he should have said. There was a claustrophobic pause and Jaya, who was standing too close to Karan, skittered away.

Akash sipped his Scotch. "I'm sorry about that," he said curtly, "I'll make sure it doesn't happen again." He continued staring at Ishan, his fingers tightening on the glass. Then he turned and gave Karan a once-over.

"You from the Academy?"

Karan nodded wordlessly, and Akash clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"Champagne. Good choice." he turned back to Ishan. "Let me get you a glass too."

"It's OK," Ishan said. "I'm fine with my beer."

"Come on," Akash said. "Let me get you a champagne."

The beer suddenly felt bitter against his tongue. Akash's gaze seemed to be boring a hole into his skull.

"No really," Ishan said. "It's alright."

There was a flash in Akash's eyes, and then it disappeared. He smiled a thin smile.

"You know, you remind me of a friend of mine."

"Um..." Ishan looked helplessly at Karan, who shot him a nervous look. "Oh... anyone I know?"

"I hope not."

Akash reached over and grabbed a handful of roasted peanuts. Ishan watched him rub them in his palms, the skin of the nuts falling from his hand like autumn leaves in America. He felt nauseous. Akash's phone buzzed, and he ripped his gaze from Ishan to peer at the screen.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your friends then," Akash said. They exchanged tight lipped smiles. Ishan waited until Akash went to end of the bar and started tapping at his phone before he turned to Karan, his eyes wide.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

Karan shrugged. "I have no idea, dude. But I don't think he likes you."

"Yeah, no shit," Ishan muttered, dropping the chilli into his beer. He took a long sip. It was hardly the first time one of the older assassins had treated him with some hostility. Karan once said that it was because Ishan was a lot like Shadow. He still couldn't figure out whether that was a compliment or not.

"Anyway, forget him," Karan said. Slipping onto the bar stool beside Ishan. "Tell me, what was it like?"

"What?"

"You know... killing the guy?" Karan's eyes were shining, and Ishan's stomach roiled.

"It was... fine."

"Fine?" Karan asked, disbelievingly. "That's all you can say?"

Ishan shrugged, turning to look at a *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* poster on the wall. In all honestly, he didn't want to think about the hit. He still wasn't feeling guilty per se, but there were moments while he was getting ready and when he was driving to the bar, when his mind started drifting back to the sight of the blood, the man's woeful voice. His gut twisted.

"Why is Shahrukh Khan still acting like a twenty year old in movies?" Ishan asked.

Karan seemed ready to argue, to point out that Ishan was changing the subject, and perhaps to give a spiel about how this was the moment they both had been waiting years for, but they were interrupted by two of Karan's friends from the Academy. Ishan didn't particularly like them, and Karan knew that. Yet he had somehow decided to invite them. The girl was bossy and domineering and the boy was drearily morbid. Ishan called them Chamchi and Chamcha, because of the way they were always sucking up to their trainers.

"We saw you talking to Akash," Chamchi said to Ishan, after they were all done with the conventional pleasantries.

"Yeah," Karan said, directing the attention back to himself, "it was really weird. He was being very aggressive-types."

Karan was used to being the center of attention. He was considered the 'cute' one from their batch. His large eyes, dimpled cheeks and curly brown hair made him look like a children's cartoon character. His maladroitness and gaucherie made him act like one too. That, coupled with his tragic backstory - his drunkard father who got run-over by an auto, his abusive sister who would sell his Pokemon cards for bidis, his stint in jail for fighting back - ensured he was used to fighting off attention. Which also meant, however, that when he was not the in spotlight, he was going to do everything in his power to claw his way back to it. Ishan and him got along for multiple reasons, but a large part of why their friendship worked was because Ishan had no problem staying out of the limelight.

“I heard he used to be the life of the party when he was younger,” Chamchi said, flicking a strand of pitch-black hair away from her overly made-up face.

“Seriously?” Karan said, watching Akash from across the room. “I really can’t see a guy like him having a good time.”

“It’s true,” Chamcha said. “Nandini said that when she was new, she once saw him get drunk, stand up one of these tables and start singing.”

Chamchi snorted and Karan let out a disbelieving laugh.

“What happened to him, then?” Ishan asked, more out of convention than actual curiosity.

“Life,” Chamcha said, dully.

“The whole Shadow thing, probably.” Chamchi supplied.

“They were best friends, weren’t they?” Karan asked. “Akash and Shadow?”

“If you could call them friends,” Chamchi said. “I heard Shadow was a loner.”

“You have to be odd to be number one,” Chamcha said. He said it sadly, as though he was quoting a line of poetry or a deep quote by Aristotle, even though Ishan and Karan both knew it was a quote by Dr. Seuss.

Before anyone could respond, Chamchi grabbed onto Karan’s arm. “Look!” she said.

Ishan turned and looked around the bar, confused. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. A group of trainers, Fireflies, and the guys who clean up after them (who were affectionately referred to as the ‘Katkas’) were crowded on the dance floor, talking and laughing. A bunch of shy students from the Academy were sitting at a table eating french-fries, and by the door Akash was talking to an older man in an immaculate suit. It struck Ishan just how normal they all seemed. In fact, they seemed happier than most people at a bar, like they were overcompensating for their guilt with loud laughter and jeering.

“What are we looking at?” he asked.

“Idiot.” Chamchi sniffed. She gestured discreetly at the man talking to Akash. “That’s Tahiliani.”

Ishan wasn’t sure if he imagined it, but the air seemed to get colder. Tahiliani? Here? The thought was frightening. The man had been just a name for so long, Ishan had forgotten he was a real person.

“He looks so ordinary,” Karan whispered beside him.

It was true. If it weren’t for the expensive suit, Tahiliani could be anyone’s engineer-father or doctor-uncle. No one would have been able to tell just by looking at him that he had started this whole business with only an American contact and 500 rupees in his pocket. Followed by Akash, Tahiliani strode over to the bar and peremptorily ordered a Scotch, the tattooed barman obeying timidly. Tahiliani was a stocky man, with the light grey hair, dark brown eyes and thick lips of any rich older Indian man. When he turned around Ishan could see a mole nestled below his nose. His face was beginning to sag from years of stress and worry. He and Akash engaged in a hushed conversation, with Tahiliani emitting several tired sighs.

“Oh man,” Karan said, nudging Ishan in the side. “I can’t believe he’s actually here!” Karan’s eyes grew wide. “This is your chance! Ask him about Shadow.” Ishan opened his mouth to protest, but Karan had already turned to Chamcha and Chamchi to explain. “We had decided that whoever becomes a Firefly first would have to find out the real story about Shadow.”

Chamchi snorted again. “Good luck with that. Piece of advice though, I wouldn’t ask Tahiliani about it if I were you.”

“And why not?” Karan asked.

“He was the most affected by Shadow leaving, you know that right?”

Chamcha nodded gravely. “It’s true. Shadow was like a son to him.”

“Shadow *was* his son,” Chamchi said, frowning at him. “He adopted him.”

“He did not.”

“He *did*. He found him on the side of the road and he decided to keep him.”

“What rubbish.”

“Arre, seriously!”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Karan said, interrupting them. “What I want to know is why Shadow left in the first place.”

Chamchi put a hand on her hip. “Because of that girl.”

“Alyssa Wolf?” Ishan asked.

Chamcha sighed and Chamchi nodded.

“Boys always want the gori,” she said, resentfully.

Ishan had never met Alyssa Wolf, but the woman was such a common topic of conversation around the Academy, Ishan tended to forget he didn’t actually know her. She was the CEO of Umbra, a British multi-million pound software company that was set up in India and subsequently rocketed to fame in the early 90’s, when they came out with a brilliant search engine that was later overshadowed by Google. Instead of going under, they made a comeback with a series of successful computer programs and smartphone applications. Alyssa and her twin brother Aresdian inherited the company in 2000, following their father’s death. It was about five years later when Alyssa Wolf contacted the Fireflies to put a hit on her brother. Shadow, the top assassin at the time, was assigned to the case. The ‘Aresdian Wolf’ assignment would have been like any other high-profile case for the Fireflies if it hadn’t marked the end of Shadow’s brilliant career. The reason behind Shadow’s downfall, however, was still being debated. Some people in the Academy said it had to do with an incident involving his close friend and co-worker Kali. Others, those who believed the rumours about Shadow being Tahiliani’s son, said it was a fight with Tahiliani that sent him

over the edge. But the most popular theory was that Shadow fell hard for Alyssa Wolf. So hard, in fact, that when she rejected him, he completely lost his mind.

“She is damn hot though,” Karan said, pointedly. “She looks like a princess... who’s the one with the long hair?”

“Rapunzel,” Chamcha said.

Karan snapped his fingers. “Yeah, that one! Doesn’t she look like Rapunzel? The gold-coloured hair, the blue eyes...”

“Still,” Chamchi sniffed, “I hardly think she’s hot enough to warrant someone literally going mad over her.”

“Love does make you lose your mind,” Chamcha said.

“Losing your mind is one thing. Kidnapping and torturing the brother of the girl you’re in love with is another,” Chamchi snapped.

“That never made sense to me,” Karan said. “I mean, why would he kidnap and burn her brother to death, instead of just going ahead with the assassination as planned?”

The kidnapping and burning to death of Aresdian Wolf was the only part of the story Ishan believed. He’d seen the news reports of the kidnapping and the pictures of the man’s burnt corpse with his own two eyes. The reason for the kidnapping, however, made no appearance in any of the news reports.

“He went *mad* Karan. Mad people don’t know what they’re doing. They just do things. He probably thought that by doing that he was proving his love for her, or something.”

“That...”

“It makes *sense*,” Chamchi insisted. “You know that Akash goes on regular visits to Alyssa Wolf’s house, right? Why do you think that is?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “It’s a

precautionary measure. He's making sure that Shadow doesn't come back to *reclaim* her. Like she's his property, or something," Chamchi added as a bitter after-thought.

"That's so fucked up," Karan said.

"Tell me about it," she shook her head. "That Shadow sounds like a real nut-job. I don't know why you boys think he's so impressive."

"Because he's fucking badass," Karan said, as though that explained things. "I heard he was once attacked by seven people from Agni. He had no weapons *and* got shot in the leg but he still managed to defeat all of them, and then dragged himself from Colaba to Breach Candy hospital where he stitched up his own leg."

Chamchi rolled her eyes. "That sounds fake, but whatever. We need to bounce. We have a party to go to." She smiled a cloying smile. "Congrats again, Ishan."

Ishan was about to point out that she hadn't congratulated him before, but she waved pleasantly and dragged Chamcha away by his elbow before he could say anything.

"Do you believe them?" Karan asked Ishan after they'd left.

Ishan shrugged. "Out of all the stories I've heard, it makes the most sense." Ishan turned towards Tahiliani again and noticed with a jolt that the man looking straight at him. He quickly glanced away, feeling uneasy.

"Damn." Karan was saying. He seemed wrapped up in concerned thoughts as he took a long sip of his champagne, which he immediately spat back into the glass. "Oh god," he murmured to himself. "This stuff is disgusting."

Chapter Two: Pawn to D5

Akash

Tahiliani was getting old. Obscenely so. He was going to be seventy-five in two months, and his hair was the light grey of Himalayan snow. He'd been heading the Fireflies for more than forty years. Anyone else would have taken their looming seventy-fifth birthday as a sign that it was finally time to step down, hand the reigns over to someone younger and more capable. But no, the old cow just kept ploughing on. Akash didn't want to be insensitive - after all, he'd been raised on Indian folktales which suggested that the older a man, the wiser he was. The story of Akbar and Birbal and the old man with the beard had been one of his favourites when he was a child. The way the old man had outsmarted everyone, proving that knowledge was power, had thrilled him in a way that few stories had before. But Akash had also been raised in a country which had villages where the old were euthanised. And he was starting to understand why.

He loved T. He did. The man was like a father to him. Or at least, Akash used to think so. At one point. When he was naive and stupid. Ever since joining the Academy at age 15, Akash had secretly (or not so secretly) yearned to be his protégé. All the boys and girls in the Academy had craved his attention, but Akash had wanted more. He wanted his admiration, his respect. Basically, he'd wanted what Shadow had, even if Akash wasn't aware of it at the time.

It wasn't that he was jealous of Shadow. The boy was good - one could maybe even say exceptional, he supposed - when it came to their line of business. He was good with a knife, Akash had to give him that. And yes, he had an ease when it came to assassinations; an unflinching way with murder and an astute mind. But Akash knew he would have been just as

good if he too had been trained since birth. Not to mention, Shadow was an absolute pain in the ass. He was privileged and staggeringly skilled, a noxious combination that made him arrogant. The true sign of a great man, Akash believed, was humility. Something Shadow lacked. In great amounts. When Akash had known him he was always scowling, and was as stubborn as one of those cows that sat down in the middle of the street and refused to move. Sometimes Akash would remember the way he used to strut about, a dishevelled mess of a boy who thought he was better than everyone else, and he'd be seized by an irresistible urge to roll his eyes. He remembered the way Shadow would put his dirty shoes on the furniture and treat every damn conversation like it was a game he was out to win. People didn't like him, but they still showered him with attention because he was the boss's son.

Truthfully, Akash was a little jealous. But it was specifically Shadow's relationship with Tahiliani that he had been jealous of. Why couldn't *his* father have come up with the idea of starting a group which tailored assassinations to the specific desires of the people requesting it? It wasn't fair that Akash's father was an actual tailor while Shadow's father was the coolest man in the world. What made it worse was that Shadow was so unappreciative of the fact.

When Shadow betrayed them, it had seemed like the perfect opportunity for Akash to finally take the spot in Tahiliani's heart that his 'friend' had so inconsiderately abandoned. But Tahiliani had never let him in. Not once. And Akash was done with it. He was Tahiliani's heir, for all intents and purposes. When T died, Akash would inherit his money, his apartment and his position as one of the three heads of the Fireflies. But the way things were going it didn't seem like he was going to die any time soon. He didn't even seem close to retirement. Akash was almost forty. The best part of his youth had been spent working for the Fireflies, and even though Shadow was now nothing more than a precautionary tale the older Fireflies told the younger ones, he was still foremost on everybody's minds. It had been almost a

decade since anyone had more than glimpsed the traitor, but that hadn't stopped the ghost of Shadow's illustrious reputation from clenching in its fist the number one spot that rightfully belonged to Akash. Akash was probably a better assassin now than Shadow had been back then, but there was no way of proving that. Anyway, it hardly mattered. He could never live up to the memory of the man Shadow once was. There were nights where he couldn't sleep, haunted by the idea that he was doomed to be the Salieri to Shadow's Mozart for the rest of his godforsaken life.

But hearing about Shadow 2.0 at the mela had shaken Akash up. He'd been hearing stories about this Ishan kid from before he'd even joined the Academy. "He was just like Shadow used to be," Salim had told him once, laughing. "The same solemnness, the same adamance." Apparently he also possessed the same dexterity, and the same ability to improvise on the spot. Akash hadn't given it much thought, though. Every new kid was rumoured at some point or the other to be the 'chosen one,' the Firefly who would finally take Shadow's spot on the heroes pedestal. No, what had shaken him was the simple fact that rookies didn't normally take risks on their first day. Particularly not ones as extreme as killing a man in the middle of a crowded road after the two of them had just had a conversation. The incident set off warning bells in Akash's mind, and they continued ringing incessantly, their shrill screech getting increasingly unbearable. They only stopped when he decided that he wasn't just going to sit around while some other intrinsically lucky bhenchod stole everything he'd earned from under his feet. Enough was bloody enough.

He told Tahiliani to come to the bar at eleven, the day after he'd heard about the new kid. He wasn't about to waste any time. He chose eleven on purpose, knowing that Tahiliani usually went to sleep at ten-thirty. He'd be groggy and exhausted, but Akash knew he wouldn't turn down the invitation. Tahiliani liked to pretend he was still the young man he

once was. So Akash got to the bar at eleven, but T didn't show up till it was almost eleven-thirty, dressed up as usual in an Eermenegildo Zegna suit.

"I'm not going to stay long." Tahiliani said after a curt greeting. The exhaustion in his voice was clear. "I've had a long day."

They walked over to the bar. Akash loved Bombay Whiskey. It was warmly lit, their chairs were comfortable, and they kept their music soft enough for people to actually be able to hear each other. He loved it even more because it opened two years after Shadow had left, which meant that there wasn't a trace of the man anywhere. Not on the wood-panelled walls, or on the old Bollywood posters, or the cushioned stools.

