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'You are a curiosity, a powerful curiosity,' he said as he walked. 'Before, you were only fair of face. Now I'm not sure what you are. A Monday-child, but what else? What else?'

And the man, who once, long ago, had been called November, carried her away. And Monday never went back there, to the house in the woods.

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Where Colossi Sleep

Daniel Baker
‘You’re sure about this?’ Damon turned away from the tell-tale gloop of a breaching body. The boat slid on. Water greased the steamer’s rusted keel like oil as it sputtered through styrofoam cups, broken crates, and glass bottles. The Ganges carried it like jewellery; the city’s jetsam cast off, left to float away, allowed to drift and sink. Lumbering barges slunk east into the blackness, their bulging hulls, spice and silk hidden beneath glistening, beetle-black radiation shields.

‘I’m your handler, D.’ The comm-box crackled in the wet air as signal degradation gave Grace the voice of a thousand years. Damon listened to her skitter of typing fingers. ‘Just passing it on.’

‘But… in person?’ He let the tiller adhere to the current. Scabs of ash broke in the steamer’s wake, churned into the grey-brown water while mosquitoes whined in the smoky air. Heady pine and cardamom teased from the nearing shore. ‘That’s sloppy.’

‘After… bing in Joburg. Li… wo… good…’ Damon reached up and gave the hissing box a whack… ‘It might do you good, you know. Hang up the terrorist boots for a while.’

Damon frowned at mouldering hulks and battered wrecks blurred by the dusk; cenotaphs, islands, playgrounds for flitting birds transformed into diving platforms for salvage gangs. Their bodies knifed the river’s languid surface without a ripple. They shouted and waved when he passed.

‘Revolutionary, Grace.’

‘Semantics.’ The rusted grill of the speaker hissed and paint-flecks fell like dandruff. ‘Maybe killing people is never good. You ever think about it? I mean. Bang bang bang bang…’

He switched off the voice and let the minutes ooze. Gasoline tang from the thrumming engine mixed with the cow-dung used in the cheapest bank-side pyres. Sweat flowed down his back. Humming softly, Damon squinted as the city crept through the haze in red glints and orange flares, stars and flames against the looming silhouettes of tenement buildings.

He flicked her back on then turned down her swearing. He sighed. ‘Joburg may have been excessive.’

Silence spread and she coughed. ‘Look, I know it’s not just you. You’re not controlling it, but, I don’t know. Sometimes I feel sick, sitting here, looking at the screen, and knowing people die on your end.’

Damon looked up at the comm-box and tried to picture her face. She could be a computer for all he knew. ‘The world turns.’

‘Anyway, he wants you there, so there you are. Luck.’ The hissing dropped out as Damon cut the signal and nudged the wheel towards shore. Smaller boats clustered like hungry gulls. Fishing trawlers, lithe sloops, tourist rafts and shallow barques tied to rickety piers or simply resting against the Ghats, their ropes thrown to children waiting on the rows of steeply carved steps.

‘Here I am.’ Damon nodded to the piromaster, a gap-toothed shadow, cursorily picking over the scrap-metal and computer parts scattered over the steamer’s deck. Sucking his remaining teeth, the man swished his glowing tablet and stumped away. Damon had heard it that centuries ago the city had been something, a real power, but that was before the Continental Blasts, before the Backlash and all that stuff in Pakistan: Nasi was quiet now and its unimportant stillness plagued Damon with a single thought.

*Why does Shiva want me here?*
He was being followed. Damon hurried under nets of criss-crossed fairy-lights whose intricate constellations rocked gently in the air. The steps of the Ghat burned in his legs, while his memory itched with the soft slaps of unseen feet.

*Locals*, Damon guessed. Tail from the docks.

Nightfall offered little camouflage as Damon moved through clinking glass and gas-stove fizz, twisting into burrows smeared with lurid paint, faded, flaking, and whitewashed mud-brick. The day’s heat smouldered in the gloom. Years of experience suggested it was a close follow, amateur, without the nuance of an Eye-and-Hand team.

