

THE
SHIP

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ONE

*A trip to the British Museum ❁ the manifest
is full ❁ we leave*

Right up until the day we boarded, I wondered whether the ship was just a myth. There were so many myths in my life then. The display cases in the British Museum were full of them, and the street prophets crowding the pavements outside ranted new ones at my mother and me every time we walked past. From time to time, there was a government raid and, for a few days, the streets would be empty, except for the one prophet who always survived. He sat on the corner of Bedford Square and Gower Street, filthy in worn denim, holding up a board that said, 'God has forgotten us.' I don't know why the troops left him. Perhaps they agreed with him; in any case, he must have had a card. He was still there when we left, sailing past the car window as though he were the one on water. It was my sixteenth birthday.

I was born at the end of the world, although I did not know it at the time. While I fretted at my mother's breast, demanding more milk than she was able to give me, great cargo ships sailed out of countries far, far away, carrying people from lands that were sinking, or burning, or whose natural bounty had been exhausted. While I took my first stumbling steps, cities across the world that had once housed great industries crumbled into dust, and pleasure islands that had been raised from the oceans

melted back into them as though they had never existed. And as I began to talk, the people in the surviving corners of civilisation fell silent, and plugged their ears and their hearts while the earth was plundered for its last scrapings of energy, of fertility. Of life.

I was seven when the collapse hit Britain. Banks crashed, the power failed, flood defences gave way, and my father paced the flat, strangely elated in the face of my mother's fear. I was right, he said, over and over again. Wasn't I right? Weren't we lucky that we owed nothing to anyone? That we relied on no one beyond our little trio? That we had stores, and bottled water? Oh, the government would regret not listening to him now. The government would be out on the streets with the rest of the population. Weren't we lucky, he wanted us to say, weren't we lucky that we had him? He ranted, and we bolted our doors; my mother tightened her arms around me, and for months we did not leave the flat.

Across the country, people lost their homes, the supermarkets emptied and the population stood, stunned and helpless, in the streets. My father watched the riots and the looting, the disasters and the forced evictions on every possible channel; he had the computer, his phone and his tablet and juggled them constantly, prowling about the flat and never seeming to sleep. The government resigned, and then came the tanks, and the troops with their terrible guns. My father vanished. Oxford Street burned for three weeks, and I watched the orange skies from the circle of my mother's arms, weeping for him. Hush, my mother whispered to me, hush. But I was only a child; I had not learned to be silent, and when he returned, tired and triumphant, I cried just as loudly and buried myself in him. But he was no longer the man who had walked away. The military government had listened; they had bought the Dove from him. He was a rich man now, and a powerful one, and he had more important things to do than cuddle me.

Within weeks of my father's return, the Nazareth Act came into force. I remember the queues, the identity checks, the biometric registrations, and surrounding it all, my father's jubilation at his success. Opponents called the Dove a violation of human rights, but as my father said, it worked. Your screen was registered, you were issued with an identity card, and from then on you were identified by your screen address, no matter where the social and financial earthquakes had left your land one. The satellites were still operational, so the authorities always knew where you were. What food there was could be distributed fairly. New laws could be communicated quickly and card-carrying citizens got the information they needed to survive. Food drops, medical assistance, re-registration requirements, work opportunities. New acts came in thick and fast: to the Exodus Act and the Optimum Resourcing Act were added the Land Allocation Act, the Prisoner Release Act, the Possession of Property Act – each heralded by a triumphant fanfare on the news bulletin, which was now the only source of information. The Dove was the ultimate firewall; anything it did not approve went onto the raven routes and over time, the raven routes became more and more dangerous. A screen open to raven routes burnt out in seconds; whether the virus that did so was a government initiative or a legacy from the days of unrestricted access, no one could say. And so, with cards and screens and the Dove, order was created from chaos. Regular biometric re-registration meant that stolen cards, and the cards of the dead, were only ever valid for a limited time. By the time I was ten, a valid card was the most valuable thing in the world, and my mother and I, duly registered, were able to go out for a walk.

'Where's your card?' my mother demanded the first time we went to unbolt the door. 'Show me.'

We'd practised so many times. I unzipped the inside of my pocket, felt through the hole, opened the card compartment of

my belt and held it out to her. ‘Seven seconds,’ she said. ‘It’s not fast enough.’

