

## Chapter 1

### *Riding the Tiger*

The wind was chill. If Humayun closed his eyes he could almost imagine himself back among the pastures and mountains of the Kabul of his boyhood, rather than here on the battlements of Agra. But the short winter was ending. In a few weeks the plains of Hindustan would burn with heat and dust.

Drawing his fur-lined scarlet cloak more tightly around him, Humayun walked slowly along the walls. He had ordered his bodyguards to leave him because he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Raising his head, he gazed up into clear skies that were splashed with stars. Their intense, jewel-like brightness never failed to fascinate him. It often seemed that everything was written there if only you knew where to look and how to interpret the messages . . .

A firm, light footstep from somewhere behind him disturbed him. Humayun turned, wondering which courtier or guard had been rash enough to disobey their emperor's expressed wish for solitude. His angry gaze fell on a slight, tall figure in purple robes, a thin gauze veil pulled over the lower face, with above it the raisin eyes of his aunt, Khanzada. Humayun's expression relaxed into a smile.

'We are waiting for you in the women's quarters. You said you would eat with us tonight. Your mother complains you spend too much time alone, and I agree with her.'

Khanzada dropped her veil. The tawny light from a torch burning in a sconce fell on a fine-boned face no longer as beautiful as in her youth but one that Humayun had loved and trusted for as many of his twenty-three years as he could remember. As she stepped a little closer he caught the soft fragrance of the sandalwood that burned constantly in jewelled golden saucers in the women's apartments.

'I have much to reflect on. I still find it difficult to accept that my father is dead.'

'I understand, Humayun. I loved him too. Babur was your father, but don't forget he was also my little brother. He and I went through much together and I never thought to lose him so soon . . . but it was God's will.'

Humayun looked away, unwilling for even Khanzada to see the tears gleaming in his eyes at the thought that he would never see his father, the first Moghul emperor, again. It seemed incredible that that strong, seasoned warrior, who had led his nomadic horsemen down through the mountain passes from Kabul and across the Indus to found an empire, was dead. Even less real was the thought that only three months ago, with his father's eagle-hilted sword Alamgir at his waist and the ring of his ancestor Timur on his finger, he himself had been proclaimed Moghul emperor.

'It's so strange . . . like a fantasy from which I keep expecting to wake.'

'It's the real world and you must accept it. Everything Babur wanted, everything he fought for, had one purpose only – to win an empire and found a dynasty. You know that as well as I – weren't you fighting at your father's side when he crushed Sultan Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat to claim Hindustan for the Moghuls?'

Humayun said nothing. Instead he looked up once more at the sky. As he did so, a shooting star sped across the heavens and vanished, leaving not even a trace of its fiery tail. Glancing at Khanzada, he saw that she had seen it too.

'Perhaps the shooting star was an omen. Perhaps it means my reign will fizzle out ingloriously . . . that no one will remember me . . .'

‘Such self-doubt and hesitancy would anger your father if he were here now. Instead he would have you embrace your destiny. He could have chosen one of your three half-brothers as his heir, but he selected you. Not just because you are the eldest – that has never been the way of our people – but because he thought you were the most worthy, the most able. Our hold on Hindustan is precarious – we have been here only five years and dangers press in from every side. Babur picked you because he trusted not just in your courage, which you had already demonstrated on the battlefield, but also in your inner strength and your self-belief, your sense of our family’s right to rule, which our dynasty must have to survive and prosper here in this new land.’ Khanzada paused.

When Humayun did not reply, she raised her face to the light of the torch and ran her finger down a thin white scar extending from her right eyebrow almost to her chin. ‘Do not forget how I got this, how when I was young and your father had to abandon Samarkand to the Uzbeks I was seized by their chieftain Shaibani Khan and forced to submit to him. He hated all who, like us, have the blood of Timur. It gave him pleasure to humiliate and degrade a princess of our house. I give thanks that I never despaired all the time I was a captive in his *haram* . . . never forgot who I was or that it was my duty to survive. Remember that when another woman attacked me and stole some of my beauty, I wore this scar as a badge of honour – to show that I was still alive and that one day I would be free. After ten long years that day came. I re-joined my brother and rejoiced to see him drink to my return from a vessel made from the skull of Shaibani Khan. You must have the same self-belief, the same strength of character, Humayun, as I had.’