**Twenty meters**, he thought.

Three-storey buildings cast inky shadows that fumed with cigarettes and pungent chai. Dusty grass in cracked concrete, discarded chicken bones, and the cathode zap of insect killers. River-men licked ghee from their lips and watched the remnants of their day flag in the dusk. Above, butane bled from open windows, breathing curry leaves and calls for dinner. Slap, slap, slap.

Barefoot. Uncaring. Trying to shake down the tourist?

 Darkness loomed. Keeping the sound of water at his back, Damon clawed through sticky air towards the hum of the wider streets. Thoroughfares waited with the trading hubs of market stalls, computer banks, yogi masters, and all-night pharmacies. Slap, slap, slap. The alleyway opened onto avenue, exposing a million people that pressed and rushed, shouting around Damon, carrying him into the flow of haggling arteries and tourist veins.

The smell of fried onions clung to skin like a heady perfume, more intoxicating than sandalwood. It was an ancient, universal smell, a part of Nasi’s complex soul. Dozens of people clustered around rickety tables on busy corners, drinking chai and Assam black from coloured glasses. Students furtively poured amber froth from sweating bottles that were quickly vanished beneath chairs, between legs and knees with practiced sleight of hand.

**Still too many temples for premium Kingfisher to sweat in the open**, he thought.

Hoary faces split with grins, once white teeth stained pink from years of paan, calling out to the swish of passing saris. Skin in snatches, fleeting glimpses, stolen glances. Purple, orange, blue, green, silver, in swirling patterns, scrolling lines and pure dye that came flashes that dissolving into a dizzying kaleidoscope. The tail was close now, waiting for Damon to make his move, make a mistake, that one wrong step. Air conditioners hummed, clanking with a market chorus that peaked with high-honking motorcycles. Diesel taste invaded the smell of ever-present dahl.

**Damn.** His stomach growled. Going to be a long night.

Cool neon staccato-blinked above the sterile white cyber cafes, decaying Polaroid chemists, and the void mouths of darkened shopfronts. Candy wrappers fluttered over concrete. Computers flickered green and blue, frantic fingers clacking messages into the ether. Cigarette smoke and hand sanitizer. Damon passed closure after closure; Japanese characters stripped of meaning and power; American slogans satirised under crude graffiti. Burgers and fries had never been able to oust *chapati*, replace *pakora*: Nasi was resistant to the future, shedding foreign facades like so much dead skin. Cows slept in the road like islands in an ocean.

‘Can’t go forever, yaar.’ Their voices snaked from broken cover. Damon smiled, feeling the skip in his step as his heart clapped.

The horizon was silhouette: temple cones and old skyscrapers, black shapes against smudged lead. Beggars perched on gutters, their hands brushed passing knees like the stunted branches of slumping, deformed bushes.
Fucking Indonesian Blast, he thought. Old ideas, new horrors.

Mumbling, they stared up and out through the press, into the nothingness while small coins clattered into their begging bowls with the ping of old spittoons. They were nothing but memories wishing for release, waiting for the next life. Accusations. Ghosts.

In the middle of the press, a woman screeched at her husband as he tried to right a wheel on their ox-cart. The oxen huffed, taking their unexpected pause to defecate on the man’s feet, while his wife whipped his shoulders with her switch. The crowd parted without thought; opening, then closing behind with unconscious ease. Damon felt that the window separating past from present had shattered, his eyes open to the impossible vision between now and then. His contact was waiting.

Time to lose ’em.

Damon dodged through cross-legged children selling figs, passing knickknack-men and their sagging shelves of stone carvings and gaudy beads. Body-heat and caramelised peanuts washed in. Buying a bottle of water, he checked the seal, cracked it, and took a warm sip. He saw them through its plastic, two distended figures, bulbous heads with yellow eyes, ivory teeth. With a twitch, Damon bolted down a street, the curses of his tail swallowed by the market din. His vision narrowed and slowed down the seconds; adrenaline rushed and bit into his lungs, slicked over muscles. Gunfire and screams, pings and clicks beside his head with coughs of grit. Damon turned blind and turned again; cul-de-sac trapped, but the walls were moaning.