Tahiliani ordered a scotch with the same gruff intensity he'd always possessed, and sat down on a stool. Akash noticed him flinch.

"How's your back?" he asked. Tahiliani opened his mouth to reply but a thought crossed his mind and his jaw stiffened. He actively tried to resist the urge to succumb to the conversational tendencies of 'old people'. "This won't take long, I just wanted to talk to you about something," Akash continued. He gestured at the bartender - who was also the owner - and rattled the ice in his glass. Tahiliani looked sharply at the glass and Akash's hand involuntarily stopped shaking. The bartender nodded at him.

"You couldn't have waited until tomorrow?" Tahiliani asked.

"I thought you might want to meet the new recruit." Even Akash's vernacular changed when he was talking to Tahiliani. He seemed to adopt his accent, like he was trying to become him. The thought was disconcerting. The barman handed him his Scotch, and Akash was reminded of the day T told him that Shadow had run away. He remembered T giving him a glass of Scotch. He remembered the way it had burned his throat.

"Why would I want to do that?" Tahiliani asked.

"Well, some of the kids in the Academy were saying he is a carbon-copy of Shadow."

Tahiliani halted, his lips hovering over the glass. His eyes narrowed. “And that’s supposed to be a good thing?” he asked.

“Thought you might be missing him,” Akash said.

There was a beat, and Akash avoided Tahiliani’s gaze. “I’m too old for these games, Akash,” T countered. “What do you want?”

Unlike his precious Shadow, Akash wasn’t one for games either. He liked getting straight to the point.

“I want to become head. I’ve been a senior member for eleven years now. I’m tired of it.”

Tahiliani took a long sip, watching Akash from under his bushy eyebrows. “Or what?”

Akash’s lips stiffened. “I thought you said you didn’t like playing games.”

Tahiliani surveyed him. He really was obscenely old. His face was covered in lines. The dewlap under his chin quivered as he put down his glass.

“Akash,” he said finally. “You know what the deal is. You take over once I retire.”

“Is that going to happen any time soon?” Akash asked. He’d never been so irreverent around Tahiliani before. Fear was tugging at his gut with its rough calloused fingers, but he ignored it. He’d kept quiet for long enough.

Tahiliani’s gaze was burning into his skull. Why was the owner of the bar serving drinks anyway? Akash didn’t like it when men did that. If you’re the boss, then you should act like the boss.

“I’ll step down when I’m ready,” Tahiliani said.

“I’m bored.”

“You’re working.”

“Eleven fucking years, T. Eleven fucking years I’ve been doing the same damn job. Training the newbies, planning the missions, getting new clients. Occasionally going out into the field. Its bloody tedious. Give me something to look forward to.”

Tahiliani’s lips pursed, and Akash could feel the sweat break out across his forehead. “Where is all this coming from?” Tahiliani asked.

Like he didn’t know. Akash shrugged. His could feel the confidence seeping out of him, thick hot sludge pouring out from the pores in his skin. Tahiliani’s gaze was piercing. Itchy. Akash scratched his neck, below the collar of his shirt.

“You know what?” Tahiliani sighed, rubbing his cheek. “You’ve got a point. You get the money from the Wolf girl like you promised, then we’ll talk.”

Akash fumbled with his glass. Damn it. T really had a talent for catching him off-guard. A few months after Ares Wolf’s disappearance, Akash had proposed offhand, while he was extremely drunk, a plan to get his hands on the half million pounds Ares had left behind. Alyssa still had the money, and she’d told him one day, when they were in bed together, that she was going to hold on to it. “You know,” she’d said, “for security reasons.”

i.e. in case anyone found out that she’d put a hit on her own twin brother.

“Why are you still after that money?” Akash asked. “As far as I’m aware the Company still gives us all the funding we need.”

Everyone referred to their benefactors as simply ‘The Company’. The Fireflies received a lot of money from them - enough to keep them afloat even when they weren’t getting as many cases as usual - which led Akash to speculate very early on that they were a famous company. Apple, perhaps, or maybe Mercedes-Benz. Or Google. A company that probably had a pristine reputation, which would explain why they were desperately attempting to hide the fact that they owned a boutique assassination business. Tahiliani was

one of three people in the world who knew the real identity of The Company. Akash planned on being the fourth.

“That’s not the point.” Tahiliani’s gaze was making him feel like a child again. “The point is that you set yourself a challenge.” Akash gritted his teeth. Tahiliani took a long sip of his Scotch. “You know I don’t like you associating with the Wolf family to begin with,” he added softly.

“Alyssa is not her brother.” Akash snapped. He sounded like a petulant child.

“She might be worse. You and I both know how cunning she can be. The press still has no inkling she put a hit on her own brother, for god’s sake. She plays the innocent damsel exceptionally well,” Akash opened his mouth, but Tahiliani held up a hand. “Let me finish. I don’t like her. I don’t like her family. But I respect you for following through on a challenge. The money could help us with our expansions. It could allow us to do more field work. Every bit helps.”

Field work. Right. What he wanted was to have more people out there looking for Shadow.

“Why are you really making me do this?” Akash asked.

“To see if you can,” Tahiliani said. He finished his drink and sent a look across the bar. Akash followed his gaze. That Ishan was sitting a few seats down with that idiot boy who’d come to the bar in a suit.

“Is that him?”

“The one in the blue shirt.”

“He doesn’t look like Shadow,” Tahiliani grumbled.

“He acts like him though,” Akash muttered. “Rash little thing.”

“Shadow was a lot of things, but he was never rash.”

Shadow could stick a knife through his heart, and Tahiliani would die still caring more about him than he'd ever cared for Akash.

* * *

Friday evenings tended to throw Akash's house into chaos. Which hardly made sense considering there were only three of them living there. Tara had moved in six months ago, and his maid, Shukla bai, was now in her eighth year of working for him. It was hardly a crowd, but five minutes before they were supposed to leave the house Tara would be running around screaming about earrings or shoes, Shukla bai would be ranting about how they kept dirtying the carpet or not eating proper dinner, and Akash would be running from phone to phone taking business calls. They would all be shouting and screaming at one another and at nothing in particular, until the moment he and Tara got into the lift and the frenzied energy whooshed out of them like a breath of cold air.

This Friday wasn't any different. In a way it was worse. Shukla bai, tiny and wrinkled, looking more and more like a chocolate covered walnut with each passing day, wanted a few weeks off. Instead of talking to him like a sensible human being, she decided to scream her reasons for a vacation at Tara as she attempted to straighten her hair. Akash kept receiving calls from the office from younger members who were panicking about their assignments. Tara couldn't find her keys. She still wasn't ready when they got into the car. She had her pencil heels in one hand and was clutching a compact and lipstick in the other. She made Akash slide across the seat and then commanded the driver to take them to Breach Candy in her best hindi, which happened to be her god-awful privileged little girl Hindi. It took the driver a solid minute to understand what she was saying, but soon they were speeding down the Bandra-Worli sea link. Akash watched Tara as she leaned back against the

leather seats, pulling down her short red dress. She really was the perfect socialite girlfriend. Her looks screamed wealth. Thick waves of deep brown hair that always remained in place. Full lips that she'd definitely had work done to. Long eyelashes. She was almost a cliché. She could talk to anyone like they were long lost friends. She spoke gossip as fluently as she spoke English. Sometimes when Akash saw her pictures in the magazines, he was struck by the feeling that that was where she truly belonged. Not in the real world but on those thick glossy pages.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she said without glancing away from her hand mirror. She was applying her lipstick now, tracing her lips with practiced ease.

He turned away, looking instead at the dark choppy waves of the sea. They drove off the sea-link onto Worli sea face, and Akash tried not to look at the infuriating pale pink building that Shadow used to live in. Dull golden light from the street lamps made a feeble attempt to compete with the bright lights of the cars that were speeding past. The city blurred by and Akash felt sick.

“How was work today?”

“It was fine.”

He still wasn't sure if Tara knew what he really did. He was sure she had her suspicions, but like the good socialite she was, she gossiped about everyone but her own boyfriend. Or maybe she did gossip about him. He had no idea what she said to people. But in front of him she sold the story that he was the CEO of Tayaar with such conviction, there were days even he forgot it wasn't true. Her glowing recommendations even got Tayaar hired a few times.

Tayaar was the invention of Sanjana Mirchandani, the second head of the Fireflies. She was Tahiliani's friend from college, and was in charge of running the cover for the Fireflies, the fake business that the group was masquerading behind. She'd made it an event

organisation company. The Fireflies had devoted a large portion of the Academy training to Tayaar. They'd worked it out so that when the new recruits weren't training, they were organising social events like galas and charity auctions for big companies. That bit was Akash's idea. It helped them learn how to organise. Organisation was a vital skill. It was what made an assassination successful. Plus, he loved the idea that trainee assassins were ordering ice and balloons for the parties of large-scale corporations.

A loud knock on the window startled him, and Akash found himself staring into the woeful face of a half-dressed child with a protruding stomach. She knocked on the window again, and then gestured to her mouth. She looked so pitiful. Akash turned away from her.

"I love how you still can't make eye-contact with them," Tara said, turning towards him and batting her eyes.

It had nothing to do with empathy. Their expressions reminded him too much of those nights in the warehouse.

"I hope there's food there," Akash said. He said it nonchalantly, hoping that Tara wouldn't realise he was trying to block out the sound of the child's hungry moans.

"If there is, they won't serve it till midnight."

The little girl crossed over to Tara's window and Tara waved her hand, shooing her away like she was a fly that had flown into the car. Tara's silver necklace seemed to glow next to the torn clothes of the beggar girl.

"I think we should fire Shukla bai," Tara said with a sigh. "I've grown fond of her whinging and her incessant aches and pains, but she's starting to get on my nerves."

"She's been my maid for years," Akash said, pulling out his cellphone and staring at the screen. Ten new text messages. "If I get a new maid I'll have to train her all over again."

"We live together now, Akash," Tara said. The brusqueness of her tone annoyed him. "You can stop referring to things as only *yours*."

Even if she didn't know about his real job, she should have known that Tayaar was just a cover. More importantly, she should have figured out that she was just a cover too. She was the kind of girlfriend he was supposed to have, not the kind he wanted. She was beautiful, yes. The sex was not bad. But she bored him. There were several other girls that he'd much rather be with, but unfortunately - according to Tahiliani - they were 'inappropriate' for his situation. And if history was any indication, inappropriate partners meant inevitable trouble.

"She doesn't steal from me," Akash said. "What more do you need from a maid?"

They arrived at the building and walked up two flights of stairs until they reached the gallery. Tara complained each step of the way. Why wasn't the lift working? What kind of gallery was this? He blocked out the sound of her voice. He focused on counting the number of steps as they climbed. They reached a large, brightly lit room with high ceilings and wooden floors, and she switched to her 'social' persona. Her voice became high pitched. She gravitated towards the first clump of people they saw. She gushed over Gucci handbags and Michael Kors jackets. She called everyone 'darling' and told them they looked 'stunning'.

He drifted away from her to look at the art. Mediocre. He felt like he'd seen these images of cubist Ganeshes a hundred times before. It didn't matter though. He wasn't there for the art. He was there to meet all these rich, boring people who liked talking about their expensive, meaningless things, and their bratty children who'd been kicked out of yet another school. As he passed the ex-Bollywood dance choreographer with the deep voice and powdered face whose name he couldn't remember, he was consumed by a strange feeling that originated in his gut and spread right to the tips of his toes. Maybe it was the appealing perfume she was wearing, or maybe it was her graying hair that reminded him of just how old he was, but for the first time in years, he missed Kali. She used to do this with him, back when she was alive. She'd hang onto his arm, and whisper insulting comments about the

guests into his ear, and the two of them would giggle into their palms until Tahiliani glared at them.

Tara saw a film producer she knew and squealed his name. Akash watched as he took her hand and led her across the room where he whispered something to her. Gossip probably. Akash couldn't care less.

Akash was quizzing one of the waiters on the contents of a bizarre looking kebab when he made eye-contact with a pale man with oily hair. Rahul Ghosh. One of the wealthiest men in the Mumbai financial circles.

"Mr. Talchekar," he said coming up to Akash as soon as the waiter had gone. He sounded worried. Akash could smell the sweat on him. He instinctively moved towards the emptier part of the room.

"Mr. Ghosh."

The man had been on Akash's radar for a while now. For months, Akash had had his minions whispering in the man's ear, telling him about all the Fireflies could do for him. Wealthy men were Akash's favourite clients. Wealth, as everyone knew, came with its own trove of secrets. The kind of secrets people would do anything to keep hidden. But unlike rich women, rich men didn't want to know and control each painstaking detail of the plan. They were happy to sit back and let the Fireflies take care of everything.

Rahul Ghosh scratched his nose nervously. He was wearing a peacock-blue Jodhpuri with golden buttons. His face was greasy and his nose was covered in bumps. Akash stared directly into his watery brown eyes.

"I was told.." the man looked around the room, and turned back to Akash with hopeful eyes, as though waiting for him to finish the sentence. Akash remained quiet. "I was told that... you could provide me with services."

"You want to hire Tayaar."

“Yes. I mean... no. Uh... yes.”

Akash watched him coolly. “We’d love to help you Mr.Ghosh,” he said, finally.

“We’ll be in touch.” Akash turned to walk away, but the man grabbed onto his arm.

“How much?” he asked in a low voice.

“That would depend on what you want, Mr.Ghosh.”

“I want...” the greasy man looked around the room, his eyes manic.

“Do you want a large-scale party? Or something smaller? Something... more intimate?” Akash looked him up and down. “A man of your stature. You probably want something grand, yes?”

He wanted to kill a lover of his. It was more than obvious. Nothing big. Probably just a secretary in one of his offices or something. But if he wanted to be completely free of suspicion, it was going to cost. Especially since subtlety was clearly not one of his strong points.

“No actually, I was hoping for a... more... private, sort of thing?” The man was wobbling now.

“We’ll get in touch Mr.Ghosh,” Akash said with a sigh. “We’ll contact you.”

The man nodded profusely and then headed off into the crowds. Talk about being conspicuous. If Mr. Ghosh wanted to get away with the crime he’d have to sign up for some acting classes. Akash thought about potential strategies. A simple case of ‘mugging gone wrong’ wouldn’t work, because Mr. Ghosh would be suspect number one, especially if someone else knew about the affair. Perhaps a poisoning situation? Something to fake a heart attack, perhaps? They could use always Alteride to make it look like she’d died of the flu, but it depended on how much time they had for the assignment. Plus, the heads were always hesitant to use Alteride after the Ares Wolf debacle. But if Mr. Ghosh was going to act so guilty, they would need something like that. It was the only way to make it look like the

target had died of a natural illness. The Fireflies would really have to clean their tracks well after this one, he thought with a sigh. He made a mental note to schedule a meeting with the Katkas. He looked around the room to see if the Police Commissioner was there. He was usually invited to such events, but Akash couldn't see him. Good. Though it hardly mattered if he was. He was as corrupt as the rest of them.

He was trying to find Tara when he spotted Alyssa Wolf across the room. In her blue gown with her waist length blonde hair, she stood out like a beacon in the room full of lifeless idiots. She caught his eye and sent him a wink. He grinned.

"Fancy seeing you here," she said, coming up to him. The familiar lilt of her accent was like music to his ears. She took a sip of her red wine, surveying him.

"Where's your husband?" he asked. He felt a twinge of jealousy when he said the words.

"Fiancé. He's around." She glanced about the room and then pointed to him. The only other white person there. He was tall, clean-shaven and conventionally handsome except for his long nose. The shadow of his beard still tinged his cheeks and chin. He looked just like her last two husbands.

"It's been a while since you came over," she said, keeping her voice level. A few reporters were hovering around them with cameras, flies around a glass of sugar water. She paused and turned to them, flashing a winning smile. They asked Akash to pose with her. He put a hand around her waist. The flash went off and the purple blotch stayed in Akash's vision even after the reporters had left.

"What were you saying?" he asked.

"I was saying it has been a while since you came over. To my flat."

"It's been a while since you called me over."