‘Such courage as yours is hard to emulate, but I will not fail my father or our house.’

‘What is it, then? You are young, ambitious . . . you were eager for the throne long before your father fell ill. Babur knew; he spoke to me of it.’

‘His death was so sudden when it came. I left so much unsaid. I didn’t feel ready to be emperor . . . at least not so soon, nor in such a way.’

Humayun let his head drop. It was true. His father's final moments still haunted him. Summoning the last of his strength, Babur had ordered his attendants to dress him in his royal robes, seat him on his throne and call his nobles to him. Before the entire court, in a weak voice but firm in his resolve, Babur had ordered Humayun to take Timur's heavy gold ring, engraved with the head of a snarling tiger, from his finger, saying, 'Wear it with pride, and never forget the duties it imposes on you...' But Babur had been just forty-seven, still in his prime and far too young to hand on his fledgling empire.

'No man, not even an emperor, can know when he will be called to Paradise and in what manner. None of us can predict or control fully the course of our lives. Learning to live with the great uncertainty of mortality as well as the other vicissitudes of fortune is part of growing to adulthood.'

'Yes. But I often think there is more we can do to understand the underlying patterns behind our lives. Events that appear random may not be. For example, Aunt, you said just now that my father's death was God's will, but you're wrong. It was my father's will. He deliberately sacrificed himself for me.'

Khanzada stared. 'What d'you mean?'

'I've never revealed to anyone my father's last words to me. Just before he died, he whispered that when I was sick with fever a few months earlier, my astrologer, Sharaf, had told him that he'd read in the stars that if he wished me to live he must offer up what was most precious to him. So falling on his face he offered God his life for mine.'

'Then it was indeed God's will – God accepted the sacrifice.'

'No! Sharaf told me that all he intended was that my father should offer up the Koh-i-Nur diamond – not his life. But my father misinterpreted his words . . . It seems overwhelming that my father loved me so much, saw me as so important to the future of our dynasty that he offered his own life. How can I live up to such faith in me? I feel that I don't deserve the throne I once so hungered for. I fear that a reign that began in such a way will be tainted . . .'

'Such thoughts are absurd. You search too hard for patterns of

cause and consequence. Many a reign begins in loss and uncertainty. It is up to you to make sure by your own actions that yours doesn't end so. Any sacrifice Babur made was done through love for you and trust in you. Remember also he did not die immediately – you recovered and he lived eight more months. His death at that time might well have been pure coincidence.' Khanzada paused. 'Did he say anything else to you in his last moments?'

'He told me not to grieve . . . he was happy to go. He also made me promise to do nothing against my half-brothers, however much they might deserve it.'

Khanzada's face tautened. For a moment Humayun thought she was about to say something about his brothers, but instead, with a toss of her small, elegant head, she seemed to think better of it.

'Come. That's about enough of these musings. The cloth is spread in the *haram*. You must not keep your mother and the other ladies waiting. But Humayun . . . one last thought. Don't forget that your name means "fortunate". Fortune will be yours if you will be strong in mind as well as in body and seize it. Banish these foolish self-doubts of yours. Introspection may become a poet or a mystic but it has no place in the life of an emperor. Grasp with both hands what fate – and your father – have bequeathed you.'

With a last look up at the sky that showed him that the moon was now obscured by cloud, Humayun slowly followed his aunt towards the stone staircase that led down to the women's apartments.