‘You do it then,’ I said, but my mother was holding her card up before I’d even started the timer.

‘The troops will shoot me if you don’t show your card,’ she said, ‘and it’ll be stolen if it can be seen.’ And so I tried harder, but she wasn’t satisfied, and took my card away to look after it herself. We went to Regent’s Park, to look at the tents people had set up as temporary accommodation, although she wouldn’t let me speak to anyone. We went to the new banks of the Thames, too, to see Big Ben and the London Eye peering mournfully out of the water, but even with the security of the troop patrols, London had become desolate and dangerous, and soon our outings became confined to the British Museum, just around the corner. We went there every day; it became my schoolroom, my playground, my almost home.

‘Things will get better,’ my mother said, holding my hand, and I believed her. The bulletins said the same.

And yet – and yet. Time went by, and still people starved. Still they slept in floating death-traps, or in the campsites that had been created in London’s parks, now surrounded by razor wire. I saw these things through the bubble of safety and relative plenty in which I lived; I saw them so often that I became immune. My father saw them too. I think he was a little bewildered that his great triumph, the Dove, had not saved the world, and so he set about saving his own world – my mother and I – another way. He always did like to be in control.

The paper ran out, so my mother tore labels from tins and taught me to write on the back of them; when there were no pencils left, we burned splinters of wood and made our letters with scratches of black. And after a year or two, a new word began to creep through the wall that divided my parents’ room from mine, whispered at night in hopeful voices. *A ship. What about*

a ship? I scraped the word laboriously with my burned sticks. Ship. Ship. I grew quieter as I grew older, and listened as hard as I could to my mother and father's intense, whispered conversations. I was spelling out the titles on the spines of my mother's old books when I first heard the word spoken out loud.

'A ship,' he said to her. 'Shall we do it?'

And my mother said, 'But Lalage's future?' and my father said, 'There's no future here. We'll make one for her,' and from that time on he was barely ever home. It was years before I learned that Anna Karenina was the title of the novel and not the name of the author.

The ship. The word floated through my childhood, a thought with nothing to tether itself to. *There'll be paper on the ship*, my mother told me, when I complained about the labels. *There'll be rice on the ship*, my father said, when we ate the last of the rice in our stores. *The ship*, my father said when the public executions went from weekly to daily. When the marketeer riots spread from Oxford Street to Bloomsbury and the bodies stayed outside our flat for three days; when the screen crashed, or the rats got inside our building; when the water gave out, or a food drop failed, he always said, *Just you wait, Lalla. Wait until we sail.*

The only actual ships I'd ever seen were the stinking hulks that drifted up the bloated river every now and again, relics of the great evacuations, and I knew they weren't what my parents meant. Mostly they were empty; anyone left alive on them was shot as they swam to the bank, if they didn't drown first. The rusting carcasses lined the river from London to the sea, lowering into the water until they keeled over, complete with the homeless who'd taken refuge on them. My mother would go pale and clench her fists as we watched the bulletins on our screens. I hated seeing my mother so unhappy, but to me she seemed naive. After all, no one had forced those people to sleep on the Sinkers, any more than they were forced to live in

London's public buildings. My parents and I lived in a proper flat, with food and clothes and locks on the door, and because we had these things, it seemed to me that they were available, and anyone who lived without them was making a choice. My father was very big on choice.

'Turn it off,' my mother always said, but she never meant it. She would no more have missed a bulletin than she'd have let me go out into the streets alone.

Food became scarcer; on my twelfth birthday, for the first time since the Dove, there was no cake.

'There's no power spare for the oven,' she told us.

'Why can't you just melt chocolate over the fire and stir in biscuits, like last year?' I asked, but my father told me to hush, and my birthday was ruined.

My mother got thinner, and when my father came home the two of them pored over papers and screens while I read and played approved screen games and tried to remember the things my mother had taught me during the day. Daytime London gradually emptied, drained by the curfews and the Land Allocation Act, and the terrible penalties of being discovered by the troops without a card. My father's appearances were gala days; the rest were about survival. Food drops. Hiding the car, which my father claimed we'd need one day. The fingerprinting and flashing lights of the biometric re-registrations, which became ever more frequent. And the ship, the ship, the ship, held out like a promised land between them, hung on words like equality, kindness, safety and plenty. 'Wouldn't it be nice if the good people had a chance?' my mother would say, but in post-collapse London, my father and mother were the only people I knew, and in any case, she never seemed to expect an answer.