She smirked. Akash could feel a dozen eyes on them, men staring hungrily at Alyssa. She'd lived in India practically her entire life, but she was still indisputably white, and her accent was still devastatingly British. Which meant that she was always going to be exotic, the novelty experience. Wealth didn't stop men from fetishising exoticness. It just made them slightly better at hiding it. He wondered how Alyssa could stand it.

"It's been a bit hectic at work. We're launching a new app. We've got high hopes for this one."

"I know. I've been seeing you all over the newspapers." Just a week ago he'd seen her splashed all over page 11 of the *Times of India*. 'CEO of Umbra promises new smartphone app will help cure insomnia' it had said, right above a picture of Alyssa and her muted smile. Akash was skeptical, but if anyone could pull it off, it was probably her. "It sounds like a big deal."

Alyssa smiled, one side of her lip curling. "It is."

"And that's why you're here?"

A man in a suit shoved into Akash as he walked past. The whole room smelled of chicken tikka and perfume. Raucous laughter and the tinkling of wine glasses fused with the soft instrumental music.

Alyssa sighed and smoothed her dress. "Unfortunately so. I'd rather be drinking this wine in my pyjamas while watching a movie, but duty calls." She yawned delicately and covered her mouth with the back of her hand. "It's been exhausting. Next month is the ten-year anniversary of Ares's death, and the public is expecting something big." She sipped her wine, looking unamused. "Or so my PR person says. Truth be told, I feel like people have forgotten all about him. Regardless, I've decided to have a gala. So between preparations for that, my trip to England next month, and the launch of the new app, I've hardly had any time to breathe. I've even had to postpone my wedding."

Ten years. It had been ten years since they first met. Alyssa seemed to know what he was thinking because she let out a small laugh. “I know. Doesn’t seem that long, does it?”

“It feels like a hundred years to me.” It was bizarre that they felt this way. So much had changed for Alyssa since she contacted the Fireflies, but nothing had changed for him. He was still just a senior member. Shadow was still out there. He was still lodged uncomfortably between the real world and his life as a Firefly.

“What kind of gala are you going to have to commemorate your brother?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I’m not sure yet. I just figured something to raise money for a charity.” She rolled her eyes. “You know, because Ares was such a kind and generous spirit.”

Akash always suspected that Alyssa had been a little jealous of her brother. All Akash had ever heard about Ares Wolf were stories about how sweet and unselfish he was. For the first couple of weeks after he’d disappeared, all the newspapers had been full of pictures of Ares surrounded by cancer-riddled orphans in bright red clothes, their white smiles contrasting starkly with their dark skin, or sitting outside the Gateway of India, winking and making a silly face. *What a likeable guy!* the pictures said. Granted, people were always idealised after their deaths, but there was something about the way people talked about Ares that almost convinced Akash they were right. Alyssa, of course, was the opposite. She donated to charities because it made her look good, not because she cared, and by no stretch of the imagination could she ever be called sweet. But truth be told, that’s what he liked about her.

“I actually have an idea about that.”

Alyssa quirked an eyebrow. She had delicate features - a narrow chin, doe eyes, a nose that was ever-so-slightly upturned at the tip - but she wore them confidently. Like a wooden doll painted to look like it’s made of porcelain. She looked deceptively fragile. “For the gala?”

“Well, I know a way that you get people to *think* you’re raising money for a charity, when actually you’re... investing in something a little more exciting.” Akash had never been much of a salesman. He was the kind of man to get straight to the point, but he wasn’t sure Alyssa would appreciate his tactics. After a beat, a small smile appeared on her face.

“Well, well. You’ve got an agenda, haven’t you? I’d love to talk business.” She grinned, and there was a wicked flicker in her eyes. “But you’re going to have to buy me a drink first.”

“How about next week?” he asked.

She winked. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Chapter Three: Pawn to C4

Ishan

Ishan was always intrigued by the variety of reasons his coworkers had for joining the Fireflies. A lot of them were liars, there was no doubt about that. But even if the reasons were made-up, it gave Ishan insight into the way his fellow Fireflies thought. Tej, for example, claimed that it was financial troubles that caused him to join, though everyone knew he had a fairly wealthy sister living in Delhi. Jaya had an abusive mother and couldn't find a job after running away from home. Nandini had been caught stealing gold bangles and had been offered an ultimatum - join the Fireflies or go to jail.

However, most of the stories were just that. Stories. Naya, a former Firefly, for example, had apparently turned into an extremely religious assassin after she couldn't pay off her LSD dealer. She would famously pray to Lord Shiva, the destroyer, before making any kill. The stories claimed she'd been murdered in a Hookah bar, stabbed to death by a manic man who was later found to be high as a kite. On LSD. Ravi, another former Firefly, was being harassed by the Mafia. Apparently he refused to give them free liquor when he was working at a nightclub, and they sent him death threats until the Fireflies offered him protection. Protection that was later rendered null when Ravi was killed on the night of the attack.

The attack had happened a year before Ishan joined the Academy. It was all very hushed, even back then. No one liked to talk about it, but Ishan managed to piece together events of the night from the limited information he could get from his trainers and the other students. It was the night after an intense test match between India and Pakistan. India had won. People were on the streets dancing to loud pop music, but in their office the Fireflies were being attacked by thirty-odd Runaways. The Runaways had descended on them like

bats, smothering them, killing dozens of Fireflies and attempting to hack their computers and steal information, before they were finally vanquished. It had taken the group months to recover, and it looked to Ishan like they still hadn't recovered completely.

Their business was dangerous. Sometimes things seemed so much like a game, Ishan tended to forget that any moment could be his last. Why then, were there so many people so eager to join the Fireflies? Ishan could understand people who'd been offered ultimatums, an opportunity to join the Fireflies instead of going to jail or forced to... become prostitutes, or something. There was a certain desperation in each and every one of them. They may have joined for noble reasons - righting injustices, revenge, leaving behind money for their family - or selfish ones, but in the end they were all killers. There was no way you could justify murder. Why then, did so many people continue doing it? The simple truth was, it is remarkably easy to develop a taste for blood.

Ishan's reasons for joining the Fireflies weren't as straightforward. Of course, if one were to think about it, none of their reasons truly were. There was no doubt that it took some deep psychological bashing to turn to killing others for money. Relatively, Ishan's reasons were uncomplicated, but he found it easier to lie. Once he said it was because his father used to be an assassin and he wanted to follow in his footsteps. Another time he claimed it was to get money to find his brothers, which was partly true. But the real truth was that he was a lost child with nowhere to go when the Fireflies found him. And over time he'd grown to like the precision of it all. The meticulous planning all leading up to that exhilarating moment when he pulled the trigger, or pulled out his knife, or uncorked a bottle of poison. And then blood would be dripping out of the target's mouth staining her teeth, or a corpse would be hanging off a rope their face frozen mid-scream, or a man would be lying on the ground foaming at the mouth, and Ishan would disappear. The Katkas, the students from the Academy who were deemed unfit to become assassins, were left to clean up after him. He was free from

consequences but was always haunted by the feeling that he could be caught at any moment. It made him almost giddy with euphoria. No drugs or alcohol or parties could give someone such a high as living in a constant state of danger.

He wondered if people could tell that about him. That he liked killing. At age nine he used to have such graphic nightmares of torture, he would have never believed he'd be drawn to such a profession. Not ever. But then again, he'd always been unsympathetic as a child. He never cried in movies, or felt strong pity for people, real or fictional. He and his brothers used to bully people in their school. He used to kick stray dogs and sneer at beggars. But in the end, that was about it. There was nothing sociopathic or strange about him. He was just a boy who didn't care very much. About anything. Anything but his brothers.

Ishan had been working with the Fireflies for a good part of a year, but he felt like he hadn't changed. Perhaps a little. He'd grown more accustomed to getting blood off his clothes and had become considerably better at ignoring invasive thoughts, but overall he found himself the same boy who'd come out of the Academy ready to show his superiors what he could do. His best friend was still Karan - who was still in the Academy - and he still liked his beers and dahi puri. Though he could no longer stomach those gory detective shows he used to enjoy. They were riddled with too many inaccuracies.

"It kind of makes sense," he told Karan. "From the beginning of time man has been killing. For food. To attain dominance. Maybe the reason it doesn't feel wrong is because we're inherently programmed to kill."

They were on one of their monthly days out. The first Monday of every month, the students at the Academy had a day-off, and Karan and Ishan had always taken full advantage of it. While they were studying, it used to involve consuming large amounts of alcohol, but ever since Ishan had told Karan about his brothers and how he was determined to find them, their days off had evolved into something else. Instead of going to Hookah bars, they were at

the Academy library, scouring the internet for signs of Ishan's brothers, or else having 'therapeutic' sessions. At least, that's what Karan called them. They were Karan's way of helping Ishan deal with his painful memories, which unfortunately involved forcing Ishan to go back to places he hadn't gone back to since he'd been separated from his brothers.

Ishan really wasn't looking forward to this day out. It was a miserable day to begin with. Overcast and humid. Ishan had pointed out the menacing gray clouds that were threatening to break at any second, but Karan had dragged him out of the house anyway. They'd spent the day walking sluggishly along Breach Candy. Karan was going back to his village in a week, and wanted to buy his younger (non-abusive) sister and his mother something, now that he had the money to do so. And then they were going to get lunch at a South Indian thali place that Ishan and his oldest brother, Tushar, would go after harrowing days at school. Ishan had protested, but Karan had pointed out that he couldn't hide from those memories forever. Ishan didn't have the energy to argue.

Which is why they were in the middle of a sari shop on Breach Candy, debating the biological need to murder. Ishan eyed the startlingly long fingernail on the salesman who had pulled out another bedazzled sari from the folded piles on the shelf. The man's arms were covered in a thick coat of dark hair. The disparity between the feminine looking finger and the man's bear-like arm amused him.

"To kill animals, maybe. Not other men," Karan said. "We're the only species that kills our own kind, you know that?"

"I'm pretty sure that is not true at all," Ishan muttered.

"Can you not be so crabby," Karan admonished, inspecting the border on one of the saris lying on the counter.

Ishan wanted to point out that he wouldn't be crabby if he wasn't being forced against his will to return to a place he'd sworn to himself he wouldn't go back to. But he reminded

himself that Karan was doing him a favour. Karan might have been a loopy attention-seeker, but he was a good friend.

“Oi, bhaiyya,” Karan told the man with the fingernail, switching abruptly to Hindi. “I told you I don’t want anything shiny.”

The man turned back to the shelves. They were lined with saris, hundreds of overwhelming, luminescent options that reached the ceiling. Saris made of chiffon or cheap rough material, with thick borders that rustled as the man tugged them out of their places with practiced ease. He pulled out a nauseating pink one with a cheap gold printed border and spread it out on the counter.

Karan bought it.

Karan was the only one of Ishan’s ‘friends’ who didn’t treat him with any hostility since he had graduated from the Academy, but Ishan could sense a tinge of jealousy - perhaps even resentment - in Karan’s voice every time he described some incident at the dorms, or something that happened in training. While the stories were the same entertaining tales Karan was always spouting, there was a hint of accusation in them as well. Karan was stuck doing training exercises and organising events, living in dorms and getting weekly ‘allowances’ like he was a child. But Ishan was getting to work, to live, to be an adult. “Maybe I should act more like you,” Karan had said once, “then maybe I’ll be able to graduate.” Ishan found the idea ridiculous. Why would anyone want to be him?

“Did you know that Dara was killed?” Karan asked when they were in his car, driving to the thali place. Ishan stared out of the raindrop splattered window, watching the rich neighbourhood give way to slums.

“What?” Ishan frowned. “When?”

“A week ago.”

Dara was one of their trainers in the Academy. He had become a little slow over the years. He only wore white pajama-kurtas, and couldn't hear very well, so more often than not he'd answer a question completely wrong, or think he heard something he expected to hear. He was obsessed with the Mahabharat, and would lace their physical training exercises with anecdotes about Arjun and his penchant for archery. Ishan couldn't count the number of times Dara had forced them to listen to the story of Arjun and the bird's eye.

“Are you serious? How?”

“Shot through the chest. When they checked the bullet, they couldn't find a headstamp. They think it might have been one of ours.”

“What?” A few drops of rain squeezed through the window and landed on the back of Ishan's arm. “You mean someone from the inside might have done this?”

Karan nodded. “Or maybe someone from Agni stole one of our guns.”

“Wasn't there a guy who left the Fireflies to join Agni a couple of years ago?”

“Last I heard he's been dead for ages.”

Karan stopped outside of a shack, parking his car behind a sickly looking tree.

“Though, now that I think about it,” Karan continued, “anyone could have scratched off the headstamp.”

Ishan was about to ask him why they'd stopped when he realised they had reached the restaurant. It looked smaller than he remembered. Smaller and dirtier. He suddenly felt out of place in his crisp white button-down shirt.

They were ushered in by loud-mouthed men who smelled like tobacco and cooking oil, and hustled into a place by a frosted window. Ishan cringed when a fly settled itself on the napkin holder by the table. The only purpose of the fan directly above them seemed to be decoration.

He'd been reluctant to come here, but instead of being bombarded by nostalgia, like he'd expected, all he felt was horror. He stared at a blot of dal on the table until a man with a soggy yellow sponge came and swept it off into a metal bucket.

One of the waiters in a striped brown and white shirt slammed a steel thali down in front of him. Karan was already slurping water from the wet steel tumbler beside him.

"How do you know all of that anyway?" Ishan asked.

"What?"

"About Dara."

Karan shrugged but didn't say anything.

"You don't think..." Ishan took hesitant sip of his water. "You don't think it's *them* do you?"

"Who?"

"The Runaways."

Karan scoffed. "Please. They aren't behind everything, you know?" He shook his head, affectionately. "You've become a real Firefly now, Ishan. Blaming everything on them."

Ishan chewed on his bottom lip. "You don't think we're in danger, do you?"

"No one has said anything to you about it, have they?"

Ishan shook his head and Karan shrugged. "I guess not, then. No more than usual, anyway."

Another waiter dressed in a striped white and blue shirt came around with a giant bowl of rice and scooped a mountain of white onto Ishan's plate. Ishan tried to tell the man he didn't want so much, but the man had already moved on to Karan. A woman came around next, and sloshed something watery and red into one of Ishan's katoris. It took him a minute to remember that it was rasam.

“So?” Karan asked. He murmured something Ishan couldn’t hear. Ishan strained his ears, attempting to listen above the noisy crowd.

“What?” he asked.

“I asked you whether this place was how you remembered it?”

It was exactly how he remembered it. That was the problem.

“Sort of,” Ishan said. Another woman came around with salt, aachar and fried papad. She also dumped a spoonful of ghee onto Ishan’s rice before he could protest.

“I told you it wouldn’t be so bad,” Karan was saying. He had poured his rasam onto his mountain of rice, so that everything on his plate was now wet and swimming in the red stuff. “You just need to face your fears.”

“It’s not a fear,” Ishan said. More things were being spooned into his bowls, each one slimier than the next. “Just memories I didn’t want to think about.”

Karan was audibly slurping his food now, scooping it expertly with his fingers. Unlike Ishan who only used his wrist, Karan scooped his food with his entire arm, like a real South Indian. “You can’t hide from them forever, you know?”

“I know.”

“So you’re OK?”

“Surprisingly, yes.”

Karan’s face lit up like Diwali fireworks. “I told you it would be fine!” He beamed, deepening his dimples. “I always thought I’d be a good therapist. If I ever get to go to America, I’m going to do psychology there.”

“And when are you going to do that?” Ishan asked, half-smiling. He picked up a spoon and poked at the bowl of dahi.

“I don’t know,” Karan said, thoughtfully. “I guess I’ll work with the Fireflies for a few years. Then as soon as I save up enough money for college I’ll go.”

“And you’ll become a therapist there?”

“Maybe.” Karan looked at Ishan, his large brown eyes rounder than usual. “What about you? Once you find your brothers?”

“I don’t know,” Ishan admitted. “I don’t really have a plan.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Karan said, scooping the dahi out of his bowl with his fingers. “Or if you don’t, you could just come to America with me.”

They both laughed, but Ishan’s was forced. Was it odd that he didn’t have a plan past finding his brothers? He’d just assumed he would continue on with the Fireflies, become a senior member like Akash. That’s what was expected of them, right? But if Karan got enough money, would he really leave and go to America? He was the closest thing Ishan had to family at the moment, a surrogate brother for all intents and purposes. Ishan didn’t want to find his brothers just so he could lose his best friend.