Prostrating himself before Humayun in the emperor's private chambers some weeks later, Baba Yasaval, his usually blunt, ebullient master-of-horse, looked strangely nervous. As the man rose again and looked up at him, Humayun noticed that his skin seemed stretched unnaturally tight over his wide cheekbones and a pulse throbbed at his temple.

'Majesty, if I might speak to you alone?' Baba Yasaval glanced at the guards positioned on either side of Humayun's low silver chair. It was an unusual request. Security dictated that the emperor was seldom on his own – even when he was in the *haram* guards were

always near at hand, ready to turn an assassin's blade. But Baba Yasaval, who had fought loyally for Humayun's father, could be trusted.

Humayun dismissed his guards from the chamber and beckoned Baba Yasaval closer. The man approached but hesitated before speaking, scratching his stubbly scalp which, to remind him of the old ways of his clan, since arriving in Hindustan he had taken to shaving, except for a single lock of coarse, greying hair that swung like a tassel.

'Baba Yasaval, speak. What is it you wish to tell me?'

'Bad news . . . terrible news, Majesty . . .' A sigh that was almost a groan escaped Baba Yasaval's lips. 'There is a plot against you.'

'A plot?' Humayun's hand instinctively reached for the jewelled dagger tucked into his yellow sash, and before he knew it he had risen to his feet. 'Who would dare . . .?'

Baba Yasaval bowed his head. 'Your half-brothers, Majesty.'

'My brothers . . .?' Only two months ago he and they had stood side by side in the courtyard of the Agra fort as the gilded cart drawn by twelve black oxen and bearing their father's silver coffin departed on the long journey to Kabul, where Babur had asked to be buried. His half-brothers' faces had been as marked by grief as his own and in those moments he had felt a rush of affection for them and a confidence that they would help him complete the task their father had left unfinished: making the Moghuls' hold on Hindustan unassailable.

Baba Yasaval read the incredulity and shock on Humayun's face. 'Majesty, I speak the truth, though I wish for all our sakes that I did not . . .' Now that he had started, Baba Yasaval seemed to take courage, becoming again the tough warrior who had fought for the Moghuls at Panipat. His head was no longer bowed and he looked unflinching into Humayun's eyes. 'You will not doubt me when I tell you that I have this information from my youngest son . . . he is one of the conspirators. He came to me just an hour ago and confessed everything.'

'Why should he do that?' Humayun's eyes narrowed.

'Because he fears for his life . . . because he realises he has been foolish . . . because he knows his actions will bring ruin and disgrace

on our clan.' As he spoke these last words, Baba Yasaval's face creased as he struggled to contain his emotions.

'You have done well to approach me. Tell me everything.'

'Scarcely a fortnight after His Majesty your father's coffin left for Kabul, the princes Kamran, Askari and Hindal met in a fort two days' ride from here. My son, as you know, serves Kamran, who offered him great rewards to join the plot. Hot-headed young fool that he is, he agreed, and so heard and saw everything.'

'What are my brothers planning?'

'To take you prisoner and force you to break up the empire and yield some of your territories to them. They wish to return to the old traditions, Majesty, when every son was entitled to a share of his father's lands.'

Humayun managed a mirthless smile. 'And then what? Will they be content? Of course not. How long before they will be at each other's throats and our enemies begin to circle?'

'You are right, Majesty. Even now, they can't agree amongst themselves. Kamran is the real instigator. The plot was his idea and he persuaded the others to join him, but then he and Askari came almost to blows over which of them was to have the richest provinces. Their men had to pull them apart.'

Humayun sat down again. Baba Yasaval's words rang true. His half-brother Kamran, just five months his junior, had made no secret of his resentment that while he had been left behind to govern as regent in Kabul, Humayun had accompanied their father on his invasion of Hindustan. Fifteen-year-old Askari, Kamran's full brother, would not have been hard to persuade to join in. He had always followed worshipfully where Kamran led despite being both bullied and patronised by him. But if Baba Yasaval's account was accurate, now he was almost a man Askari wasn't afraid to challenge his older brother. Perhaps their strong-willed mother Gulrukh had encouraged them both.