Who were the good people, anyway? The street people, or the prophets or petrolheads, who avoided me as instinctively as I did them? Were the strangers who came to the flat when my father

was at home good people? I had no way of knowing; I didn't talk to them, and in any case they never came twice. You'll have friends on the ship, my parents told me. By the time I was fifteen, my parents were still all I knew, and their stories of the ship had become as fascinating and impossible as fairy tales. I didn't know that the people who came to the flat were being interviewed for berths, or that the hours my mother spent on the screen were spent exploring the forbidden raven routes, looking for stories of people who deserved to be saved. I didn't know that my father's frequent absences were spent tracking down supplies and vaccinations; I didn't know that he finally bought the ship itself from a Greek magnate who'd decided to tie himself to the land. I knew nothing. Except that I was lucky, and that was only because my parents kept telling me so. We walked to the British Museum almost every day, and the dwindling of the collections was the only marker of time I had.

The evening before my sixteenth birthday, I sat watching the news bulletin with my mother. At least, she watched the bulletin; I didn't bother. I couldn't understand how she could waste precious power when the bulletins were always the same. I never watched them; what I watched was my mother watching. She sat on the edge of the sofa, twitching and shifting as she sifted the presenter's words, her hand resting automatically over the pocket where she kept our identity cards, right up until the bulletin finished, as it always did, with the recording of the commander's original promise to the people. I could recite it word for word. 'Keep your card. It is your life. This Emergency Government has but one task – to ensure fair distribution of limited resources. I, Marius, Commander of the Emergency Government, promise that no card-carrying, screen-registered, law-abiding man or woman in this country will go hungry, or homeless, or watch their children walk without shoes. But with that promise comes a warning. Do not let your registration lapse. Carry your card

and keep it safe. My citizens are my priority. I cannot feed those who are not mine. And without your card, I cannot know that you are mine.’

‘Your card, Lalage,’ she said suddenly. She had handed it over to me just before the bulletin.

I felt in my pocket. ‘It’s fine,’ I said. Her face tensed. ‘What?’ I demanded. ‘I’ve got my card. It’s here, all right?’

‘No. It’s not all right.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’ll be sixteen tomorrow. You’ll be responsible for your own card. They will shoot you if you can’t produce it. Not me. You. Your card, do you hear me, Lalage?’

‘Happy birthday to me,’ I muttered. But I listened. I always listened to her, although I rarely let her know it, and on the day of my sixteenth birthday, as we walked to the museum, I was so conscious of the little plastic rectangle nestled inside the pocket my mother had made for it that I forgot to complain that my father was away for my birthday. I was an adult; the card in my pocket said so, and I looked around at the museum dwellers with judgemental eyes, asking myself how they could have been so careless as to lose their cards and end up homeless. While my mother spoke with them in undertones, and handed over the food we always brought, I wandered the display cases.

So many objects had disappeared over the years. The Mildenhall Treasure. The Portland Font. My favourite exhibit, a little gold chariot pulled by golden horses, had vanished just after my fourteenth birthday. Instead, the cases were filled with little cards – *Object removed for cleaning*, *Object removed during display rearrangement*. Lindow Man was still there, though, huddled, leathern, against whatever had killed him two thousand years before. I stared at him, and through the glass at the sleeping bags beyond, inside which living bodies huddled against what London had become. My mother made sure we kept up our

registrations, and she took me to the British Museum and talked at me, and we read her old books and waited for my father, and scratched letters with burnt sticks, and that was my life. A closed circle shot through with irritations, soothed by the promise of a ship that never seemed to come any closer.

‘If the ship is real,’ I asked my mother as we walked back to the flat, ‘why don’t we just get on it?’

‘It’s not that simple.’ She tapped in our entry code and began to fit the separate keys into their various locks.