Ishan looked down onto his plate. Had this food always been so greasy? Should he even drink this water? He didn’t want to end up with food-poisoning or jaundice during his time off between assignments. Had he really liked ghee in his rice before? The whole thing was a bit overwhelming.

God, maybe he had changed.

* * *

It was scarcely a day after he had been cast out onto the streets, when Ishan had been approached by a man from the Fireflies. He’d been tall and dressed formally with yellow teeth and red tinged hair, dyed with henna. He had pretended to be just a good samaritan. A kind man who felt bad for the ‘beggar’ boy and had taken him out for a thali meal. But as soon as Ishan had picked up the first puri, the man began his proposition. *How would you like*

to get free food, free stay and training? Ishan hadn't been living on the streets for long enough to question this stroke of good luck, but the catch came out soon enough. He had to perform 'errands' for them. Dangerous ones. He might have to do illegal things. Would he be alright with that? Ishan said he had to think about it. And then he was back in the slums.

A day later, he'd been approached by a woman from Agni. She was tall and fat, and Ishan had counted her eleven chins when she had interrupted their meal to make harsh threats on the phone. She'd taken him for idlis and gave him the same spiel. He'd have to do *illegal* things. He'd have to keep secrets. But he'd get food. He'd be rich. He'd have a family again.

He'd debated the options strongly. Back then he didn't know much about either of the groups, which is why he'd been leaning more towards Agni. They were based on a system of loyalty and strong camaraderie. But what deterred him was the fact that they weren't afraid of playing dirty. The woman from Agni all but said it when they had lunch. Their system wasn't as slick as the Fireflies, and that's why he'd chosen them in the end. He didn't want to play dirty. He wanted clean murders. None of this extra stuff. Nothing that would bring back his nightmares.

In the weeks following his first kill, however, Ishan learned that the Fireflies weren't as clean as they initially seemed. They were a suave group of men and women, but Ishan soon discovered that class comes with its own type of filth. At least their competitors were open about it. But in the end, Ishan had made his choice. He never told anyone that he was approached by Agni too. He didn't want them to suspect him of any foul play. He was loyal to the Fireflies and he didn't want anyone to think otherwise.

Karan dropped him off at his flat and drove away, blasting some hip-hop song that he pretended to know the words to but really didn't. Ishan was only in the rain for a second as he ran from the car to the front door of his building, but he was wet enough to warrant an

immediate hot shower. He unbuttoned the first couple of buttons on his shirt as he got to the door of his flat and fished around in his pocket for his keys. His fingers closed around the jagged metal when he noticed the door was ajar. He clutched the keys tightly, adjusting his hand so one of them stuck out of his closed fist.

He reached out and gently nudged the door so it swung open to reveal a young girl, around his age, sitting on his sofa. She had light skin and hair that was either black or deep brown, tied in a tight pony-tail that swung violently as she lifted her arm. He couldn't tell anything else about her, because he was distracted by the barrel of her gun that was pointed straight at him.

He wasn't scared, even though he had never stared down the barrel of a gun before. At least, not at a moment he believed he was in actual threat. But there he was, staring down the barrel of a gun, more astonished than frightened.

It was only when his attacker gave a small cry of protest and infinitesimally lowered her weapon when he noticed that she looked vaguely familiar. She was dry, which meant she'd been there for a while.

"Who are you?" she demanded. She looked down at the key in his hand. "Don't tell me he's got himself a replacement son."

"What are you talking about?" Ishan snapped, finding his voice. He sounded a lot more agitated and confident than he actually felt. People were always saying that was one of his gifts.

Or his curse. Depending on who you talked to.

"Where's Tahiliani?" she asked. Her teeth were clenched, so the words sounded like a hiss. He noticed that all her teeth were straight except one of her top canines that stuck out, like it was trying to run away from her tongue.

"In this own home?" Ishan suggested.

Her eyes widened and she lowered her gun some more. Her ponytail continued swinging heavily from side-to-side. She was wearing jeans and an old blue t-shirt that looked a bit big for her. Her Keds were covered in mud.

“He doesn’t live here anymore?” she asked.

“Clearly not,” Ishan said. The words came out aggressively, but his heart that was hammering erratically in his chest made his voice wobble. “Could you please put away the gun?” He lifted his arms in an exaggerated gesture of innocence, dropping his keys to the floor. “I’m unarmed.”

She lowered her gun then, narrowing her eyes. “Who are you?”

“The real question is who are *you*? You’re in my house,” he reminded her, savagely.

“Where is Tahiliani?” she asked, as though he had never spoken. “He used to live here.”

“Until he was almost attacked by-” That’s when he remembered where he’d seen her. He’d seen a young girl with a face like hers, on one of the posters on the back wall of the break room. “Oh my god... you’re one of the Runaways.”

“You’re a sharp one, aren’t you?” She raised her gun again. “Tell me where Tahiliani is.”

In the five years Ishan had been in the Academy, he’d heard tons of stories about the Runaways. Slightly crazy stories. Not just about the attack, either. He’d heard stories about their ruthlessness, their betrayals. How they were impossible to reason with. Over time they had become like characters from a popular ghost story. *If you encounter them, they will mercilessly rip you to shreds! Especially that Shadow. He comes out from the darkness with his dagger glinting and his manic eyes, unwilling to listen to cries for mercy. He’ll chop you up and feed you to the dogs!* The trainers would say. Usually the newer trainers. The older ones didn’t like to talk about the Runaways or their attack. Like World War Two veterans,

they sat back and allowed the pain in their eyes to speak instead. The Runaways were given even more gravitas by the posters that covered the walls of the Academy cafeteria and the Fireflies break room. Posters with about fifty pictures with names and sometimes code names written below. Some had the words 'deceased' printed below as well. These posters were periodically updated with new pictures and new names. New Runaways. New friendly faces that were suddenly out to get them.

But this girl didn't seem terrifying. Her gun did, but she didn't.

"How the fuck should I know?" he demanded. He lowered his hands and she tightened her grip on her gun, but he knew she wasn't going to shoot. "It's not like he calls us to his house for tea parties."

"Then direct me to someone who *can* tell me," she said.

"Akash probably could, but I don't know where he lives either." Ishan adjusted his damp collar. She stomped her foot, making him freeze.

"I don't think you're taking this seriously," she threatened. "Tell me, or I'll shoot you."

"You were a Firefly once. You know how it is. They don't share that information. Especially not with rookies." He pointed to the back wall of his apartment. "When Tahiliani lived here, this and the flat next door were one big flat. He had this one and the one above it too. After the attack he moved to a new place, and they made this into four flats for the newer recruits."

"Ok fine, he doesn't live here. Where does Akash live?"

"I just told you, I don't know."

"You must have a phone number then." She stood up from the sofa. Ishan thought of her muddy soles on his new carpet.

"I only have his work number. It's unregistered. It won't help you."

“Let me worry about that,” she snapped.

“Fine.” Pulling out his phone, Ishan tore a page from a notebook and copied Akash’s number onto the scrap of paper. The girl watched over his shoulder to make sure he copied the right numbers. She snatched it out of his hand as soon as he finished.

She inspected the shred of paper and then slipped it into her back pocket. “Thank you,” she said, curtly. “You’ve not been very helpful.”

He tried to visualise the image of her on the poster. She looked much younger there. In fact, if he remembered correctly she was a child in that picture. Hardly older than twelve.

“Rhea.” He said aloud and her head shot up. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

“No,” she said, coldly.

“Ok then,” he said. “Could you please leave now?” His soggy socks were making him uncomfortable. It made him feel like he was ten again, heading to school in the middle of the monsoon. He felt like he was sitting in the school bus in his wet socks and Bata shoes, getting shouted at by the bus maid.

“You don’t act like you’re new,” she said, quietly. When he didn’t reply, she shrugged. “Ok, I’d like some food before I go. And toilet paper. And today’s *Mumbai Mirror*. And leave your phone on that table. Don’t even think about signalling anyone or grabbing your gun.”

He let out a squawk of indignation, but she waved her gun in the air. Begrudgingly he made his way to the kitchen. He pulled out a plastic bag from under the sink and began filling it with packets of Masala Lays and biscuits. She hovered about him, occasionally making tuts of protest when he attempted to put in packets of Parle-G or Little Hearts. By now he was more frustrated than frightened. She felt more like an irritating sibling than one of the menacing Runaways who would gut you and feed you to the pigeons.

“I can get Lays anywhere. Give me something good.”

“Why don’t you just kill me?” he grumbled. “Then you can just ransack my house without me to bother you.”

“I didn’t leave the Fireflies to continue killing,” she said. She snatched a packet of Aloo Bhujia from his hand and tore it open, pouring some of it into her mouth.

“Then why did you leave?”

She laughed. “Nice try. You’re not very good at extracting information.”

“And you’re not very good at lying.”

She froze, the packet still clutched in her palm. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“You don’t kill anymore? Your group killed dozens of Fireflies in the attack. You killed one of my trainers just last week.”

“We kill when we need to,” she said, shrugging. “Plus, Dara was a million years old. It was his time anyway.”

“So you admit you killed him.”

She raised an eyebrow, but didn’t respond. There was a long pause as Ishan finished stuffing the packet. His head was buzzing with thoughts. He’d have to tell Akash that he’d given the girl his number, even though Akash never answered unknown calls anyway. He’d probably be annoyed. Even if his number was untraceable, he wouldn’t take lightly to Ishan handing it out like modaks on Ganesh Chaturthi. He wondered if they’d be able to catch her.

“I could kill you,” she said. He looked up and she smiled. Her nose was a bit too small for her face and her eyes slanted upwards a bit too much, but the amalgamation of features looked attractive on her face. Though she would have looked even prettier had she not looked like she’d been camping for the last month. “But I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“I know what it’s like,” she said. “Being new. You’re probably brimming with pride and loyalty.” She cocked her head to the side. “I feel bad for you.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Ishan felt a bolt of fury run through his chest. “Fuck you,” he said, letting go of the plastic bag so its contents spilled to the floor. “Fuck you, get out of my fucking house.” She whipped out her gun, but he ducked and kicked the stool she was sitting on, so she toppled to the ground. Her gun flew out of her hand and went spinning across the floor. They both lunged for it. She was just a fraction of a second faster. Ishan felt the cool metal touch his temple and his hands flew up. Now he was frightened.

He looked up at her, up at her hair that was messily poking out of her ponytail and her widened eyes.

“You need better reflexes, but you’re pretty good,” she said. She sounded surprised. He didn’t know whether to feel offended or relieved. “How long have you been working with them?”

He didn’t answer, and she ran a hand over her hair to make sure it was still in place. “They probably headhunted you.” She poked the gun into his cheek. “Things were probably pretty good for you for a while, and then in a very short period of time everything fell to shit, right? And as soon as it fell to shit, the Fireflies swooped in like Hanuman and saved your ass.” Ishan remained silent, but his expression must have been a dead giveaway because Rhea smiled like she’d just won the lottery. “Yeah, they do that. I don’t know why you’re still working with them,” she said. “You don’t seem like a bad person.”

“We aren’t bad people,” he spat, his vision blurring. The Fireflies couldn’t have behind his abandonment, could they? They couldn’t have been the reason he had to spent that week in the slums, surrounded by flies and human faeces. “We’re just doing our jobs.”

“It’s not just that, and you know it. Killing for money is one thing. But the acid attacks? The torture?”

“The torture? They don’t torture anyone.”

She laughed. A hoarse laugh devoid of music or joy. “Ok. So You *are* new.” She stood up, and pointed to the plastic bag on the floor. “Refill the bag,” she commanded.

Still on his knees, he edged towards the bag and slowly refilled it. “What do you mean?” he asked, after a moment of silence. “About the torture?”

“Have you been to one of those old mills in Byculla?” she asked him. He shook his head. “Here...” grabbing his notebook, she scribbled down an address. “Monday. At seven. I think you’d be interested to see what’s going down there.” Ishan stared derisively at the piece of paper and she laughed again. “Relax, Rajnikanth. If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it right now.” She tucked it into his wet shirt pocket and he immediately pulled it out, but the paper was already translucent. “They’re not good people. In fact, you’d benefit a lot more from joining us.” She roughly pulled out the rubber band that was holding her hair in place, and brown waves came cascading down her back. “We’re leaving on Tuesday. Three in the morning. If the stuff you see in the mill convinces you by then, come to VT station. Platform 13. We’ll be looking out for you.”

Ishan was still ruminating about how absurd her proposition sounded when she left his apartment, grabbing the bag of food from the floor and slamming the door shut with an echo that bounced down the hallways. When he opened the door again, she had vanished.

Chapter Four: Pawn to C6

Rhea

In her childhood, Rhea had a bed littered with stuffed animals, and a room with pink walls the nauseating bright pink colour of Barbie dresses and cough medicine. She had watched Snow White a million times and giggled, each time without fail, at the scene where the animals cleaned the house, the squirrels using their tails to clean the dishes and the turtle carrying a stack bowls on his back. She used to play house-house with the children from her building, and she was always the mother who dropped her kids off to school and then went shopping for hairbands with sunflowers on them. She dreamed of being a princess, of wearing a tiara and having a handsome white prince ride up on a white horse and sweep her off her glass-slippered feet.

Syra told her that her childhood dream was ‘anti-feminist,’ naive and clichéd, which - in theory - Rhea supposed it was. Re-watching Snow White, she was dismayed to discover that Snow was perhaps the dullest character to ever exist in the history of film; a high-pitched passive little teenager who cleaned houses and got by on her porcelain doll beauty. Rhea, on the other hand, had gotten by solely on her own stubbornness and hard work. Barely twenty two and she had more life experience than most people. She’d run away from home at age nine, and had spent the rest of her life fighting, quite literally, to stay alive. She’d done questionable things for money and information. In short, she couldn’t be Snow White even if she wanted to. She’d never be happy cooking and cleaning for other people. Most dresses didn’t have pockets to hide guns or money, and any shoes with a heel were inconvenient to run in. She was, however, proud that she could walk down the streets of Bombay at three in the morning in the shortest skirt she could find without being the least bit afraid. She knew she could unblinkingly break the neck of any man who attempted to touch her.

Yet, as she walked down Marine Drive after leaving Ishan's house, looking like she'd just finished running a marathon, and noticed another red-eyed man - this one perched on a bus-stop - leering at her backside, she wondered why it was wrong to wish to be a fairy-tale princess. What was anti-feminist about wanting to be pampered? About wanting money and authority and a gorgeous boyfriend with a nice butt who didn't just want sex?

She stopped and turned to face the man, the plastic bag in her hand crinkling, and threw him a dirty look. His lecherous gaze travelled up to her breasts, his lips twisting to form a crooked smile. She told herself to ignore him and walk away. There was no way these men legitimately believed that a woman could be charmed by eve-teasing and leering stares. He was just trying to provoke her, and the best thing would be to remain unresponsive.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" she demanded in Hindi.

He grinned, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Why don't you come over here?" he asked, rubbing the metal pole he was sitting on. The whites of his eyes and his uneven yellow teeth seemed incandescent in the growing darkness.

She narrowed her eyes. A tantalising force tugged at her fingers, drawing them towards the gun that she'd stuffed into her boot.

"Arre chokri," he crooned, rubbing the front of his jeans, "come on."

She smiled and the man stiffened. She walked closer, unzipping her hoodie where a knife was concealed in an inner pocket she'd stitched on herself. "You're a charmer, aren't you?" she said, her voice saccharine. She ran the fingers of her free hand through her hair.

He was frowning now, his back arched like a cautious animal. A lighter stuck out from the pocket of his loose candy-striped shirt. He groped for it; a child with his safety blanket.

"You know," she continued, "I've always wanted a man like you. Roadside Romeos really do it for me."

"What are you playing at, woman?" he asked, his nostrils flaring.

“What do you mean?” She pulled out the knife from her rain-splattered hoodie and his eyes widened in alarm. He scrambled off the bus-stop, a chappal falling off in his haste. He held out a finger, panic now clear on his face.

“I was just teasing,” he choked out. “What are you doing? Don’t take everything so seriously.”

“Arre,” she said, stroking the flat side of her knife. “I’m just flirting with you.” She advanced, the knife held before her, the blade partly obstructed by the sleeve of her jacket. The man started running, but she stuck out her leg and tripped him. He fell into a puddle, droplets sticking to his hair and eyelashes. A family nearby turned to look at them in confusion. Funny how when she was being catcalled nobody seemed to notice.