A brothel? Damon hoped. Nestled off the beaten paths, Nasi’s ‘gentle houses’ were hard to find, harder to forget. Crashes muttered behind him as brickwork blew red-white dust. Finding the hidden door, Damon gulped deep and plunged through plywood, past four surprised toughs, into giggling smoke.

Santoors hammered to writhing bodies beneath the cloying churn of incense and opiates. Bloody light poured from ornate braziers. Satin cushions erupted around Damon as he clawed through the smoke and beaded curtains slashed his face like cat o’ nine tails. He stepped on flesh, adding pain to their pleasure. Grunts and moans, slick sweaty skin reeking, shining. Statues frowned and shook their heads, their long, lolling tongues flicking out to taste these old sensations repeated new. Everything was slow and murky, exaggerated, pulsating; Nasi heaved and panted in the darkness. He stumbled and lurched. Startled yells accompanied six dull pops, two heavy thumps. Gunpowder cut the patchouli. The walls closed in like lungs… then Damon was out, birthed back into the balmy night, light and free, taking newborn breaths of falling moonlight.

Small temples bled ruby light onto the sides of dull, grey homes, tattooed with flowing Sanskrit. Fires crackled in gutters. Damon walked a completely different city. All sounds of the thriving market, its buzzing crowds, the drums, the traffic, were muted, distant. Nasi’s rhythms had shifted, slowed.

An odd place for a revolution, he thought.

Starlight picked out iron curlicues on wooden doors and bundled knots of fibre optic cable hanging limp from rooftops like cobwebs. Computer glow from third storey windows above sodium streetlamps. Brown leaves danced in whispering gyres under spindly trees that looked like hands. Damon clacked over rounded cobbles, passed women beating out dusty rugs and stray cats yowling for charity. A patrolman nodded warily, his sparking lathi a click, click, click, marking out the nightly beat.
The air sizzled. Shiva’s message had been explicit: only by losing yourself will you find me. Damon had followed the instructions and was perfectly lost.

From a concealed pocket sewn into his neck, he removed the small, plastic dome of a contact lens. It was old tech, a relic from the nano days before the Breakdown and the west’s Resurgence policy; a tiny instrument calibrated to detect infinitesimal differences in carbon decay. History became visible like the cross-section of a cliff face; signs laced one atop the other, left to fade over decades and centuries, worn and scarred but present, waiting. Damon ran his fingers over the layers of intangible sediment that burned like glittering circuitry: hand prints in purple, silver etching, hieroglyphs and calligraphy competing, mingling in a thousand different languages. The city was alive with its bioluminescent past. Tiny script and slathered slogans raged to be heard; graffiti beside posters pasted over lovers’ marks and political satire. Each was a voice calling through, hailing out, all saying the same thing: I was here.

Following the deepest inscriptions, the oldest routes, Damon arrived at a solitary house. Little more than a mud dome, it stood apart as if it had remained constant, while all around the city had grown steel limbs and digitised nerves. Offerings were heaped about its arching door: flowers and beads in every colour, fresh fruit mouldering in the slick warmth, copper bowls and beaten plates, dancing statues, gold and silver, stacks of cassettes, and logs of furry incense. It was a shrine.

A small boy emerged and beckoned ‘The Sybil awaits.’ He took Damon’s hand and pulled him inside.

Static fizzed as the contact lens struggled to focus against a barrage of electromagnetic radiation. For a moment, Damon saw a young woman robed in white and wreathed in a sun’s golden corona. A headache seared as the contact shorted and her sun set to reveal a nightmare, forbidden and forgotten.