‘Why not?’ I asked. It was my job to keep watch while she did the door, but nothing ever happened. My mother liked things to be done properly, that was all. Even the milk, which came in cardboard bricks when it came at all, had to be poured into a jug before she’d let me or my father have any. When the outside door was safely bolted behind us, she began the long process of unlocking the front door of our flat. We went in, and the door clunked solidly behind us. As I began to fasten the bolts, she went to the pantry, took down one of the few tins on the shelf and stood staring at it. It didn’t have a label. She held out the tin to me, smiling. ‘It’s your birthday,’ she said. ‘You decide. What do you think? Shall we risk it?’ I refused to look and went into the drawing room. We had always eaten roast chicken on my birthday, and I’d never forgotten it, even though the last one had been five years ago.

There was a bang at the door, then a pattern of knocks. Before it was finished, my mother and I were both there, our almost-quarrel forgotten, racing to see who could get the bolts and locks undone first. ‘It’s my birthday,’ I protested, but she still got to him first, and clung to him, and left me to close the door and start on the bolts again.

‘I’ve got something for you, birthday girl,’ my father said, leaning over my mother and kissing the top of my head. I wondered, wildly, whether he’d managed to find a chicken. But the box he

produced as he grinned at my mother was smaller than the palm of his hand. 'We haven't seen one of these for a very long time,' he said, and I felt my mother trembling beside me, crowding in closely as he put the box into my shaking hands. I opened the box and her face fell. She began to cry and he moved away from me in consternation.

'I thought you had found a flower,' she said. And he held her, and while she sobbed against him and he said sorry, sorry, sorry into her hair, I shook a pool of white fire onto the palm of my hand. I remembered him bringing home diamonds years ago, when the banks were teetering and there was still roast chicken, but I'd never even been allowed to hold them, and before long the diamonds had given way to rifles and grenades, piled up throughout the flat. My mother's face had become pale and lined, and my father went away, and then the rifles gave way to stacks and stacks of screens, pristine in their boxes. Then the Art Trials began, and my father was gone again. And so it went on, but now I had a diamond of my own. I stared at it, gleaming in my hand, and could not imagine how any flower could be more beautiful.

It was good to have him back on diamonds. I think my mother thought so too, because she looked at the diamond in my hand and said, 'Another rivet in the ship,' just as she had done all those years ago, and once again I imagined a boat studded with sparkling rainbows, like something from a dream.

'How was the trip?' she asked, drying her eyes and settling onto the sofa with her sewing.

'Fine. And I visited the holding centre. Roger told me that the people don't believe in Lalla because I never take her with me.' He laughed, but my mother didn't even smile. He started to say more, then stopped and looked at me. 'Kitten, is there any water? Could you fetch me some?'

I went to the kitchen. The boiled water in the stone jug was

mine; my mother knew I hated the taste of the water sterilising tablets we were given at every re-registration. But it was hard to boil water when power was so scarce; my father and mother always used the tablets. I looked about for them, but the tone of my father's voice stopped me. 'Anna, listen,' he said quietly as soon as I was out of sight. 'The troops are going to bomb St James's Park. They've put the razor wire round it, and moved out the people who've got cards. It's Regent's Park all over again. We need to leave.'

Regent's Park. It had been one of the first places opened up for people who had nowhere to go. I was thirteen when the government bombed it. Hundreds, thousands of people eliminated in a series of explosions that had made the windows of the flat vibrate. 'Be glad I didn't let you meet them,' my mother had said, taking away my screen so I couldn't see anything more. 'Then it would really hurt.' My parents had shut themselves away for hours after that; I heard them through their bedroom door, talking about the ship, then and for weeks afterwards. The ship, the ship, the ship, but nothing happened. There had been more food available at the food drops after the bombing, and my mother said it was because things were turning a corner, as she'd always said they would. But it hadn't lasted, and now my birthday dinner was coming out of a single tin. I stood in the kitchen doorway, holding my diamond in my hand, and watched as my father knelt in front of my mother and took the sewing from her limp hands.

'You brought home a diamond,' she said. 'You haven't done that for ages. Surely that means things are getting better?'

'No. It means people have given up. I got that diamond for a tin of peaches.'

'A tin of peaches?' she said. I opened my hand and noticed for the first time how hard the diamond was, how cold. My stomach rumbled, and I wondered what would be inside the tin my mother had lighted on.

‘It was a kind of joke,’ my father said. ‘I was negotiating for the contents of a warehouse in Sussex. The guy said that diamonds were for those who believed in the future more than they cared about survival. I thought Lalla would like it, that’s all.’