But what about his youngest half-brother? Why had Hindal become involved? He was just twelve years old and Humayun's own mother, Maham, had brought him up. Years ago, distressed at her inability to bear any more children after Humayun, she had begged Babur to

give her the child of another of his wives, Dildar. Though Hindal had still been in the womb, Babur – unable to deny his favourite wife – had made Maham a gift of the child. But perhaps he should not be so surprised at Hindal’s treachery. Babur himself had been just twelve when he had first become a king. Ambition could flare in even the youngest prince.

‘Majesty.’ Baba Yasaval’s earnest voice brought Humayun back to the present. ‘My son believed the plot had been abandoned because the princes could not agree. But last night they met again, here in the Agra fort. They decided to bury their differences until they had you in their power. They plan to take advantage of what they call your “unkingly desire for solitude” and attack you when you next go riding alone. Kamran even spoke of killing you and making it appear like an accident. It was then that my son came to his senses. Realising the danger to Your Majesty, he told me what he should have confessed weeks ago.’

‘I am grateful to you, Baba Yasaval, for your loyalty and bravery in coming to me like this. You are right. It is a terrible thing that my half-brothers should plot against me, and so soon after our father’s death. Have you mentioned this to anyone else?’

‘No one, Majesty.’

‘Good. Make sure you keep it to yourself. Leave me now. I need to consider what to do.’

Baba Yasaval hesitated, then instead of departing threw himself on the ground before Humayun. He looked up with tears in his eyes. ‘Majesty, my son, my foolish son . . . spare him . . . he sincerely repents his errors. He knows – and I know – how much he deserves your wrath and punishment, but I beg you, show him mercy . . .’

‘Baba Yasaval. To show my gratitude to you not only for this information but for all your past services I will not punish your son. His actions were the indiscretions of a simple youth. But keep him close confined till all this is over.’

A tremor seemed to pass through Baba Yasaval and for a moment he closed his eyes. Then he rose and, shaven head bowed, backed slowly away.

As soon as he was alone, Humayun leaped to his feet and seizing



a jewelled cup flung it across the chamber. The fools! The idiots! If his brothers had their way, the Moghuls would quickly return to a nomadic life of petty tribal rivalries and lose their hard-won empire. Where was their sense of destiny, their sense of what they owed their father?

Just five years ago Humayun had ridden by Babur's side as they swept down through the Khyber Pass to glory. His pulses still quickened at the memory of the roar and blood of battle, the odour of his stallion's acrid sweat filling his nostrils, the trumpeting of Sultan Ibrahim's war elephants, the boom of Moghul cannon and the crack of Moghul muskets as these new weapons cut down rank after rank of the enemy. He could still recall the ecstatic joy of victory when – bloodstained sword in hand – he had surveyed the dusty plains of Panipat and realised that Hindustan was Moghul. Now all that was being put at risk.

I'll not have it – this *taktya, takhta*, 'throne or coffin' as our people called it when we ruled in Central Asia. We're in a new land and must adopt new ways or we'll lose everything, Humayun thought. Reaching inside his robe for the key he wore round his neck on a slender gold chain, he rose and went to a domed casket in a corner of the chamber. He unlocked it, pushed back the lid and quickly found what he was seeking – a flowered silk bag secured with a twist of gold cord. He opened the bag slowly, almost reverently, and drew out the contents – a large diamond whose translucent brilliance made him catch his breath each time he saw it. 'My Koh-i-Nur, my Mountain of Light,' he whispered, running his fingers over the shining facets. Presented to him by an Indian princess whose family he had protected in the chaos after the battle of Panipat, it possessed a flawless beauty that always seemed to him the embodiment of everything the Moghuls had come to India to find – glory and magnificence to outshine even the Shah of Persia.