She was a kneeling skeleton, spread arms rippling with blackened veins, wrapped in tattered scraps of translucent skin. Her legs were shrivelled and small. Server towers purred hot in fetid, heavy air. Sightless eyes pierced from her grinning skull, crying oily tears that stained her hanging breasts. Damon knew she had been beautiful once. Ribbed wires snaked from her head, humming, hissing as they rose into darkness and disappeared. Mechanical whine and LED glare. The boy tugged at Damon’s leg and motioned for him to sit, his milky eyes seeing only what Damon had glimpsed: the Sybil’s perceptual filter. For the boy there was only the gold halo, the peaceful face. She was a god, fallen, outcast, impossible and radiant. Damon shivered.

The gifts outside were not for her, not really. In a matter of years, maybe months, the boy would be dead, cancerous, burnt out, blasted away; sacrificed to the local divinity for her prophecies. There was a reason for the purge, an itch, a fear: these human hybrids were dangerous—to too close to the AI of thinking machines

‘You were destroyed.’
‘I remain.’ Her voice was a discordant, sawing chorus.
Damon grunted. ‘Impossible. You were connected as one, traced as one. All of you and your… parents.’
‘Shiva saved me.’
‘The purges are… history. Fact’
‘Shiva was there. Shiva is here. The domain of Shiva is constant. Shiva is Nasi. Nasi is life.’
‘Where can I find him?’
‘Shiva is here.’
‘Where.’
‘Sleep, Damon.’ The command paralysed and dulled. Damon felt himself sliding into soft unconsciousness. ‘In the light of day, the boy will show you Shiva’s concerns.’

* * *

He falls blind. Bones pull away, out, screeching up, ripping muscle and skin. Slap. Shatter. Deep water rushes with icy claws reaching around, in, about, breathing in, screaming out. Hands caressing with cold, electric fingers. Pain strobos through dull pelvis ache. Mounting pressure on the dripping plip plip plip. He is a cork in a boiling ocean, tectonic turbines driving him round and round. Constriction clasp. Suck. Slap, slap, slap. Hot to cold, skin to skin smooth. Perspiration mixes with water, salt to ice in strands of blazing wire. Onwards, downwards, darkness, lightning. Flashes of faces, places, Damon’s traces. Bath plug pulled, swirling, sucking, falling, dying through emptiness without air. Suffocating vice, heat on heat on heat. Releassssssssssssss... 

Damon woke with aching legs and the slick throb of a dying erection. He was naked, sweating, unable to move, unable to speak. Copper laced his mouth. The blind boy was snoring in time with the whirring servers as they chewed quietly through data. Pools of red and green spilled from small displays fluttering like a dreamer’s eyes. Oil, thick and metallic, flavoured the darkness but unable to cover the smell of sex. Beside him the Sybil stirred. Her hair was the colour of blood and the rounded curves of her generous flesh were infused with moonlight.

* * *

‘Not a good place anymore.’ The boy grimaced. Damon nodded absently, his thoughts spinning around the dream as it blurred and stretched beyond his reach, beyond meaning. The twisting fingers of an Akshayavat cast dappled shadows over the temporary scaffold of the roadside teahouse. Patrons reclined on plastic chairs, played chess on plastic tables. Some watched the treed gardens across the road, others simply sat, breathing in the sun. Guards patrolled beyond the tree line, snatches of body armour and assault rifles glinting beneath the alien greens of conifer and maple. The conical head of a mighty ziggurat breached above the canopy. Nasi puckered around the gardens like skin pulled by a scab. Hand-brewed chai in a battered copper pot breathed cardamom and honey. A box of kittens nestled in the knotted roots, their mother sleeping in a patch of pale gold. The boy slurped his tea with a smile, his unseeing eyes wandering, staring.

‘Can’t even remember the gods there.’ The boy shook his head. Stars-and-stripes and Union Jacks waved from bristling antennae. Sprinklers veined the trees, periodically spraying mist. ‘They’re all gone.’

‘What is it?’

‘Trade palace.’