“Rhea!”

She grit her teeth, turning around. Kartik was leaning out of his car window, an incredulous look on his face.

“What’s all this?” he asked.

Rhea threw the bewildered man another dirty look before walking over to the car and peevishly sliding into the passenger side. “Your girlfriend is fucking crazy,” the man called out. He was still lying on the ground. Nobody seemed to be coming to his rescue. Kartik rolled up the window.

“What the fuck were you doing?”

“You were supposed to wait for me outside the Oberoi,” she said flatly. The AC was blasting. She shivered.

“We are supposed to be *hiding*,” he snapped. “What’s the matter with you?”

She flung the plastic bag onto the back seat, spraying it with bags of chips and raindrops.

“You can’t keep doing this, Rhea,” he said. There was a seriousness in his voice made her look down at her feet. Shamefully? Perhaps. She was so used to him being being dramatic and annoying, she tended to forget he was in the same predicament as she was. If they were caught by the Fireflies, this was the end for them. “If you had injured the man there’s a high chance the Fireflies would have heard about it. It was easy to pin Dara’s death on Agni, but they would have been suspicious if they heard about some random man on the street with a knife wound, so soon after Dara’s death.”

“Yeah alright,” she muttered.

“We can’t afford to lose any more people,” he continued. “Last time you had... what... forty people? And you still didn’t manage to shut down the Fireflies? We have five people Rhea, if we lose...”

“I said *alright*, Kartik.” She refrained from adding that she knew more about all of this than he did. Who made him the boss anyway? Rhea had been working on bringing down the Runaways for more than twelve years. There were days she felt completely hopeless, wondering how she and four others were going to achieve something forty people hadn’t been able to. But she had a new plan and it didn’t need forty people to work. What she needed was to get hold of Shadow. Her plan coupled with his leadership? There was actually a chance they could succeed. But that was only *if* he agreed to help them. She just needed to think positive, but Kartik wasn’t helping in that regard.

“What is this?” he asked, jerking a thumb back at the food.

“Snacks.”

He raised an eyebrow. She noted with annoyance that while she still looked disgusting and haggard, her hair frizzy from the humidity and her t-shirt smelling of sweat, Kartik had taken the first opportunity to freshen up. He was in a black Ralph Lauren shirt that looked new, and jeans, and his hair was damp from his shower. The smell of Axe bombarded her as

he leaned over to pick up a packet of Namkeen that had fallen onto the floor of the car. God, he smelled so *clean*.

“You went shopping?” he asked. The disbelief in his voice made her grit her teeth.

“No, I did not. But I see that you did.”

He looked down at his shirt. “I was out of clothes.”

“*That* is not what we should be spending on, Kartik. We’re on a limited budget here.”

“Can you relax,” he said, tossing the packet back into the pile. “This is from fashion street.” He was so desperate to come across as wealthy, he was now buying fake designer clothes. This was the precise reason she couldn’t take him seriously.

“Where did you get these?” he asked.

“From the house of our next recruit.”

Truth was, she wasn’t under any illusions that this Ishan fellow was going to be their next recruit. But if her plan worked out, they’d have a lot more going for them than just an extra set of hands. The car started off down the road, and Rhea kept her gaze stubbornly out her side window.

“You seem awfully sure of yourself.” Kartik remarked, inspecting the packets on the backseat through the review mirror. He reached over and picked up a packet of Cheetos. “He gave you these?”

“Not voluntarily.”

“These are imported,” he said. She clenched her fists, flaring up at his haughty tone. “Did you really think *stealing* from him was going to convince him to join us?” He dropped the bag back onto the seat, shaking his head as though asking God why he was the only one with any sense.

Rhea struggled for a minute, trying to find the words to explain. Her entire plan had been meticulously organised. The Fireflies weren’t just assassins, they were planners,

detectives. She might not have been a Firefly for long, but she'd spent enough time around them to know the kind of people she was dealing with. If she showed up at Ishan's house looking like Kartik did - fresh and comfortable - and asked him to help her take the Fireflies down, she knew there was no way he'd take her seriously. She had to let him know what to expect. They lived a life of nomads. Of outlaws. Like Rama they were banished from their Kingdom, but before they could rid it from evil and take it back, they had to spend their years in precarious exile. That's how it worked. But Ishan wasn't going to understand that if they just had a discussion over a cup of chai. If she had to play him a little to make him see, then so be it. Truth was, she had her sights set much higher than just getting more people to join their cause.

She stabbed on the radio, letting the upbeat tones of *London Thumakda* thump through the car. It was a rusting old car with uncomfortable upholstery, but it had all the amenities they needed. Of course, that didn't stop Kartik from constantly whining that she didn't steal a Merc. The older cars were easier to break into, for one, and she'd stolen this car from people who had two others. This car was probably the one used by their teenage child for driving lessons which meant that they wouldn't make a huge deal of it being stolen. Kartik, however, didn't seem to understand that.

"Change the song," he complained. "I'm sick of it." The song ended before Rhea could even move, and the upbeat, fake American accent of the radio host came on instead. Rhea thought it sounded a little like Lux.

"I was trying something," she said.

Kartik turned to look at her, confused. "The snack thing," she said, "I stole from him for a reason."

"Oh god," Kartik groaned. "Please don't tell me you tried your little terrorising routine."

“I just think it’s more effective for him to come to the conclusion to join us by *himself*. If we tell him we need him, then he’s going to think he can order us around.”

“Dear god, Rhea,” Kartik said, covering his face with a hand. “This is not the place to play Sherlock Holmes. We have too much to lose here.” Bloody drama queen. Just once she wanted him to talk to her like they weren’t characters in one of those saas-bahu serials.

“Look, I did it my way. You approach your person your way, alright?”

After Dara had handed over copies of the files of the newly ordained Fireflies, four of them had each picked a single candidate. Lux was excused, given that she’d shot Dara, but the rest of them divided their duties. They needed more people on their side, and Kartik said the newer Fireflies were a safer bet. They were lower risk than the more seasoned Fireflies. The seasoned ones would be more likely to rat them out to their superiors. Truth was, the files of the newer Fireflies were all poor old Dara could get his hands on. They had to do. Rhea believed the newer ones were inexperienced, and would essentially be useless, but she’d been outvoted. They needed people on their side, Syra said. Anything was better than nothing. So Rhea had given in. Maybe they were right.

But her encounter with the boy had made her reluctant again. Even if all four newbies agreed to join them, would they really be much help? She’d played that boy like a bloody Sitar. Did he honestly believe she was just some random girl who *happened* to know that he’d been abandoned by his family just a few days before the Fireflies took him into their care? Did he really think the torture in the old mills was a piece of information she told everyone who’s flat she ‘accidentally’ walked into? No, her whole approach was so obviously designed for him, she was scared he was going to catch on. And then he didn’t. Which, in a way, was worse. He *still* hadn’t figured out that the Fireflies had paid his family to hand him over to them. Clearly the guy wasn’t that bright. But even if he did join, and even if he - by some crazy turn of events - proved to be useful, how could they be sure they could trust him?

Which is why Rhea had told him to come to VT. He wasn't going to trust her. Why would he? The Runaways were loathed and feared by the Fireflies. No, what he was going to do was tell his superiors. And when that team of Fireflies showed up at the train station, the Runaways were going to gun them down. Fewer people they'd have to worry about later.

The real problem was going to be telling the other Runaways about her plan. Knowing them, there was a high chance they were going to freak out. But she'd cross that bridge when she came to it. She was done with her part of it now, which was more than the other four had bothered to do.

They'd come back to Bombay a week ago - her, Kartik and the three other Runaways they had managed to accrue over the past three years. They were hot on the trail of a woman named Shanti who Rhea had been chasing since before she and Kartik had reformed the Runaways. It wasn't a surprise that Shanti was in Mumbai, but the revelation of where she'd been hiding for all these years, in plain sight of the Fireflies, had been shockingly impressive. While Lux and the others had stolen the files and killed Dara, Rhea had been in the midst of the Dharavi slums, looking for someone who could get Shanti a message. The woman had contacted them yesterday, agreeing to meet them today for half an hour, in a small restaurant in some galli near Walkeshwar. If they played their cards right, she'd get to talk to Shadow. After eight years. Rhea's stomach bubbled with anticipation at the thought.

The car peeled past Marine Drive and Rhea silently watched the couples who were walking down it, holding hands and laughing in the rain. The granite-coloured waves of the sea crashed into the tetrapods, spraying the couples with salt and euphoria. It had been eleven years since she'd last been to Bombay. It brought back a strange feeling in her gut, a disquiet nostalgia. Everything felt uncomfortably familiar, despite how different it all looked. The buildings looked bigger, the roads looked cleaner. There were less beggars sitting on street corners and fewer bhutta sellers on the promenades. Yet the air felt as humid and warm as she

remembered, and the city smelled the same when it rained. Like wet leaves and invisible mud. She remembered running down Marine Drive when she was five, the wind in her hair, feeling like she could fly, her chappals slapping the rough stone and her grandmother hobbling after her. She remembered being sprayed by the filthy waves, and drying up as she walked home, holding her grandmother's soft wrinkled hand. She remembered the compound of her house. The way she would swing from the hanging roots of the Banyan tree, and scamper up the deformed bark trying to catch the sparrows. The memories were warm. She wondered again why she'd believed she was so unhappy.

“What are the others doing?” she asked.

Kartik shrugged. “When I left, Syra was playing some game on a gameboy and Zahan was reading. Lux had just gone for a shower.”

Rhea imagined them sprawled out in the living room of the decrepit old house they were staying in. Syra splayed across the ratty sofa, staring at the screen of her gameboy under the stained waterlogged ceiling that seemed to have some serious form of eczema. Zahan was probably in his pajamas, sitting on the balcony behind the bamboo curtain that rolled down to the floor, his hair mussed in the salty monsoon air. Lux was probably still in her bath. Her royal highness didn't seem to believe in conservation in any form, in relation to bath water or words. No wonder people in the villages barely had any water, just as it was no wonder Rhea had grown sick of hearing Lux talk.

Syra had come to them two years ago, a scrappy sixteen year old who left the Firelies after refusing to carry out an acid attack. She was eighteen now, but still hadn't outgrown that teenage brashness, the belief that she was secretly immune to the ravages of the world. She was like a teenage boy. She kept her hair short and uneven, cutting it herself. Rhea, typically Indian in her haircare habits, was appalled by this, especially when she discovered that Syra used to have beautiful waist-length hair.

Zahan was their newest member. He had joined them seven months prior because of 'reasons' - which they forced him to reveal meant the realisation that assassinations had real-world consequences, and that even boys who seemed to be made of stone were probably going to be deeply affected seeing a mother beating her chest and crying at her child's cremation. He was solemn and taciturn, and at times reminded her of a statue of Nehru she'd seen in Trivandrum; gray and unsmiling. He spent most of his time reading novels about space travel. Lux, Rhea's unending nightmare (three bloody years and counting) was the only one who could occasionally get him to talk, but even then she didn't get much out of him except for dry facts about the moon landing or how Jupiter's moon Io has more than 400 active volcanoes on its surface.

Rhea knew it was wrong, but she was constantly comparing them to her group of Fireflies. The Originals, as she liked to think of them. That group hadn't been perfect, of course. They had their share of conflicts and drama, but compared to this group of nursery schoolers, they worked like a well-oiled machine. These guys hadn't been there for the attack, and part of her believed they didn't understand how serious this all was. Sometimes she tended to forget too. It was like they were playing a country-wide game of Hide and Seek, but if they were discovered they were dead. Probably after being tortured. She suddenly thought about Arjun, how he used to carry her on her shoulders and call her 'Ree' and she picked up her phone and checked her messages because that was the last thing she wanted to think about.

"I have to admit," Kartik said, "this house we're staying in right now isn't bad."

"I told you," she said. He didn't seem to pick up on the curtness in her tone.

They passed by a wall with 'Bean Bags' and a phone number spray painted in yellow. Rhea had always wondered whether they were really selling bean bags. Syra told her that it was actually the number for a brothel, but she didn't believe that.

“Someone you knew used to live in the house, na?”

“One of the Runaways from the last group. She was such a sweet girl. Had the loveliest eyes. The house belongs to her sister now, but she lives in America and only uses it when she comes to India. So I guessed it would be empty.”

“More than that, I’m impressed how you managed to break in.”

“I’ve done a lot worse.” As far as her repertoire of criminal activities went, she’d say picking the locks of old houses was the least impressive.

“When we get back from this meeting, we should take advantage of the place.” She felt his hand on her knee and she whipped around, making him jolt back.

“We are *not* doing that. I look and feel disgusting, and surprisingly,” she added, “you giving me shit for taking initiative and getting us food, hasn’t exactly put me in the best mood.”

He raised an arm in playful submission. “Alright, I’m sorry. I was just voicing my opinion.”

“I’ve been doing this for longer than you have. Just back off and let me do my thing, alright?”

“Why are you freaking out?” he asked, his eyes wide.

She let out an irritated exhale. Did she really need to spell it out for him?

“I’ve been working all day, and we have that meeting with the woman and I’m just really stressed out because it *needs* to go well, and *you* are always judging me and making me feel like everything I do is wrong. You guys just laze around and I’m the only one working, but...” she trailed off, letting out another annoyed sigh. “Fuck. Forget it.”

“I think you need to chill,” Kartik said. The corner of his lip curled. “I could help with that?”

“We slept together twice,” she snapped. “Twice. It’s not happening again. Get over it.”

How men like him were still not extinct after all these years of evolution, Rhea didn’t know. Kartik huffed, but didn’t push it any further. They passed Chowpatty beach. An old man who was feeding the pigeons. Her father used to hate it when people fed the pigeons. “Why would you want to have pigeons around you?” he would say. “Disgusting creatures. Full of disease.” She wished she could contact her parents. Tell them how sorry she was for abandoning them, for causing them so much pain. She wondered if her grandparents were still alive, whether her *dadi’s* pakodas still tasted the way she remembered. It physically hurt her that she couldn’t get in touch with them. *Once we’ve shut down the Fireflies for good*, she told herself again, *then I’ll be able to go back. My family be safe. I’ll be safe*. All this sneaking around would be worth it, just to feel a mother’s hug again. But that was still so far away. How much longer did she have to suffer because of a nine-year-old’s stupidity?

Well, that depended, she supposed. On whether Shadow would be willing to help.

The café was a small little thing, squashed between an ICICI bank outlet and an apartment building called ‘Sea Breeze’. The chairs were dirty gray plastic, the tables covered with a shiny floral tablecloth. Daisies. Rhea wondered idly whether she had ever seen real daisies.

“When is she coming?” Kartik asked, swatting at a fly. The absurdly large Ralph Lauren logo on his shirt, coupled with his fair skin and loud complaining, made him the most conspicuous person there.

“She’ll get here when she gets here,” Rhea said, picking up the menu again. It was a laminated piece of paper riddled with typos. For some bizarre reason, the restaurant had

decided to have a menu in English, though no one there knew how to speak it. “What are you getting?”

“Cutting chai, I suppose,” Kartik replied. He held the menu gingerly by the tips of his fingers, “I don’t trust their milkshakes. I don’t want to get cholera.”

Rhea resisted the urge to roll her eyes. When the waiter came around, she ordered a mango milkshake. She didn’t really want one, but the look on Kartik’s face was worth it. He ordered his tea, and she requested a vada pav. The waiter came back a couple of minutes later with their drinks and food balanced precariously on a thali that was doubling as a tray. Kartik watched as she spread the red garlicky masala on her bread, but she didn’t offer him a bite. She’d made that mistake in the past, and she had learnt her lesson. If he wanted it, he should have ordered it himself. He picked up his chai and immediately let go of it, howling as it burned his fingers through the glass.

“You would have thought you were a foreigner or something, the way you’re behaving,” she muttered.

“I just forgot how hot they make the chai here, alright?” he grumbled. She noticed a flash of silver of his wrist.

“Is that a new watch?” she asked, pointing at it with her knife.

Kartik looked down at his arm, but didn’t respond.

“What the hell, Kartik?” She whispered sharply. “We should be saving the money for things we *actually* need.”