‘What did he take, if he didn’t want diamonds?’

‘Munitions. He traded one warehouse for the means to protect the other, and pistols for his family. There is nothing left, Anna. Nothing. We have to leave. You won’t dissuade me this time.’

My mother fastened her length of thread, shook out the material – it was a red velvet curtain that she was making into a skirt for me – and pointed the needle at my father.

‘You created this situation,’ she said. She unspooled a length of thread and bit it off, looking up at him sharply.

‘Me?’ He stared at her. ‘Me? The Dove saved this country. Saved it.’

It hadn’t. You only had to look outside our window to see that. But my father no longer looked outside our window. His mind was made up, and his eyes were on places far beyond our London square. My mother picked a black button from her sewing box and said, ‘What about the people in the British Museum?’

‘They’re squatting,’ my father said quietly, sitting on the back of the sofa and stroking her hair. ‘It’s all very cooperative, but how can they build an alternative society when there’s nothing left to build it on? All the government can do – all it can do – is reduce the population in the hope of feeding what’s left. Bit by bit. The museum dwellers are idiots, corralling themselves so they can be eliminated. It’s time for us to leave.’ He frowned and jabbed at his screen. ‘It’s been time for a long time.’

She bent her head over the button, and when she spoke her voice was so quiet I could barely hear her. ‘I’m not ready, Michael. However dreadful the process is, soon the population will be manageable, and all this will improve. The ship will be the last thing we do.’

‘The last thing?’ My father laughed, putting his screen down, swinging his legs over the back of the sofa and landing beside my mother with a bounce. ‘No, my darling, the ship is the start. Why do you cling to the end, when the beginning is waiting?’

‘I want to grow things.’

He stopped bouncing and turned away. ‘Still?’ he said. ‘The Land Allocation Act’s a failure. People are coming back from the countryside as fast as they left. And if they don’t come back, it’s because they’re dead. I’ve seen it.’

My mother put her sewing down. ‘What about the Lakes?’ she said. ‘They didn’t do industrial farming there. Or fracking. The soil might still be good.’

‘And you’d take that risk, even though we’ve never heard anything from any of the families who left? Remember the Freemans? The Kings? The Holloways? Think of the security we’d need just to get there. And the loneliness.’

Freemans, Kings, Holloways – names from a time I could barely remember. A time of restaurants, a time when Regent’s Park was a place to take a picnic, a time when people smiled at each other and sometimes stopped to talk. A time when there were still a few private cars in the street; when electricity was constant. Nothing but myths now, lost in time. But at sixteen, I knew about loneliness. I was lonely, so lonely that my stomach clenched with it at night.

‘A life for Lalla,’ my father said. ‘Isn’t that worth everything we have? A place to be a family, among friends, where we can learn and share without fear? A place for Lalla to grow in safety? Isn’t that what we set out to create?’

‘A place without money,’ my mother said softly, putting her arms around him. ‘No gold or guns. Just everyone working hard and sharing in the plenty we’ve provided.’

‘No homelessness,’ he replied, ‘and no hunger.’ He turned in

the circle of her arms and stroked the hair back from her face. 'Tell me when, Anna. Please tell me when.'

'It was an insurance policy. Just that. Insurance. And now you're making it a life plan. I don't want to spend my life clinging to a lifeboat.'

'How much worse do you want things to get?'

'If you loved me, you'd stop pushing.'

'If you loved me, we'd have gone already.'

'I love you, Michael. I just don't think you're right.'

I stood in the doorway, forgetting I wasn't meant to be listening. I clenched my fist and felt the diamond cutting into my palm. 'I want to go,' I said. 'If the ship is real, I want to go on it.'

They looked at me in surprise. My father looked for his glass of water and realised that I wasn't holding one. My mother said, 'You don't know what you're talking about,' and took back her sewing, tucking her legs under her. 'We're going to Mughal India tomorrow.' But I had spoken out at last, and I couldn't stop now.

'I've seen Mughal India,' I said. 'I've seen Ancient Egypt and the Aztecs and Babylon and Abyssinia and Mesopotamia. I've seen them all day, every day, for years and years and years.'