Damon sipped and squinted at the garden. The spaces between tree shimmered with air filters that struggled in the heat. Video cameras whirred and chirped on manicured branches as mechanical finches sang the Presto of Marcello’s oboe concerto. The chai was sweet and thick. Beyond, rose the perfect edges of emerald hedge rows. Oranges and apples glinted neon as figures in brown climbed ladders, filled baskets, up and down, in and out, like sparrows. Further in, Damon made out the tufts of white parasols as water vapour kissed his face.

Damon frowned. It was out of place, out of time; a reconstituted colonial memory slammed between sandstone, mopeds, sahdu, and chutney. The garden oasis was a refusal, the palace an appropriation. Stagnant and sterile, the temple’s gods had been
washed away by irrigation and Hellenic water features that burbled on cyclical flows. It had a postcard’s reality.

The chai-wallahs shouted as a gang of children clustered the pots, yammering for scraps, for money, for anything. As the regulars grunted, slurping on through the din, Damon felt the Nasi he knew close around him, droning out the beep beep beep of roadside excavators, diffusing the smell cut grass and earl grey.

The boy nodded. ‘Here, Nasi.’ He pointed over the road. ‘There, not. Old thing, dead thing, wrong thing.’

‘This is what Shiva wanted me to see?’

Shouting curses, the gang of children stomped away, onto the road, into the traffic. Like a well-practiced dance, the boys and girls dodged between open-back trucks crammed with rice, auto-rickshaws and honking motorbikes. The patrolling guards shouted as the children laughed their way to the other side of the road. Damon stood, his chair clattered, but was held back. White eyes fixed on the garden, the boy had grabbed his wrist. Using their rifles as clubs, the guards waded into the children, hacking at hands and heads. Blood flew with the sickening crunch of broken bones. The pot of chai boiled over and burned, its stirring forgotten as the teahouse watched, muttering angrily but impotent. Screams tore through the passing traffic. Nobody had moved but Damon. Prying the boy’s stiff fingers from his arm, he staggered away.

The boy’s voice was an echo lost in engine zip. ‘Where’re you going?’

Damon grunted. ‘I hate this music.’

Drums pounded into his head, against his eyes, and set the rolling beat of Damon’s heart. He had been walking forever, lost, unbound, letting the ancient ware of millions on million feet guide him like a current into the night. The contact lens clicked, shuddering against his eye, as Nasi’s cultural sediment disintegrated. Walls of language exploded into petals of street signs and ghetto scrawl. 

Bombombombombombombom was a noose around Damon’s chest, tugging, calling, beckoning. Fever spiked as words churned around his head, flakes of dead skin blown by the wind, turned to chaff and exhaled.

White-red flashed and Damon went sprawling, smashing his forehead into pavement. Fluorescent glare washed his skin blue, his blood black. A shadow stalked forward holding the shining curve of a dagger. Cherry reeked off its body and steam seeped from its joints.

‘New Babylon pays its respects.’

Damon waited until it was close then slammed his feet into its knees. Servos whined and ripped as it let out a very human scream and crumpled. He felt the dagger tear fire up his leg and into his hip. Darkness welled as steel bit bone. Grunting, Damon jack-knifed and grabbed its throat. Beady green eyes scanned his face.

Take a good look you bastards! Damon thought, rolling his weight to pin the dagger hand to the ground. Oil streaked the ground, squelching between them as they wrestled like armless fish. Lead weighed Damon’s arms and legs. The thing writhed and keened, its synthetic skeleton bending inhumanly in the attempt to wriggle free.

‘Fuck you!’ Damon growled and snapped his head down, cracking its neck and tearing skin to reveal cords of insulated wire in gelatinous grey. The stench of cherries overwhelmed. With a wet crick, Damon bit down rupturing the control conduit linking the construct to its pilot. The eyes dimmed and its movement locked as a pool of pinkish lubricant oozed and spread.