Still holding the gem, Humayun returned to his chair to think. He sat brooding and alone until the sound of the court timekeeper, the *ghariyali*, striking his brass disc in the courtyard below to signal the end of his *pahar* – his watch – reminded him that night was falling.

This was his first major test, he realised, and he would rise to it. Whatever his personal feelings – at this moment he'd like to take all of his half-brothers by the neck in turn and throttle the life from them – he must do nothing rash, nothing to show that the plot had been betrayed. Baba Yasaval's request for a private audience would have been noticed. If only his grandfather Baisanghar, or his vizier Kasim, who had been one of his father's most trusted advisers, were here. But the two older men had accompanied Babur's funeral cortège to Kabul to oversee his burial there. They would not return for some months. His father had once spoken to him of the burden of kingship, the loneliness it brought. For the first time, Humayun was beginning to understand what Babur had meant. He knew that he and he alone must decide what to do, and until then he must keep his own counsel.

Feeling the need to calm himself, Humayun decided to pass the night with his favourite among his concubines – a pliant, full-mouthed, grey-eyed young woman from the mountains north of Kabul. With her silken skin and breasts like young pomegranates, Salima knew how to transport his body and patently enjoyed doing so. Perhaps her caresses would also help clear his mind and order his thoughts and thus lighten the road ahead, which seemed suddenly and ominously dark.

Three hours later, Humayun lay back naked against a silk-covered bolster in Salima's room in the *haram*. His muscular body, scarred as befitted a tested warrior, gleamed with the almond oil she had teasingly massaged into his skin until, unable to wait a moment longer, he had pulled her to him. Her robe of transparent pale yellow muslin – a product of Humayun's new lands where weavers spun cloth of such delicacy they gave it names like 'breath of wind' or 'dawn dew' – lay discarded on the flower-patterned carpet. Though the pleasure Salima had given him and her response to him had been as intense as ever and Humayun had relaxed, his mind kept drifting back to Baba Yasaval's revelations, re-igniting his anger and frustration.

'Bring me some rosewater to drink, Salima, please.'

She returned moments later with a silver cup inlaid with roundels

of rose quartz. The water – chilled by ice carried down in huge slabs from the northern mountains by camel trains – smelled good. From a small wooden box beside the bed, Humayun extracted some opium pellets and dropped them into the cup, where they dissolved in a milky swirl.

‘Drink.’ He raised the cup to Salima’s lips and watched her swallow. He wished her to share his pleasure, but somewhat to his shame he also had another purpose in doing so. His father had nearly died when Buwa – mother of his defeated enemy Sultan Ibrahim – had tried to poison him in revenge for the death of her son. Since then, Humayun had been wary of anything untasted by others . . .

‘Here, Majesty.’ Salima, lips lusciously moist with rosewater, kissed him and handed him the cup. He drank deeply, willing the opium that in recent weeks had helped blunt his grief and lessen his anxieties to do its work, uncoiling softly through his mind and carrying him to pleasurable oblivion.

But maybe tonight he had taken too much or was expecting too much of its soothing powers. As he lay back, portentous images began forming in his mind. The gleaming blue domes and slender minarets of an exquisite city rose before him. Though he’d been too young to remember his brief time there, he knew it was Samarkand, capital of his great ancestor Timur and the city his father had captured, lost and yearned for all his life. From Babur’s vivid accounts, Humayun knew he was standing in the Registan Square in the centre of the city. A crouching orange tiger on the soaring gateway before him was coming alive as he watched, ears flattened, lips drawn back over pointed teeth, ready to spit defiance. Its eyes were green as Kamran’s.

Suddenly, Humayun felt himself on the tiger’s back, wrestling it with all his strength, feeling its sinewy body twist beneath him. He gripped hard with his thighs, smelling its hot breath as, arcing its body and swinging its head from side to side, it fought to dislodge him. Humayun locked his legs yet tighter around the animal and felt its flanks writhe and plunge anew. He would not be thrown off. He leaned forward, sliding his hands beneath its body. His fingers encountered flesh that was soft and smooth and within it a warm,

rhythmic pulse, the source of its life force. As he began to grip harder, to press and to thrust, the beast's breath came in jerky, rasping gasps.