'But you've learned nothing,' she said, standing up and marching past me into the tiny kitchen. I heard the drawer open and shut and the rattle of the utensils in it. I heard the tin opener puncturing the lid, and the ratcheting as she turned the handle. 'Seriously, Lalage,' she called over the rattle of the spoon as she scraped out the contents of the tin. 'What have you actually learned from the British Museum? From me? From your father?' I drew breath, ready to tell her about hieroglyphics and lunar calendars, about crucifixes and fertility symbols and currency, about kings being buried with gold and sandwiches to see them safely to the underworld, but my father spoke before I could begin.

‘I don’t care what she’s still got to learn,’ he called into the kitchen. ‘I want her safe. I want both of you safe.’

‘I want to go on the ship,’ I said again, and it was as though someone else had taken over my body, someone who carried their own card and owned a diamond and said what they thought.

‘Lalla wants to go on the ship,’ my father said, and his eyes shone, and I felt the hairs on my arms prickle with electricity, because even though my mother had come back in the room, it was me he was looking at, my words that had brought that light to his eyes. I thought about the ship, and the promise of friends, and suddenly I needed to know, more than anything else in my limited, safe, grey world, that the ship was more than a theoretical hereafter for the hopeless, that it was not just one more of the many heavens I’d seen in the display cases at the British Museum.

My father stood up. ‘Lalla is sixteen now,’ he said. ‘Maybe that will persuade you better than I can.’ He held out a hand to me, and I stood beside him, his arm around my shoulder. My mother looked at us and, for a fraction of a second, her eyes widened. ‘It’s over, Anna. You know it. That’s why we bought the ship in the first place.’ He lifted his arm and I slipped out from under it, dismissed. He went to my mother, the two of them framed by the kitchen doorway, and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. ‘Darling,’ he began.

I went to the window. It was quite dark now, and street people were gathering by the railings in the square opposite. One looked up at us, face stark white against his clothes. What did sixteen mean, when nothing ever changed? Behind me, my father and mother were kissing softly. Until recently, I’d just hidden behind the latest Dove-authorized game when they kissed, regardless of the power rationing. But now, I found myself staring, and wondering how it would feel to have my lips touched by someone else’s like that, and whether it would ever happen to me.

‘Come back into the room, kitten,’ my father said, and I did as I was told. I knelt down to see whether my mother had laid the fire. The wood came from a man my father knew. Everything we’d ever had came from a man my father knew.

‘Of course we’ll leave. When we have to,’ my mother said into the silence. ‘But, Michael, we need to stay for a little longer.’

‘What for? There’s nothing left to see in the museums anyway. The stuff gets traded on all the time. What do you think the museum dwellers are living on?’

My mother’s voice began to rise. ‘They need people like us. If we don’t keep visiting the museum, then those people will be next on the government list.’

‘There are no more people like us.’ He gestured around the room, at the fire, the working screen, the spaghetti hoops in tomato sauce that my mother had emptied into three small bowls and put on the table in the corner. There were sausages hiding under the hoops, and I realised that my mother had known the contents of the tin all along and had saved it for my birthday. We went to the table. My mother didn’t like sausages; I ate them for her, and for a few moments nothing was said at all. I waited for the miracle that sometimes happened on my birthday – not a cake, but chocolate or sweets; even a tin of peaches. But when my mother finally spoke, it was as though my birthday wasn’t happening at all.

‘You wouldn’t want to leave the museum people if you’d actually talked to them,’ she said. ‘They’re organising themselves, working together. If we desert them, it’s over. We might as well kill them with our own hands.’

‘I talk to the people who matter. You, and Lalla, and our people in the holding centre.’

‘And people who give diamonds for tinned peaches.’

‘Yes,’ my father said flatly. ‘Face it, Anna. If we don’t walk past the people who need us, we’ll never save ourselves.’

‘I won’t walk past them,’ my mother whispered. I took the armchair, and thought about the people who had once lived in tents in Regent’s Park, their bodies blown apart and scattered across the ruins of their makeshift homes. Who had gathered them up? And my own death. What would that look like? In a tent, by a bomb? *Lucky Lalla, lucky, lucky Lalla*. In the warmth of the fire, I lost myself in thoughts about people so valued that their dead bodies were buried with gold and jade, and of others so hungry that they would steal stories to feed themselves. Where did the difference lie? Which was I?

I sat up when my father said, ‘Tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘We’re ready. We’ve been planning this for years. What’s it all been for if we don’t go? It’s time. I’ve warned you, Anna. For Lalla, if not for you.’