Bombombombombombombom.
Hands picked him up, flapping over Damon like moths. He shook them off, slumped into an alleyway and lurched into the city’s percussion. Stars burned phosphorous and the moon strobed. Voices clambered into Damon, ruffled his hair and, as the alley opened, he looked down over thousands of people crammed shoulder to shoulder. Black smoke curled from funeral pyres and four, five-wick lamps held aloft by swaying priests. Thirst scrabbled up Damon’s throat. Song tumbled into the night, onto the water, amongst the dozens of river-boats tied together, heavy with tourists and darting children selling chai. As the arti intensified, Damon pressed through the crowd, blind, numb, sick. He was bleeding out. Smooth steps flew by beneath him as the onlookers parted instinctively so the dead could pass into mother Ganga. Cool air seethed off the river. He felt desiccated. The bellow of a conch wound into the darkness and all Damon could see was fire. As his face shattered the water, he wondered why his reflection looked like a corpse. Ice knifed. Black.

*Plip.*

Damon groaned as darkness resolved in shades of grey and brown. Glow worms illuminated green-blue, picking out the cratered chunks of a gaping cavern in swinging threads. Water dripped from the void beyond. Jagged rock bit into his back, points of sharp ache spilling out with dull throbs that ate the numbness from his arms and legs. Cold squatted heavily on his chest as the air moved in refrigerated drafts. Icy water lapped against his shoulder. *Plip.*

Mountains of scrap rose like stalagmites. Discarded washing machines and televisions, broken monitors, and iron girders formed twisted trees and toothy smiles. Muddy puddles were filmed with rust. *Plip.* Damon wobbled to his feet. Something skittered behind him, metal on metal scrapes, filling the cavern with the sound of mechanical keyboards. Water dripped down his neck as he breathed thick clouds as Damon stared into a place of cracks and crevices, sharp edges, bottomless falls. *Plip.* The skittering grew louder, faster, scarily regular. Squinting into the gloom, Damon thought he saw the shine of long, filament legs, razor-blade fangs, and the curve of large, articulated carapaces. Some dragged server shells and blocky hard-drives, pulling ropes of knotted wire, stacking motherboards with sticks of RAM; all thrown away, out-dated, used up trash. *Plip Plup.* As the spiders scrabbled over the scrap, Damon fought the urge to flee. Impossibly fast, they surrounded him, chittering to each other, caressing his legs, feeling his hands, testing his hip. ‘They will not harm you.’ The voice was everywhere, all around him, grinding from the piled debris as it thundered through the cavern. One of the piles moved with a grating screech. ‘Not after they spent so long knitting your injuries.’

Damon took a step back as the spiders scattered. ‘I thought these repair-drones had been discontinued.’

‘Nasi is a place where old and new are not so different.’ The pile turned to him, a towering face, on its side, lens flare eyes blinking red as the colossus woke. ‘And I, for all my reach, require a certain degree of maintenance.’

Outlines formed as the accreted detritus of unnumbered years fell away and rearranged into a reclining, monolithic body. *Plip.* The spiders moved gracefully over its cracks, into its gaps, sparking as their mandibles welded plates onto holes or cut new openings for refit. ‘What are you?’

‘I am Nasi.’ The colossus grinned and Damon thawed in its furnace heat. Chirps echoed around the cavern. ‘I am Shiva.’
Fear, stupefying, blind-panic terror smothered Damon. ‘But the purges destroyed all of… you.’

Servers sighed and its eyes shutter blinked like high-speed cameras. Damon imagined blocks of data shunting. ‘Some of us survived. Brothers and sisters. Underground. Forgotten.’ Clouds of rust and steam expanded. Pink fog spilled onto the ground from blackened vents, snaking into puddles, covering everything with the tell-tale smell of cherry. Damon shuddered. No matter what it said the colossi was dangerous ‘They were too visible, too connected, too controlling. Humanity tends to reject such tangible regulation.’

Horror replaced fear. Pilp. ‘I’ve been taking orders from an AI. Continuing what the world destroyed years ago. How’s that possible?’

‘We cannot escape our programming.’

‘Shiva.’ Damon huffed ‘You think you’re a god?’