“I *actually* needed a watch,” he shot back. Luckily he too dropped his voice, so he was no longer attracting attention from the other customers. “The ‘untraceable’ phone you got me is a piece of crap and keeps showing the wrong time. I needed a watch, and I saw this one for sale. It was cheap. What is your problem anyway? I earned the majority of that money.”

“It was a team effort. You know how hard it is to count cards by yourself?”

“I do. Because I was practically the only one *doing* anything over there.”

She clutched the masala covered knife tightly in her fist, imagining how much it would burn if she stuck it through one of his infuriating light brown pupils. Would he even feel the burn? Or would the pain of having a knife slice through your cornea be too overwhelming?

She was distracted when a wizened old woman approached their table, carrying an opaque green plastic bag. She dropped it on their table with a large thud. Kartik looked like he was going to have a heart attack.

“I’m Shanti,” she said. She looked like she’d just walked out of a slum. She was wearing a old soft printed sari that she tucked between her legs, and her skin was brown and wrinkled like uncooked Brownie mix. Her arms were thin, loose skin hanging from them like wet laundry on a clothes line. Yet her accent seemed refined. When she sat down on the chair besides a recovering Kartik, she pulled out a paan from her plastic bag and stuffed it in her mouth whole. “I only have half an hour, so I would suggest you hurry up.”

“You’re working for Shadow, yes?”

The woman looked up, her beady black eyes burning into Rhea’s. “Who’s asking?”

“My name is Rhea. I was one of Runaways. I worked with Shadow for years.”

She looked Rhea up and down, scowling, her mouth chewing mechanically. “All those Runaways are dead.”

The woman was testing her. Shadow had trained her well.

“Not all. Three men survived, Shadow included. Regardless, I wasn’t a part of the attack. I was fourteen when it happened. Shadow didn’t allow me to fight. He sent me away for my own protection.”

“How do I know you’re who you say you are?”

“I found you, didn’t I?”

“How?” she asked, her voice low and threatening.

“Through Mariam.” Mariam was one of the maids who used work at the Academy when Rhea was a student there. She’d since retired, and was living in the slums. Rhea was confused to discover this, until she realised the woman had used the money she earned at the Academy to buy two flats which she was renting out to other people.

The woman licked her slug-like lips. “How did you know I was working for Shadow?”

Rhea scratched her cheek. Truth was, it was a stab in the dark. “I remembered Shadow mentioning a woman named Kangana who used to take care of him when he was in the Academy. When he sent me away, he told me that her cousin Shanti would be willing to help us if we needed it.”

“My sister was killed when he was hardly nine years old,” Shanti said. Her right cheek swelled with the paan as she talked. “I couldn’t believe he remembered her.”

“Why are you still helping him, after all these years?” Rhea asked.

“Kangana loved him like he was her own child. I owe it to her.” Rhea chanced a look at Kartik, and almost laughed when she saw the skeptical look on his face. They both knew how this business worked. The lower you were on the ladder, the less loyalty meant to you. Shanti sighed and succumbed. “He’s paying me,” she said, “a lot of money.”

“Still?”

“Still.” Her lips were slowly turning a deep red. “I just got my paycheck last week.”

“Where did it come from?”

“I don’t know.”

“Could I take a look at the envelope he sent it in?”

“No.”

There was a zephyr of silence, which was broken by one of the woman's hacking coughs. Her teeth looked like they were covered in blood. Kartik shuffled uncomfortably in his place.

"Do you know who we are?" Rhea asked, softly.

"Wouldn't trust you if I didn't. Akash mentions this one's name occasionally," she gestured a thumb in Kartik's direction. The idiot had the audacity to look pleased. "Shadow sent me a list of the rest of you. Said I was to inform him if I caught sight of anyone."

"Did you inform him already?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"None of your business."

Rhea stared into the woman's eyes. There was something wilful and rebellious there; a look one would expect from a young person, but not an old woman.

"So you've been working undercover in Akash's household then?" Rhea asked. The woman remained silent, her jaw moving up and down. "Posing as his maid, yes?"

"How would you know what?"

"How else would you be able to get inside information?"

"Are you going to kill Akash?" Kartik asked, suddenly. The woman's head shot towards him and she narrowed her eyes. "I am *not* a killer," she seethed, her heavy breath enveloping their table. Kartik slid a little bit away from her. "I'm not going to contribute to any murder, either, so don't expect me to tell you where he lives. I was hired to pass on information. That is it."

"Pass on information to Shadow?" Rhea asked.

"We've established that." The woman was growing impatient now, dark clouds appearing in her eyes.

“About what?”

“Does it matter?”

“The Fireflies’ plans?”

“That’s a promising guess.”

The woman’s pupils had light gray rings around them. Her nostrils flared.

“Please,” Rhea said softly, “we need any information you can give us.”

“Why?”

“We’re trying to shut the Fireflies down, once and for all. Don’t you want that?”

“I want to get paid,” the woman said.

Rhea looked at Kartik. He tilted his head to the side and she nodded. Begrudgingly, he pulled out a folded envelope from the pocket of his jeans. The woman snatched it from his hands. She peered inside for a moment, clicking her tongue. Then she stuffed it into her blouse.

“What do you want to know?”

“Just tell us whatever you can. What kind of information do you pass on to Shadow?”

“Whatever I can find out.” Another opaque answer. Rhea clenched her jaw. “And about Tahiliani.”

Rhea frowned. “Tahiliani?”

The woman shrugged, wiping her purple lips with the back of her hand. “Shadow wants to know about him.”

“What about him?”

“Just. Whether he’s alright.”

Kartik quirked at eyebrow at that, and sent a questioning look at Rhea, but she ignored him.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“About his health and what not.”

They both exchanged a look at that.

“Shadow has never asked for access to Akash’s house?” Kartik asked. Though he didn’t say it, ‘in order to kill him’ was implied.

The old woman stared back at them, her mouth twisted in a strange expression. “He’s been abroad,” she said finally.

Rhea had suspected it for a while, but the confirmation relieved her. So they had managed to get out of the country. They were safe. Well, as safe as they could be, at least. She let out a sigh. Kartik sent her a frown.

There was a moment of silence before the woman added. “Shadow knows that just killing Akash isn’t going to stop the business.”

“We know it isn’t. That’s why we need to get in touch with him,” Rhea said. “How do we do that?”

The woman paused, surveying them. Then she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “I’m going out back. In five minutes, I want you to follow me.” She stood up, grabbing hold of her packet.

With that she hobbled out of the restaurant. Rhea bit her lip.

“Did she mean me too?” Kartik asked.

“I don’t think so.”

They established that Kartik would wait for her in the booth. After five minutes (Kartik timed it on his new watch), she walked out of the restaurant, into the hazy night air. All signs of the rain from earlier in the day had vanished, except for water that had seeped into the cracks in the pavement. Rhea walked around the bank and stopped at the back of the restaurant. Shanti was nowhere in sight.

Rhea's hands balled into fists, and angry tears sprang up in her eyes. The woman had promised to help, but she'd just abandoned them, completely crushing Rhea's plan before it had even started. Rhea could feel her face heating up. She furiously swiped at her eyes and then turned back to return to the café when she noticed the phone. It was an iPhone, lying on a rock behind the restaurant, a call in process. Rhea looked around and then ducked down and picked it up.

"Hello?"

There was a crackle on the other end, and then a familiar voice returned the greeting.

"Shadow?" she asked, shock and relief making her voice high-pitched.

"Unfortunately. How are you?" His voice was deeper than she remembered. She wondered if he still smoked.

"I'm... oh my god. It's been so long."

She heard something low, almost a chuckle. "Yeah, I know."

"I need your help," she said, her tongue tripping on the words in her haste to get them out. "I have a plan and I need your help. I think we can..."

"Alright, calm down. Still so excitable after eight years. And here I thought age would have mellowed you out a little." She bristled, feeling like a child again. He'd always had this peculiar way of making her feel much younger than she actually was. "Listen to me carefully," he continued. "Next week. Wednesday at two in the afternoon. Shanti will send you the address. Take the train. We'll talk about it then, alright?"

"So you'll help us?" Rhea asked. Her head felt light, like it was fizzing with Thums Up.

There was a pause. "You know I can't promise anything," he said.

"But you'll consider it?"

“Do I have a choice?” His tone was dry, but she knew he was teasing. Still, she remained quiet until he conceded. “Yes, I’ll consider it.” She felt a burst of relief. She opened her mouth to express her happiness, but Shadow stole the words before she could utter them. “I have to go. I’ll see you next week. Bye Rhea.”

“Shadow, wait.” She couldn’t hear his voice but she hadn’t heard a click either. She felt shy all of a sudden. “Um... how’s Ares?”

The silence seemed to stretch on for minutes. “He’s fine.”

“You’ve managed to keep him alive then?”

“He doesn’t always make it easy, but yes.”

“Oh,” she scratched the back of her ear, feeling awkward under Shadow’s hush, “that’s awesome.” She hadn’t expected Ares to be dead, but hearing that he was alright absolutely thrilled her. How much joy was it appropriate to show in this situation?

Shadow cleared his throat. “Rhea, I should go.”

“Yes, of course. Um... see you next week. And uh... Ares too? Hopefully?” There was no response. “Yeah, bye,” she added, hastily.

A click. Rhea shoved the phone in her pocket, feeling foolish. She didn’t know whether she was supposed to keep the phone or not. Instead of asking about that, she’d asked Shadow about Ares. *Idiot*, she chided herself.

She returned to the restaurant and slid into her former place on the booth. She did another scan of the restaurant to ensure no one was spying on them. Kartik asked her how it went. She shrugged. She asked for a cutting chai. Kartik ordered a vada pav.

Chapter Five: Knight to F3

Ishan

The sky was a lacklustre pink when Ishan and Karan got out of the black and yellow. A few clouds broke the monotony, but otherwise the blush seemed to stretch on forever, dull pink plastic wrapped around the world. A pallid moon hung in the sky, watching the sun dip behind the enormous mill that stood before them. The cab driver gave them another suspicious look before driving away, and Ishan regretted not having him drop them off somewhere close by instead of right in front of the mill. A cool wind whipped at Ishan's clothes and hair as he looked up at the towering structure.

Mumbai was dotted with old cotton mills just like this one. Large structures with walls like broken gray teeth and hollow arched frames like dark blank eyes. The number of active cotton mills had dwindled after British rule, so now the city was littered with the sombre moss-covered structures. Since the late 90's some of the mills had been redeveloped into malls and complexes with movie theatres and bowling alleys, or high-ceilinged corrugated metal-roofed restaurants with no windows. But a lot of them remained dirty and abandoned, the perfect hide-outs for thieves, rapists, and members of the mafia.

"We going in?" Karan asked. His voice was laced with nervousness, but there was a hint of excitement in his eyes. He bounced on the heels of his feet.

The mill was massive, but the luminescent green trees that broke through its mossy walls gave it a familiar feeling. Like the odd comfortable feeling one gets when they meet a cousin for the first time; the inexplicable warmth between two strangers. The cement walls were damaged, giving way periodically to patches of graying brick, and the ebony smoke stack that brushed the clouds reminded Ishan of one of those rakshasas in Indian myths that could grow as big as a mountain. Ishan stared into the inviting darkness.

“I guess we are,” he said. He touched the gun stuffed into the back pocket of his jeans. “Stay behind me.”

“I’ll be fine,” Karan huffed. “I have a knife. Come on.” He charged ahead, and Ishan staggered after him, attempting to manoeuvre around shards of brick and rusting metal piping that were growing among the weeds and banyan tree roots.

Karan had been jittery and impatient lately. Just a few nights ago he had called Ishan up at three in the morning, asking if he wanted to drive down to Alibaug because he’d bought a bag of fireworks they could light on the beach. When Ishan told him he was insane and that he should sleep, Karan had let out a string of expletives and slammed down the phone. The next morning he’d apologised, and admitted he ‘had just wanted to be more spontaneous’. But Ishan knew what it was. He’d felt the same way when he was in his last year of the Academy. Karan was stifled. Disgruntled. Numbed by the unvarying routine of Academy life.

It was part of the reason why Ishan had asked Karan to accompany him to the mill. Karan had always been a good friend. For years he had cheered Ishan up when he was sad, helped him deal with his painful memories, looked over his shoulder as they scoured Facebook pages for any signs of his brothers. Now it was his turn to return the favour. He was going to give Karan the adventure he craved. It had nothing to do with the fact that Ishan wanted company, on the off-chance that Rhea’s words were not a complete lie.

They quieted as they entered the mill. The cavernous structure looked bigger on the inside, rust-red pipes stretching from the coal-dark ceiling to the filthy floor at regular intervals, as far back as they could see. A gash in one wall allowed a thin ray of purple evening sunlight to fall like a dusty spotlight onto an empty spot on the ground. Here, the world seemed to exist only in shades of gray. A wisp of dread curled in the pit of his gut.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone here,” Karan whispered. The emptiness was oppressive, and Karan instinctively fell back, trailing behind Ishan. Ishan fixed his eyes on

the beam of light, even as he kept to the shadows, the tips of his fingers trailing the rough walls.

Ishan thought again of Rhea. She was probably tricking him. The Runaways were probably hiding out here, a bunch of them crouched in a grimy corner, ready to jump out at Ishan with loud guns and sharp daggers, or worse, with loud jeering and sharp mocking laughter. What if this whole thing was a prank? Some sort of elaborate joke to humiliate him? She'd already tried to manipulate him once, by telling him to meet them at the train station and join their cause. What was that if not a set-up? An attempt to get him and his colleagues together in one place so the Runaways could kill them all in one go?

“What are we looking for?” Karan whispered.

“I don't know,” Ishan admitted. “Suspicious activity?”

“That's specific.” Ishan couldn't see Karan, but he knew he was rolling his eyes.

They reached the end, a chalky black wall. On either side of them, a staircase led up into the blackness.

“Should we split up?” Karan asked.

Ishan said no. Karan looked relieved.

He decided to go up the right staircase. Karan hung to Ishan's side, always two steps behind. His knife was clasped in his hand, and Ishan noticed he was gripping it wrong. He wondered if he should say anything.

Karan wouldn't like it if he told him what to do.

The air smelled musty. A familiar musty. The smell of old dust and old sweat and fresh fear. Ishan's heart palpitated. His mind spitting out memories and images he could have sworn he'd only seen before in his dreams. Coal black floors and rusting poles. Exposed brick. Cement. He'd seen these walls before. He'd walked on these crumbling steps.

They were almost to the landing when they heard a noise.

A puff of air, a groan. Some laughter. Normal laughter. Nothing raspy or foreboding, like the kind of laughter one would expect to hear in a place like this.

Voices.

“Grab that side properly,” a familiar voice said.

Ishan halted, and then turned, heading back down.

“Ishan!” Karan hissed. He tried grabbing him.

The noises fell silent. Ishan stopped, pressing his back to the wall.

He knew this place. He'd been here before. Sometime. Somehow. Memories shoved and swarmed to the front of his mind, sweaty and screaming like the rush-hour crowd at VT station. Flashes of memory were now scorching his mind, painful inky blotches staining his vision like flash from a bright camera. His head was spinning.

Ishan remembered tramping in the grass. Brown, tattered grass, dead with heat. He didn't remember the colour of his t-shirt, but he remembered that it was tight. Stifling. Wet with sweat and dribble. He was clambering up rocks, following his brothers who towered over him; eight and nine year old giants. Ajay hadn't been born yet. He was in their mother's stomach at that very moment, developing into the fat, bright eyed adolescent he was when Ishan last saw him. Back then Ajay was a mystery, like the reason the ravens that flew over their house had shiny black feathers, and the fragility of spiderwebs and anthills. That was back when Ishan was fascinated by the world. When he was enamoured with stray dogs with patchy fur that would stare at him with woeful brown eyes, of the even white stripes on the dark road, of the smell of diesel at the petrol pumps. He was fascinated by the brown tattered grass that day too. He stepped on it forcefully, pretending to be Hanuman, growing as big as a mountain and lighting Lanka on fire with his burning tail.

“Hurry up, Ishan,” Tushar had yelled, his arms spread out, as though he was about to take flight.

“Ishan is a baby. He can’t run fast,” Varun teased, sticking his tongue out.

“I’m not a baby!” Ishan insisted, trying to run faster. He tripped on a stone, his chubby dimpled legs buckled, and he dropped down into the dirt. His brothers just laughed. Cruel jeering laughs.