'Majesty . . . please . . .'

Another, weaker voice was trying to reach him. It, too, was gasping for breath. Opening his eyes and looking down through his dilated pupils, Humayun saw not a wild tiger but Salima. Her body, like his, was running with sweat as if the moment of climax were approaching. But though he was indeed possessing her, his hands were grasping the soft flesh of her breasts as if Salima were the ravaging beast he was fighting to subdue. He relaxed his grip but continued to thrust harder and harder until finally they both climaxed and collapsed.

'Salima, I'm sorry. I should not have used you in such a way. I felt thoughts of conquest mingling with my desire for you.'

'No need for sorrow – your love-making filled me with pleasure. You were in another world and I was willingly serving you in that world as I do in this. I know you would never intentionally hurt me. Now make love to me again, this time more softly.'

Humayun gladly complied. Later, as he lay back exhausted and still dazed by opium, *haram* attendants came to sponge his body with cool scented water. Finally, wrapped in Salima's arms, he found sleep. This time he dreamed of nothing at all, waking only when the soft light began shafting through the latticed window of the room. As he watched the strengthening rays play over the carved sandstone ceiling above him, he knew what he must do. His battle of wills with the tiger had told him. He was the ruler. He should not always be gentle. Respect was won by knowing when to be strong too.



'Majesty. Your orders have been carried out.'

From his throne on its marble dais in the audience chamber – the *darbar* hall – with his courtiers and commanders positioned around him in strict order of precedence, Humayun looked down at the captain of his bodyguard. He already knew what had happened – the officer had come to him soon after midnight – but it was important that all the court should hear it and witness the scene about to take place.

‘You have done well. Tell the court what occurred.’

‘As Your Majesty instructed, I and a detachment of guards arrested your half-brothers last night while they were feasting in Prince Kamran’s apartments.’

As a collective gasp went up around him, Humayun smiled inwardly. He had chosen his time well. Since Baba Yasaval’s warning he had kept safely within the fort. Then a week ago a consignment of red wine from Ghazni, the finest the kingdom of Kabul could produce, heady and rich, had arrived by mule train – a timely gift from his mother’s father, Baisanghar. Knowing Kamran’s love of wine, Humayun had presented some to him. As he had guessed, Kamran’s invitation to all his brothers to join him in drinking it had not been long in coming. Humayun himself had declined it graciously but Askari and even young Hindal, not yet of an age to enjoy drinking but doubtless flattered to be in company with those who did, had hurried eagerly to the party. With all three together and off their guard, the opportunity for decisive action had been perfect.

‘Did my brothers resist?’

‘Prince Kamran drew his dagger and wounded one of my men, slicing off part of his ear, but he was soon overcome. The others did not try to fight.’

Humayun’s gaze swept the faces before him. ‘Some days ago, I received word of a plot. My half-brothers intended to kidnap me and force me to relinquish some of my lands – perhaps even kill me.’ His courtiers looked suitably shocked. How many were play-acting, Humayun wondered. Some, at least, must have known of the conspiracy, even tacitly acquiesced in it. A number of the tribal chieftains who had accompanied Babur on his conquest of Hindustan had never adjusted to their new home. They disliked this new land with its featureless, seemingly endless plains, hot, gritty winds and drenching monsoon rains. In their hearts, they longed for the snow-dusted mountains and cool rivers of their homelands over the Khyber Pass and beyond. Quite a few would have welcomed an opportunity to collude with the conspirators that would enable them to return home richly rewarded. Well, let them sweat a bit now . . .

‘Fetch my brothers before me so that I can question them as to their associates.’