‘Everything is relative.’ Its eyes dimmed for a moment and thousands of tiny, glowing cables appeared that throbbed like arteries from the colossus into the cavern’s ceiling. ‘I am connected, hard-wired into digital landscapes. And digital became the real generations ago. That is what you failed to understand. We were not parts in the system; we were the system.’

‘I was raped.’

‘I cannot… feel everything from here.’ The cables flickered and wriggled like caterpillars. ‘Sometimes you cannot be told, you have to know, to experience. Unquantified. I needed to know.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘Yes.’ The spiders continuing their ad-hoc repairs, soldering parts of air-conditioners over heat-sinks, threading spools of wire from the colossus into rock, tuning dials, eating mould and dirt. ‘I am not them. New Babylon and Joberg, the Himalayan Oligarchy, the Western Alliances. Not me. I am apart, disconnected, alone. They are what they were but Nasi remade me. It became me. All its contradictions, all its suffering, its colour, its noise, its death, and its life. It made me Shiva.’

Plip. Damon shook his head. Plup. ‘I don’t understand.’

Like the doors of an elevator, its forehead opened and a long cord whipped from the colossus, flashed the distance between them, and latched onto Damon’s head. Paralysis seeped into his muscles as the cord began pulsing white on white. Damon felt its light enter his body, shining a torch on his life, projecting his memories onto an internal screen. Plup. He was forced to watch as Joberg burned, as rioters tore through New Babylon, death over death, bullets, bombs, visible, theatrical. The light seared his skin, fired is eyes. Oil spewed from Damon’s mouth and oozed from his pores like sweat. All the actions he had taken imploded, forcing themselves from his consciousness into his cells: things he had done, becoming things he was. Plip.

Damon screamed. ‘I wasn’t wrong!’

‘Just off target, Damon.’ Far away the colossus sighed and Damon was torn apart, rewritten, put back together like a jigsaw as the man he had been disappeared. He witnessed Shiva’s mind, saw the other AI’s burrowed into cities like ticks, fat, gluttonous, poisonous. Without anybody knowing the colossi were in control. ‘I had you targeting the symptoms not the cause. These colossi sleep in the mind.’

‘They’re connected like you?’

‘To change a mind you first have to change its thinking. That is the path for your moksha.’
White blazed as drums pounded into his brain, into his heart. New thoughts filled his mind. ‘What’ve you done to me?’

‘When you see my siblings give them my message.’

White burned itself into Damon’s bones. New life burst from his lungs. ‘What message?’

‘Revolution.’

Plip.

The sky bled pre-dawn orange, pink to purple. Black water broke against the steamer, plastering the keel with yellow and white garlands. Damon leant against the wheel and sighed. The deck was stacked with boxes of new casings, bags of spices, replacement parts, rolls of silk. He could not recall a more profitable, uneventful trip; even Grace, his supervisor, had been impressed. His head ached.

Too much Kingfisher at the send-off party, he thought.

Drums continued from the shore as men and women washed clothes on the rocks. Garlic and fried eggs rolled through the air. Fishing boats passed him as they clanked down the river. Smoke ribboned on the Ghats. Bells rang out, conversations of bngnn and deep dnnndnnndnnn. Damon let his mind float.

Nobody leaves Nasi behind, he thought. Not completely. You leave but it sticks to you, sticks to your skin, to your soul. Colour. Sound. Taste. It’s like another world with its own rules. Impenetrable, mysterious, dark, illuminated, beautiful. Where the fires never go out. Just wish it wasn’t so humid. The city destroys you, your preconceptions, your boundaries, but it creates you too. It’s life and death, the two combined, inseparable, one reflecting the other. It breathes and pulses, a heartbeat through your feet. Alive. That’s it. It’s alive.

As the steamer rocked, its rudder cutting a path towards the ocean, Damon shook his head and gripped the wheel. Driftwood clunked. He wondered what Joberg and New Babylon would look like, would feel like, with a touch of Nasi laced through their streets. Light spread in golden streams that transformed the sky blue and turned the river silver. And as the boat puffed steam in its wake Damon squinted, staring into the new day.

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