My mother put another piece of wood on the fire. It was prettily shaped; it must have been part of a chair once. Or a table.

‘Lalage,’ she said. ‘We named her Lalage.’ I waited for them to look at me, to bring me into focus, but they didn’t. My mother sat staring into the flames; my father sat watching her.

‘We had to find the right people,’ she said.

‘We’ve found them. The manifest is full. Five hundred pages. Five hundred people. They’re in the holding centre, waiting.’

‘But what if things get better?’ she asked, turning to him. The light of the fire shone in her hair. ‘How can they get better if we leave?’

I could feel the press of people outside. Dark had long since fallen. There were firedrums lit on the street corners; I saw their burning orange on the white walls of the drawing room. I could feel the longing of the street people for what we had, pulling them towards us like gravity. I could feel the air, pressing change upon me, and a sensation in my belly that was new, gnawing at me like hunger, although we had only just eaten.

'I can't keep paying for the guards. For the holding centre. For all the food you and Lalla take to the museum dwellers. There's enough petrol to get us to the quay, but no more. Do you understand, Anna? I can't get any more.'

'A little longer. Until the museum dwellers have a proper plan.'

'What plan can they possibly have?' my father asked, but the words were barely out of his mouth when there was a scream from the street.

'Don't,' my father said as my mother started up from the sofa.

My mother stood up. 'Someone's hurt.'

'Stay away from the window.' He took her arm and pulled her back.

'I want to know what's going on out there.'

'You know,' my father said, tightening his grip. 'You just won't see it. What do I have to do? What?'

'What?' I cried, suddenly panicked. 'What is going on?' But they weren't looking at me. They were staring at each other, locked into a battle that was nothing to do with me.

'Didn't I see you and Lalla safely through the collapse? The establishment of military government? When have you ever been hungry, or in danger?'

'You're hurting me,' she said through clenched teeth.

'Tell me we'll leave tomorrow. Tell me.' He gripped her upper arms and held her against the wall. The screaming continued; more voices joined in, piercing and demented. 'Tomorrow,' he said. There were tears in his eyes; he was shaking. 'I mean it. We've waited too long already. Say it. Say it.'

She shook him off and ran to the window. I went to follow her, but he grabbed me and held me back, and I was too taken aback to protest.

The silence lasted for three heartbeats. Then the air was split by a sudden crack and the window fell away. The fire guttered in the wind and a sudden chill wrapped itself around me. My

mother stood tall and beautiful, frozen in time, her eyes unnaturally wide and her lips parted in surprise. She folded in two and slumped backwards, and as she did so, the cord connecting me to the land snapped, fibre by fibre. There was blood, and as I ran to her, I knew that my sixteen years counted for nothing, and that nothing of this old life was relevant anymore.

‘Close the curtains,’ my father said, and as I did so I saw a small black-clothed figure move away through the crowd and vanish into the dark.

‘Look,’ I said, but my father was kneeling beside her body, kissing her cheeks, her hair, her lips, holding her hand in both of his as though he would never let her go, sobbing, ‘Anna, Anna,’ over and over again. I fetched a towel and pressed it to her abdomen, where blood seeped wet and dark, and he looked at me through his tears.

‘I saw someone,’ I began, but he held a warning finger to his lips, and I stopped.

‘Lalla,’ he said. ‘Help me to take her to the ship.’

‘The ship?’

He nodded, and even as I held on to my mother’s hand, I felt my heart beating faster.

‘Everything I have promised you is true, Lalla. Remember that.’

Together, we laid my mother gently on the back seat of the last car in London. I remembered everything I had ever heard about the ship and sat with her head on my lap, whispering tales of doctors, of medicines, of healing. Every now and then, she tried to talk, but my father told her to save her strength. I watched her blood soaking the towel, but what I felt more than anything was the irrepressible beating of my own heart. It drowned out the engine starting, the protests of the street people as they moved out of the road, the cries of the children as we passed. It filled the silence of the empty streets beyond the city; it banished the fear

of an ambush or a breakdown. On a smooth wide road in the middle of nowhere, two jeeps were waiting for us. 'Our escort,' my father said, and we drove on through the night flanked by guards and guns. It's beginning, I thought. My life is about to start.