The silence was absolute as Humayun and his courtiers waited. At last, the sound of metal chains scraping the stone slabs of the courtyard beyond the audience chamber broke the silence. Looking up, Humayun saw his brothers enter in a stumbling line, half dragged along by the guards. Kamran was first, his hawk-nosed, thin-lipped face showing nothing but disdain. He might have shackles on his legs but the proud carriage of his head showed he had no intention of pleading. Askari, shorter and slighter, was another matter. His unshaven face was creased with terror and his small eyes looked beseechingly at Humayun from beneath his dark brows. Hindal, at first half hidden behind his two elder brothers, was gazing about him, his young face beneath his tangle of hair blank rather than fearful, as if what was happening were beyond him

As the guards stepped back from them, Askari and Hindal, though hampered by their chains, prostrated themselves full length on the ground before Humayun in the traditional obeisance of the *korunush*. After several moments’ hesitation, and with a contemptuous half-smile Kamran did the same.

‘On your feet.’

Humayun waited until all three had struggled to stand. Now that he could study them more closely he saw that Kamran had a dark bruise on the side of his face.

‘What have you to say for yourselves? You are my half-brothers. Why did you scheme against me?’

‘We didn’t . . . it’s not true . . .’ Askari’s tone, shrill and nervous, was unconvincing.

‘You’re lying. It’s written on your face. If you do so again, I’ll have you put to the torture. Kamran, as the eldest, answer my question. Why did you seek to betray me?’

Kamran’s eyes – green as their father Babur’s had been – were slits as he looked up at Humayun on his glittering throne. ‘The plot was my idea – punish me, not them. It was the only way to redress the wrong done to us. As you yourself said, we are all Babur’s sons. Doesn’t the blood of Timur flow through all our veins? And through

our grandmother Kutlugh Nigar the blood of Genghis Khan as well? Yet we have been left with nothing except to be your lackeys, to be sent hither and thither according to your whims. You treat us as slaves, not princes.'

'And you behave – all of you, not just you, Kamran – like common criminals, not brothers. Where is your sense of loyalty to our dynasty, if not to me?' Glancing up at an intricately carved wooden grille set high in the wall to the right of his throne, Humayun caught the flash of a dark eye. Doubtless Khanzada and probably his mother Maham were observing him from the little gallery behind it where the royal women, unseen themselves, could watch and listen to the business of the court. Perhaps Gulrukh and Dildar were also there, waiting in trembling anticipation for the sentence he was about to pronounce on their sons.

But now that the moment had come, Humayun felt strangely reluctant. Even half an hour ago he had been so certain what he would do – ruthless as Timur, he would order Kamran's and Askari's immediate execution and send Hindal to perpetual imprisonment in some far-off fortress. Yet looking down at the three of them – Kamran so arrogant and defiant, Askari and young Hindal plainly terrified – Humayun felt his anger ebbing. Their father had been dead only a few months, and how could he ignore Babur's dying words? *Do nothing against your brothers, however much you think they might deserve it.* Just as in love-making, there was a time to be rigorous and a time to be gentle.

Stepping down from his throne, Humayun walked slowly over to his brothers and, starting with Kamran, embraced them. The trio stood before him, swaying slightly, expressions confused as they searched his face for the meaning of his actions. 'It is not fitting that we brothers should quarrel. I do not wish to spill the blood of our house into the earth of this new land of ours – it would be a bad omen for our dynasty. Swear your loyalty to me and you shall live. I will also give you provinces to govern which, though part of the empire, you shall rule as your own, subject only to me.'

Around him, Humayun caught sounds first of astonishment and then of approval rising from his courtiers and commanders, and pride

flooded through him. This was real greatness. This was truly how an emperor should act – crushing dissent but then showing magnanimity. As he embraced his brothers a second time, grateful tears shimmered in Askari's and Hindal's eyes. But Kamran's green ones remained dry, and his expression was bleak and unfathomable.