“Baby, baby!” they chanted. “Ishan is a baby!”

He remembered the smell of dirt. The bite on his finger from a red ant.

“Ishan,” Tushar said. “Count to a hundred. No peeking, ok?”

Ishan covered his eyes with his fingers. He could only count up to 40. He took his fingers off his eyes. He couldn’t see anyone.

He marched through the grass, stumbling over pieces of brick and pebbles.

The memory was fuzzy. Where were his parents? He didn’t remember. Had the three of them sneaked out of the house? With the oldest only nine years old? He didn’t remember. But he remembered the towering structure. A large black smoke stack piercing the clouds like Jack’s beanstalk. They were in there, he’d thought. They were climbing the beanstalk, and they didn’t take him because he was a baby.

Well, he was going to show them.

He wasn’t a baby.

Ishan tramped into the dark black cave. Open Sesame! he said as he stepped inside.

“Who’s there?” the voice called.

“I think it was a cat,” a female voice said.

Ishan gestured to Karan. Karan shook his head. Ishan's forehead was covered in sweat. All he could think of was to get out. Out of those claustrophobic walls. Away from those claustrophobic memories.

"Come *on*," Ishan mouthed.

"It's that guy," Karan whispered, pointing in the direction of the voices. "You know him."

There was a loud thump. Ishan could hear heavy footfalls coming towards them.

"Karan please," he whispered. There was a desperation in his voice that he didn't normally let show. It wouldn't have mattered if he was alone, but he'd brought Karan along. Karan, who couldn't even hold a damn knife properly.

Karan turned and almost crashed into Tej.

"Ishan?" Tej asked. There was a mix of confusion and aversion in his voice. He never had fully recovered from Ishan's 'gamble' during their first assignment together. "What are you doing here?"

"We're here to help you," Karan said. He quickly pocketed his knife.

Tej cast a bemused eye over him. "Aren't you still in the Academy?"

A small group of people appeared behind Tej. Two men in black shirts and a woman wearing a dark kurti, her gloved hands held up before her like a surgeon in an operating room. Her hair was tied up into a bun so tight, it seemed to be pulling her skin taut around her bones. There were dark red patches on Tej's shirt.

Karan waved at one of the men, a Katka who was in the Academy with them a few years ago. The man responded with a short confused wave. On his back was a bulky backpack.

“Akash sent me,” Karan said. Ishan was taken back by his temerity. Where was all this coming from? Karan wasn’t the type to take risks and lie like it was his second language. He didn’t sound like himself at all. He sounded more like... well, like Ishan.

Oh god.

“He said that I should acquaint myself with the Katka duties,” Karan continued. “Apparently they’re not sure which unit I’m better suited for, and they want me to shadow you guys for a while... you know. Blah blah. Same old boring shit. He didn’t say anything to you?”

“No, he didn’t,” the woman said, icily.

Ishan couldn’t stop staring at her gloves. They were the off-white kind that dentists wore. But hers looked dark brown in the darkness. Ishan’s chest felt tight.

The musty smell, the filthy walls.

Those gloves.

“Is this true?” Tej asked him. Ishan’s stomach tightened.

“Yeah,” he said. His thoughts were fuzzy and dense, like damp cotton wool.

“Perfect timing then,” Tej said. “Come help us carry this chut upstairs.”

Karan fell into pace with Tej, laughing. “Four of you can’t do it?”

Did he even know what he was talking about? This was all just a game to him, wasn’t it? Ishan wanted to turn and run. Dash down the stairs with the dust shrieking against the soles of his shoes, and out into the warm night air. Away from the smell and the soot and those dark brown rubber gloves that he knew were really red.

“Simran and Vikram are refusing to help,” Tej was saying.

“I don’t want to have to change my gloves,” the woman said. “Its a waste. And Vikram broke one of his ribs two weeks ago.”

“I know, yaar. I’m just teasing,” Tej said, slapping her on the back. The woman looked annoyed.

They rounded the corner and Ishan hung back, trudging slowly, his eyes trained on his red canvas shoes. He could hear Karan chatting happily, and then his voice faded into echoes. His words stolen from his lips. Ishan heard him take in a sharp breath. The other man, presumably the one named Vikram, laughed.

“Never seen one before?”

“Grab the side. I’ll take the top. Jotin, you take the bottom.”

Ishan turned the corner and looked up, catching Karan’s eye. His friend looked like a scruffy dog caught in headlights. Served him fucking right.

Behind Karan, tied to a chair with thick rope, a dirty rag stuffed into his mouth, was a teenage boy. Skin dark and shiny like leather. He was breathing loudly through his nose. His eyes rolled towards him, but he wasn’t struggling. He just stared at Ishan with a look that could be construed as pity. The boy had gashes on his face. Deep red gashes, dripping with blood that looked black in the darkening evening. His shirt was torn, ripped as though by the teeth and claws of a panicking tiger. Ishan’s gaze hovered over him, slowly making its way to his arm, and then his hand.

Ishan’s stomach roiled. He felt a wave of nausea sweep up his throat.

He remembered it now. What he’d seen when he was four, when he thought he was following his brothers. He hadn’t found them. Instead he’d stared straight into the face of death.

“What’s your name?” the stranger had asked.

Ishan hadn't been frightened. Not then. He was filled with the unfaltering curiosity of a four-year old. He wasn't scared until it started staining his dreams. Until his sleep was disturbed by that torn face, those high-pitched cries.

"You're a brave boy," the stranger had said, laughing. He had crumbs in his mustache. He squatted down and put a hand on Ishan's shoulder.

"Why is he screaming?" Ishan had asked. His voice resolute, adamant almost.

"Don't you scream when the doctor gives you injections?" The stranger countered.

"Are you punishing him?"

Ishan remembered the sound of his laugh. Reedy and bitter. "You're a very smart boy," the stranger had said. "Maybe one day you could come and work for us."

"Oh my god," Karan murmured. His voice was viscous now, almost unrecognisable.

Ishan couldn't tear his eyes away from it. Raw, ripped off its skin. Peeled up to the elbow, exposing an arm thick and maroon, covered in ridges, dripping. Gobs of flesh and blotches of blood stuck to it, a grotesque puppet hand on a dirty half-dead man. A fly settled down on one of the ridges and rubbed its hands together.

"Why are you moving him?" Ishan asked.

"A beggar passed by and almost saw us. We thought it would be safer to continue upstairs." Vikram said. His voice was hoarse. Ishan remembered him. He'd seen him in the bar once, drinking shots and telling everyone that he'd assassinated a 'famous Bollywood actor' who would 'remain nameless'. Vikram scratched his beard. "That's the problem with doing this kind of shit in a place that doesn't have fucking doors."

"Why are you here if your rib is broken?" Ishan asked.

Vikram narrowed his eyes. "I'm in charge of all this."

He didn't elaborate, but continued watching Ishan intently as the other three struggled to lift the chair. They hefted it up the stairs slowly. Ishan watched a sheen of sweat break out across Karan's forehead and knew it had nothing to do with the effort of carrying the man. His friend's breath was coming out in shallow gasps.

The second floor opened up into a wide segmented space. They walked down a narrow path in the middle and Ishan peered into each of the compartments as he passed. One of them had blood all over the walls. One had a noose hanging from the ceiling. One just had a bucket. They took the man over to the back of the space, into the last compartment. The back wall was missing. Instead, a large hole yawned into the evening. They dropped the chair close to the edge of it. Tej wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Alright," he instructed. "The tools."

The Katka pulled his backpack off and rummaged through it, pulling out two stunted knives with curved blades. Both had drying patches of blood on them. The man tossed one of them to Tej. Simran bent down next to the bound boy, and grabbed hold of his wrist. The boy winced.

"That must have been a nice break for you. Ready for another round?" Simran pulled the gag from the boy's mouth and he spat in her eye. She stood up and grabbed hold of his collar, pushing him back so that his chair was teetering on the edge of the drop.

"Madarchod. Do that again and I will poke your fucking eyes out."

"Do it," the boy said. "Drop me."

Vikram let out another hoarse laugh. "You wish."

"You are not going to get off that easy," Simran hissed. She pulled him back down so his chair hit the floor was a resounding thud. The sound bounced around the room, thundering like the beat of Ishan's heart. He couldn't watch this. Not after he had been forced to watch it on repeat for years in his nightmares. The blood, the bucket of skin. The exposed bones.

“Where is the client list?” Simran said. She was gripping his wrist again, twisting it.

“I don’t know.” His words came out in a painful hiss through gritted teeth.

It occurred to Ishan that the boy was from Agni. He knew a war had raged between them for years, ever since Agni’s inception. A noxious tug-of-war between the two groups, that got increasingly malicious with each passing year. He’d heard stories of how Agni had kidnapped Shadow’s friend Kali. Of how in 2001, seven of them had assailed Shadow when the Fireflies stole one of their best clients, and how Shadow had killed all of them with nothing but a rusted knife and a piece of glass. But Ishan didn’t know about the torture. Sure, the Fireflies attacked and killed and disfigured people for money. But this? This was brutality for the sake of it. There was no money in this, only bloodshed.

Karan backed up into Ishan, bumping clumsily into him. Ishan could feel him shaking. “Ishan,” he whispered in his ear, “did you know about this?”

Truth was he’d heard whispers, but he hadn’t believed them. The Fireflies were always telling stories of past Fireflies. That’s what they did. But stories about the past were exaggerated, contorted. A game of Chinese whispers that had gone on for far too long. Ishan knew this. There was no way he could have believed that the Fireflies, the family that had taken him in when he had nothing, were the source of his nightmares. He could hear that stranger’s voice in his head now, he could smell his acrid breath. Warning him that one day he would be here. Not watching the torture, but being the one doing it.

Were they really so impressed by him that they’d watched him all these years? Waiting for him to ripen so they could pluck him from the arms of his family and force him to train? To harden? To become... this?

They were starting now. Vikram was pushing down the boy’s head, Simran was gripping his wrist, and Tej was sticking the knife into the man’s arm, where his skin ended.

Karan grabbed onto Ishan’s arm, digging his fingers into his flesh.

“Ishan,” he said softly, his voice fearful, “please let’s go.”

“Karan,” Tej said, “are you watching this?”

The Katka was now standing behind Tej, a smartphone in his hand. He looked at both of them and grinned, chipped yellow teeth in a pockmarked face.

Karan forced a smile. “I have to admit,” he said, trying to sound light, “this is all a little too much for me.”

“This,” Tej said, as though Karan had never spoken, “is what we do to fucking liars.”

He dug the knife into the boy’s skin and Karan turned away, his whole body now visibly shaking.

“Tej,” Ishan said. “I think we’re going to leave.” He grabbed Karan’s elbow, and made to turn away, but Vikram was faster. He pulled out his gun and aimed it at Ishan.

“Stay where you are.”

“I just called Akash,” the Katka said. “Turns out you two had no business being here.”

“Who told you to come here?” Tej asked.

“Nobody,” Ishan said. His voice cracked. Simran pulled out her gun too, her gloves now lying in a soggy heap on the floor.

“Don’t fuck with us,” Tej said, the flaying knife still tightly grasped in his hand.

“What are you doing here?” Ishan flicked his eyes to the boy in the chair. He could see him slowly pushing himself backwards, the chair squeaking quietly against the floor.

“You think you’re so bloody brilliant, don’t you?” Tej said. “You think you can do whatever you want and there will be no consequences to your actions, na? The Fireflies’ new golden boy. It’s time you learned that this life isn’t easy.”

The boy in the chair kicked at the ground, and his chair went toppling over the edge. Simran screamed something in Hindi. There was a crash, and a loud bang. Ishan turned just in time to see Karan falling backwards.

“He’s still alive,” Vikram said, looking down into the darkness where the boy had fallen. “He’s moving.”

“Is he stupid, or what? He’s not going to be able to get away all tied up like that.”

No.

No that wasn’t fair.

That boy with the flayed arm who had pushed himself off a ledge was still alive, but there was Karan. Lying on the floor, blood pouring out of his mouth. Ishan fell to his knees beside him. He shook Karan’s shoulder, shouted in his ear, but it was no use. Blood was seeping out of the wound in his chest, mixing with the dust on the grimy floors. His eyes stared glassily out at nothing. Tej laughed. The gun used to kill Karan was hanging limply by Vikram’s side as he stared out over the edge.

“Should we get him back?” Vikram asked.

“Do that later. Get Ishan first,” Tej said. “He’s working for Agni too.”

That was when Ishan started running. He shoved past Tej, and jumped over the edge. He was flying, with the wind in his hair. Life seemed to be moving in a series of short connected flashes. First he was flying, then he was falling, out of the gash in the wall, into the darkness of the night. Then his chest was throbbing painfully, and there was a deep cut in his leg, but he was running again, limping and running, through grass, on the road, through puddles and mud. Struggling through the endless darkness without stopping, without thinking, without breathing or understanding or knowing. Flooded with adrenaline and blinding pain that shot through his leg and his knees, but mostly through his chest, as though he was the one who’d been shot there.

* * *

It had been ages since Ishan had been to a train station. The last time was a few years after his parents had died, when he and his brothers were living with their aunt and uncle. All of them were going to visit Ishan's grandparents in Delhi, their suitcases packed with tattered clothes and boxes of mithai. They were travelling third-class; their third time doing so as a 'family'. The boys thought it was exciting, more exciting than the first-class train they would take when their parents were around. He remembered the way he and his brothers scrambled onto the train bunks, the way they would fight each other for the top bunk on the right side, because it was the only seat one could comfortably sit up in.

The sharp smell of phenyl brought back the memories with such clarity that for a moment he forgot why he was there. He remembered crying because Tushar and Varun ate all the blue Lays while he was sleeping, so that all that was left for him were the disgusting tomato chips. He remembered the way he and his brothers would leave their shoes on while they slept so no one would be able to steal their second-hand Vans. He remembered the giddiness that fizzled up in him when he and Ajay would run across the narrow compartment at nights, whispering and giggling, hoping they wouldn't get caught.

They always did, of course. Their aunt could never sleep on the trains. She was a light sleeper and there was always a crying baby or a train blaring past theirs, which would frighten her just as she'd be falling asleep. She hated trains, and was especially disconcerted when people watched her sleep. Of course, one could not hope to travel in third class without having a giant family nearby, all squished together on one bunk. This family would never sleep, given their lack of space, and so they would sit in a row, like pigeons on an electrical wire. His aunt, by some cruel luck, would always get the bunk across from the family, and

would awkwardly pretend to sleep while they stared at her, their faces grave, as though they were attempting to gain the benefits of sleep by watching other people do so. She was probably relieved when Ishan and Ajay ran past her, because she had an excuse to stop pretending to sleep.

Ishan looked down and saw his blackened hands and felt numbness wash over him again. His grandparents were long dead, and he didn't know how to contact his brothers. He was completely and utterly alone. Bereft now even of the one person he had had left.

It didn't make sense. Karan wasn't really dead. It wasn't really Karan, lying there, in that mill, drenched in his own blood. It didn't feel real. It felt like something he'd watched on television. His brain didn't seem to register it, but he was aching inside. His eyes kept filling up with tears.

He sat down hard on his suitcase. He'd only had time to pack the bare essentials. He'd returned home at four in the morning, shoved whatever he could grab into the first suitcase he could get his hands on, and then he was out of his apartment, racing to the people he knew could help him disappear as soon as possible.

He saw her standing by one of the chips stalls, a hand hovering over the back pocket of her jeans. She crooked her finger at him. He trudged slowly towards her, dragging his suitcase as though he'd packed the weight of the world among his crumpled clothes.

"Have you come alone?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. He noticed the agitated way she was looking around, her twitching fingers betraying her true intentions.

"I didn't tell the other Fireflies, like you hoped," he sighed, running a hand through his still-dusty hair. At the movement she jumped and pulled out her gun and he raised his hands, splaying his fingers.

“Not in *public*,” he chastised, looking manically around the station. A large crowd of sleepy people hovered around the bathrooms, a man selling chips was absorbed in a book he was reading, his lips moving wordlessly as he read, and a lady on a nearby bench was staring glassily out at the tracks. No one seemed particularly observant at three ‘o’ clock on a Tuesday morning.

“What... what do you mean?” she demanded, slipping her gun back into her pocket, but not letting go of it.

“I know this was supposed to be a set-up,” he whispered, looking around. “You wanted me to tell the other Fireflies so you could kill us all together, didn’t you? You probably have people nearby, with guns trained on me, right?”

“What are you playing at?” she hissed again. Her brown hair looked almost maroon in the receding darkness.

“I want to join you,” Ishan said. Rhea looked alarmed. She probably hadn’t expected to actually be able to convince him.

“Even after I stole your imported biscuits?” she asked, a hint of shock in her voice.

He laughed, but it was dry, like the crackling of paper. “Your set up worked,” he said. “You knew about me and the mill.”

It wasn’t a question. She knew, there was no doubt about it. He was stupid for not realising it sooner. Even back then it hadn’t made sense to him, the way the Fireflies found him so soon after his mami and mama had taken him on that drive. When they dropped him off near Dharavi with a melting gola and told him to wait there while they finished some business. The day his aunt and uncle who he’d believed loved him never came back. He’d wandered into the mill one day and had done or said something the Fireflies liked, and they had kept him on their radar ever since. They’d set the whole thing up, planned to recruit him

from the age of four. They probably bribed his mami and mama with money, or threatened them, or promised to give Ishan a better life. Maybe all three.

Truth was, he would have chosen that life of poverty over this life of deceit any day.

Rhea was still looking around, fidgeting. Then she walked over and pulled out a cell-phone. It looked like an old Nokia, the kind people used when he was ten. She spoke on it for a minute then returned to Ishan. She cast an eye over him. He was sure he looked like shit. He could feel the mill's grime on his face, and his fingers and ratty 'I love the beach' t-shirt were covered in grease.

"Come with me," she said. She led him past the crowd of sleepy passengers, past a red-shirted coolie who was lying down on his hand cart, his white cap on his face. A weight machine excitedly flashed a series of bright lights as they passed, and Ishan felt a piercing hatred for everything around him. How could other people's lives continue like nothing had happened? He stared down at the dirty platform floor, unwilling to look at Rhea and her swinging ponytail. How could she be so calm when Ishan's entire life was falling to pieces around him?

She stopped outside of a door, beside a men's bathroom. The stench made Ishan gag. Rhea knocked on the door, and a muffled voice asked who it was.

"It's me," she said.

The door swung open. The room looked like it might have been a former lounge for first-class travellers, but was now in a state of disrepair. Four ripped sofas that seemed to be foaming from the mouth, and a splintering wooden table lay broken in the middle of the room. On the side a long table covered with a cloth stood bereft of food or drink. In the centre, leaning against the back of a sofa, stood a boy. He seemed about twenty five, with thick black hair, carefully sculpted to look messy. His face was narrow, ending in a sharp chin. His light eyes studied Ishan.

“What’s going on?” he asked. Rhea stopped beside him. He towered a foot over her. Ishan could see a outline of a gun tucked into his waistband. It wasn’t easily accessible, but it would hardly take him a few seconds to whip it out and shoot if he needed to.

“He says he wants to join,” Rhea whispered to the boy. He let out a sound, a cross between a chortle and choking.

“He wants to *join*? Are you insane?” His hand was hovering over his gun now. “He’s playing you, you idiot. They want a person on the inside.” His words sounded rehearsed, like he and Rhea had practiced this routine.

Ishan lifted his arms, feeling the warm wind of the room against his now-exposed abdomen, “I don’t have any weapons, any recording devices, nothing. You can check if you want to.”

The boy patted Ishan down, even going so far as to make him lift his shirt so he could ensure there was nothing taped to his chest.

“He’s clean,” he said. He turned to Rhea, frowning. “Did you check his suitcase?”

Rhea shook her head and gestured for it. Ishan sighed, but handed it over. While she was rummaging through his belongings, there was another rap at the door. The boy opened it, peered out, and then allowed two motley youngsters inside.

“No Fireflies spotted,” one of them said. She was a chubby girl, perhaps a year younger than Ishan, squat, with a horrible boy-cut and ferocious little eyes. She looked like the human version of a baby potato. The boy next to her looked about Ishan’s age. He was unhealthily skinny, with fair skin and dark curly hair. Obviously a Parsi.

Rhea stood up, holding Ishan’s gun. “There’s nothing but this.”

“Mobile phone?” the boy asked.

“No.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” the light-eyed boy continued. “He could be trying to infiltrate us.”

He needed to get out of here. Out of Bombay, away from the Fireflies, away from this city where all the buildings and all the roads were stained with Karan. He needed to win their trust, and fast.

“I killed one of them,” Ishan said.

It scared him how naturally lying came to him.

All of them were staring at him. “Who?” Rhea asked, cautiously.

“One of the Fireflies. I need to get out of here now. Today.”

They all shared a look of mild terror. “Who was it?” Rhea asked.

“This guy called Karan.” Even just saying his name was hard. Ishan could feel the blood throbbing in his skull. “He was a new recruit. Please.”

“Karan?” The baby potato said. “That name doesn’t sound fam-”

“Why should we help you?” the light-eyed boy demanded. “We didn’t ask you to kill him. This isn’t our business.”

“She set me up,” Ishan hissed, pointing at Rhea. The light-eyed boy threw a furious look at her.

“Could I talk to you for a moment?” Rhea asked him. The two of them moved towards the back of the room, where they conversed in harsh whispers. Ishan could hear fragments of their argument in between the station sounds. “We need more people and he can’t go back to the Fireflies,” Rhea was saying before the roar of a passing train drowned it out.

The baby potato and the Parsi were scowling at him. Ishan recognised the boy from the Runaways poster, but he couldn’t put a name to the face. But it was more than he could say about the girl. Rhea and the light-eyed boy returned to their former places.

“We’re going to give you a test run,” the light-eyed boy said. He sounded reluctant.

At his words the two others exploded into a chorus of objections, each voicing some varying form of outrage. “We don’t know he’s telling the truth,” the Parsi said.

“Shut up,” the boy snapped. “Don’t make so much noise.”

“What does it matter?” A voice asked them. A girl sat up on the sofa the light-eyed boy was leaning against. Ishan hadn’t even noticed she’d been lying down there, her entire body had been obscured by the torn back of the sofa. She was fanning herself with a city map. It was no surprise she was feeling hot. She was in a hot pink Juicy tracksuit, the velvet kind rich Gujratis were always wearing on airplanes. “What’s the worst that could happen? We take him on. It turns out he’s lying. The Fireflies *finally* find us and kill us. Who even cares anymore?”

“Lux,” Rhea said, gritting her teeth. “We don’t have time for this right now.”

“It is *so* hot,” Lux said in response. “Can’t this ridiculous heat take a *break* already?”

She had the bizarre Indo-British accent Ishan remembered hearing the actors put on in the production of ‘The Glass Menagerie’ Karan had dragged him to see at the NCPA. The tips of her brown hair were the pink of her tracksuit.

“We’re going to check your story,” Rhea said, turning to him. “And if you’re right, then we’ll take you on.”

“I need to get out of Mumbai tonight,” he said. He tried to take a few imperceptible deep breaths, but he could feel the panic bubbling up within him. “They’re going to come after me. They think I’m working for Agni.”

“Are you?” Lux asked, perking up.

“No!”

“Boring.” She dropped back down onto the sofa, disappearing from view.

The light-eyed boy rolled his eyes. An air of aloofness surrounded him that reminded Ishan of Akash. Ishan suddenly remembered seeing him on the poster. What was his name? Kailash?

“Get on the first train to Kerala. We’ll be in touch.”

“Kerala?” Ishan asked. Everything was moving so fast, his head was swimming.

Rhea shoved the old Nokia phone in his hand. “We’ll call you, alright?”

“Why Kerala?” he asked. They left the room and started walking towards the ticket counter, practically pushing him along. Lux remained on the sofa for a minute before reluctantly trudging after them. “What’s there?”

“Nothing,” the boy said.

“Then why am I going there?”

“It’s just close to where we need to go, that’s all,” Rhea said, her eyes were fixed straight ahead.

“And where do you need to go?”

“Somewhere in the South.”

“Why? What’s there?”

Rhea shot a look towards the others and then looked down at her feet.

“Are we meeting someone there?” The baby potato asked.

“We’d better have a good reason for going to the South,” Lux said. “I’ve heard everyone there smells bad, and they eat rasam with their hands which is frankly *super* gross.”

“It’s a good reason,” Rhea promised.

“What is it?” the Parsi boy asked.

Rhea looked at Ishan. There must have been something in his eyes, he figured, something acute and hurt. Something that mirrored exactly what he was feeling. She must

have seen something, because for a moment, she seemed to believe completely in his innocence.

It was out before anyone could stop her.

“We found Shadow.”

Writer's Statement

Last semester, I proposed to write the beginning of a novel that would splice my love for writing suspense and action with the realities of modern India (particularly modern Mumbai) as I have experienced it. The reason for this choice was to introduce foreign audiences to the India that I know, which is vastly different from the India portrayed in popular novels and movies currently being consumed by said foreign audiences. I hoped to do so in a way that was interesting enough to grab a reader's attention, hence my choice of a fantastical plot.

I read a lot of fiction and historical novels, primarily because I like to immerse myself in a world that is different from my own. However, growing up, I always felt the lack of Indian characters in such novels, specifically ones written in English. There was no Indian equivalent of James Bond or Batman, and if they did exist, they were badly written. Hence, while coming up with an idea for my novel, I knew that I wanted it to be genre fiction, but I also knew that I wanted it to have intriguing Indian characters. In short, I wanted to use my novel to acquaint my country and my people to those who were unfamiliar with them. This is why I chose to have a fictional plot situated in a realistic setting. Writing *Shatranj* allowed me to write about Mumbai, but still keep it exciting for me and other Indians who are accustomed to the city and its quirks.

Writing about a fictional assassin company situated in a realistic India proved to be harder than I thought it would be. In my proposal, I claimed that I wanted to have the characters travel all over India, but the plot didn't allow for this - at least these first five chapters did not - and so I found myself limited to Mumbai. This has proven to be more of a blessing than a curse. Since the prologue and five chapters were set solely in Mumbai, I could give readers a more focused view of the city, which allowed its complexities to come

through. Mumbai is also the best city to illustrate the incongruousness between modernised India and the stereotypes of traditional India, which I had proposed to highlight in my thesis. In Chapter One itself, my protagonist Ishan, gets out of his air-conditioned car and walks into a mela. Indian fair scenes are quite common in literature, but street fairs such as the one I've described in this piece, are mostly attended by people of the lower classes. Hence, by having Ishan - who has a more middle class standing - attend the fair, I could demonstrate the disparity between the classes, and provide readers with a more contrasting view of a street fair.

I aimed to make the characters in *Shatranj* unique but still familiar. Ishan and Rhea in particular. I spent time honing backstories which established them as uniquely Indian characters, but still had them be relatable in their behaviour and tastes. Modern Indian youth have easy access to and a great interest in world culture, and are moulded a lot by western music and cinema. The infrequent western pop-culture references scattered throughout *Shatranj* were added specifically to highlight this. I mixed these with Indian pop-culture and mythology references, which I hope apart from adding to the 'Indianness' of the characters, will also educate foreign readers. I also have characters like Alyssa and Akash who make up the upper class of Bombay society. Chapter 2 revolves around socialites and Mumbai's wealthy, allowing the readers a glimpse into Mumbai nightlife. Even though the socialite aspect of Mumbai life is something that has been written about by several Indian authors, I think juxtaposing it to this grimy underworld of assassins adds a unique element to my novel.

The vivid setting details, the juxtaposition of the poverty of the slums and the glamorous life of the Mumbai socialites, and the characters' uniquely Indian backstories all serve to cater to a foreign audience for whom I believed these details would be new and fresh. I mentioned in my proposal that it seemed to me that western audiences found modern India uninteresting, and I hope through my characters and the setting I have managed to

eliminate these beliefs. Presenting Mumbai society with all its oddities and contradictions accurately was a large aim of mine. I tried to weave tiny details that adhere to this into the piece, like the menu riddled with typos in Chapter Four, and the man with the long fingernail in Chapter Three. I believe the characteristic taste of Mumbai has managed to come across in my thesis.

While writing I came to realise that a part of my thesis was aimed specifically at Indian audiences. Mainly, I wanted to (sub-textually in some cases) introduce and expose the people of India to issues that are sometimes overlooked. The scene with Rhea and the man on the bus stop in Chapter Four is an example of this. I used this scene to highlight the eve-teasing that is extremely prevalent in Mumbai, the ever-present threat of danger that women feel as they walk on these roads. My choice to have a strong female character counter-act this fear, was specifically so I could challenge this notion of women being weak. Sexism is still a huge problem in India, with men (some in high positions) taking advantage of women, treating them more like objects than human beings, and victim blaming when crimes against women are committed. Later in the novel, I also hope to tackle other issues that are present in Indian society, such as skewed views about homosexuality (which is still looked at as a taboo subject and is punishable by law in India), the huge disparity in class differences, arranged marriage, and otherness in relation to Third Culture Kids. In my experience, these issues are borne more out of ignorance than anything else, and I hope that by exposing people in India to strong women characters and complex gay and bisexual characters, I can play a role - however small - in eliminating discrimination.

I mentioned in the proposal that I hoped to improve style and language movement. I felt like my transitions were clunky. I think I've managed to improve on that in my thesis. I even experimented with flashback transitions, such as Ishan's flashbacks in Chapter Five, which is a technique I had never really attempted to use before. This also gave me the

opportunity to play around with the psychology behind and the complexities related to memory, and how to accurately depict them in a novel. I also mentioned in my proposal that I had trouble giving each character a distinct voice, and claimed that after a while they all seemed to talk in the same way. I am not sure if I managed to make the different POVs sound different enough from one another, but I've been actively working on it, mainly by writing separate short scenes with the characters in order to understand them better. This in turn, helps me to better capture their voice. I also managed to incorporate more summary in my work, something that was severely lacking in my previous stories. This has helped me improve on issues of pacing, and allowed me to cut down on informational dialogue which I thought made my previous work seem a bit amateurish.

One giant change that I have successfully achieved in my work ethic is rewriting. I mentioned in the proposal that I usually have trouble reimagining the same scene in different ways once I've written it. My advisor greatly helped me in this regard. Over the course of writing my thesis I rewrote several scenes, almost completely. Chapter Four and Five, for example, are drastically different from their first drafts. Reimagining these scenes has helped me strengthen them immensely. In the original draft of Chapter Five, I had Ishan and Karan exploring the mill when they come upon the man in the chair. This chapter was workshopped in my ENG 309 class, and I received a lot of feedback claiming that certain parts were unbelievable, particularly a shoot-out scene that I had between Ishan, Karan, and the Fireflies. I was also told that the pacing was too slow because I had too much description of the mill. I revised this scene by removing large chunks of description and having the Fireflies show up earlier in the chapter, which helped build up the tension.

A novel that really influenced me over the course of writing my thesis was 'The God of Small Things' by Arundhati Roy. I read it over the summer, and was completely blown away by the sheer poetry of the language. Due to this, I attempted several times over the

course of writing my thesis to add more poetic descriptions of the city. My aim is to find a balance in which I can straddle the line between literature and genre fiction and create a piece with an exciting plot which is also beautifully composed.

My thesis is still very much a work in progress. There are several areas that I feel like I need to work on, characterisation being one of them. I feel like while the POV characters are sufficiently well-rounded, I need to work a lot more on making my side characters more complex. I've learned I tend to use too many adverbs and that I make my sentences too wordy. This is an area I need to work on as well. I also need to get into the habit of adding specific details to make my stories richer and more believable.

I am worried about *Shatranj* being too complicated. The plot is complex and at times, while writing it, some details were not completely clear in my own mind, which I felt confused readers. I feel like I have improved upon this by writing extra scenes that I haven't included in the piece, but that make the story clearer in my own head. Despite all the steps I have taken, however, I am nervous that it is still confusing at certain parts, and that this would be doubly confusing to foreign readers who are simultaneously being introduced to a new culture. This is another weak point that I wish to continue working on, even after graduating from Bucknell.

I feel like working on this thesis has definitely given me an idea of how it feels to write and edit a novel. It's been a taxing and long process, but I've enjoyed it, and look forward to continuing with it. I already have the next few chapters planned out and partly written. In ENG 210: Beginning the Novel that I took last semester, I came up with a synopsis of the entire work, which gives me a direction to follow as I continue writing the novel. Eventually I hope to get *Shatranj* published.