

PROLOGUE

Five thousand years ago

The battle was over, but its venom lingered in the air.

In the cold afternoon sun, a group of war-weary men stood in a clump on the dusty battlefield. Bodies were strewn around them, but they seemed immune to the sight and smell of festering corpses.

All their attention was riveted on the two men at the centre. Both were well-built, battle-hardened and in their mid-forties. Their right hands were outstretched in the act of summoning a weapon while the left held their bows at the ready. Even the supreme concentration of summoning could not disguise their utter hatred for each other; it hung like a malevolent shroud over the gathering.

A mediator stood between them, desperation etched on his face, a single jaunty peacock feather standing out in stark contrast to his bloodstained yellow robes and his tense stance. 'Kurukshetra is over and its outcome

cannot be altered. Duryodhan is dead, Yudhishtir victorious—there is nothing to be gained by this. Your personal enmity is putting thousands of other lives in jeopardy. Do you realise the consequence of summoning the Brahmashir weapons?’

Neither man moved a muscle, their eyes locked into each other.

‘Arjun, Ashwatthama, recall the weapons while there is still time. If you release them, there will be nothing left to rule—no Hastinapur, no Indraprastha, no subjects, no progeny—just a barren landscape where there was once a thriving kingdom. Is this what you fought for? Yours was a righteous war, fought so far for loyalty and obligation. Why sully it with vendetta now?’

With a sigh, as if it caused him great pain, the man on the left lowered his right hand and closed his eyes momentarily, chanting under his breath. Arjun had come to his senses, it seemed. The group relaxed somewhat.

A split second later, a flash rent the air in two and Ashwatthama’s right hand held a glowing arrow. He calmly straddled it on his bow, the large blue gem on his forehead glinting in the setting sun.

Krishna spoke in a hurry, ‘Ashwatthama, this weapon will let loose the apocalypse if you use it. Redirect it.’

The assembled company gasped in horror. It was

already too late. Everyone knew that Ashwatthama did not have the ability to recall the Brahmashir. Any one of the Brahmashir weapons could destroy their kingdom, and this one would have to be released somewhere or it would combust on the spot, taking everyone with it.

Krishna's voice rang out again, speaking fast, with clear instructions:

‘Ashwatthama! There is very little time, so listen carefully. You have to think of a target to which you can direct the Brahmashir. To the northeast of where you are standing, there is a crop field about five hundred yards away. If you direct your weapon there, no lives will be lost, although the ground will stay barren for a generation. But that is the only safe way out for all of us. Do not delay; do it now before the weapon self-combusts.’

For the first time in all this while, Ashwatthama's face betrayed an emotion: a bitter, twisted smile glided across it as he closed his eyes. Every person present turned his eyes in the direction of the crop field, waiting for the telltale mushroom-shaped cloud. Nothing. Just silence.

Then a wail crashed upon their ears—swelling up as more voices joined in. The dreaded cloud had appeared, but over a tent in the Pandav camp. An old woman ran out, dishevelled, mad with grief, flinging

herself at Arjun as she wept. Arjun felt himself go cold with foreboding. He knew whose tent it was.

‘Lost, lost—the last lamp of Hastinapur, Uttara’s son, your grandson—snuffed out even before he lived! The price of fratricide, and you deserve it, all of you! This is truly the end. The Kurus are a dead lot from this day on. Why, oh why did you fight this cursed war?’

She was still ranting and sobbing but Arjun heard no more. The blood pounding in his ears, he leapt at Ashwatthama’s throat with his naked sword.

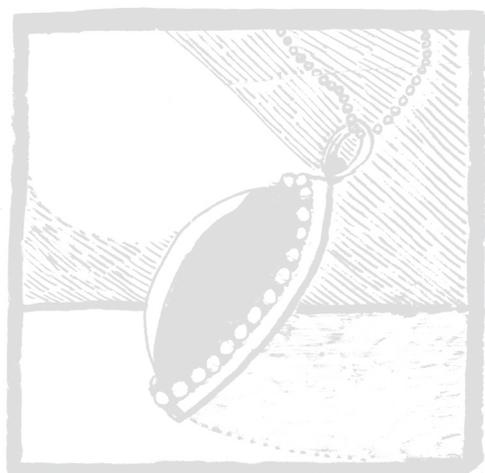
Someone else had got there first.

Quivering with rage, Krishna wrenched the gem from Ashwatthama’s forehead, his voice ringing out with terrifying resonance:

‘Ashwatthama, for this deliberate, premeditated act of spite, I curse you: you will roam the earth till the end of time, a leper, shunned by all, with a permanently festering wound on your forehead, in continuous pain till the end of the earth. You will know no shelter, no peace, no friends—you will weep for death but it will not arrive.’

On the handsome warrior’s forehead there was now a bleeding wound the size of a gold coin. Red, sore blotches were appearing rapidly on his alabaster skin.

Apocalypse had been averted. It had vent all its fury on one man.



PART ONE

Notes from an Immortal

I, Vibhishan, past Lord of the Sinhala land of Lanka, immortal by the grace of my Lord Ram, and the general of the wordkeepers, write the following.

I had to meet her in spite of the circumstances. I was worried. We had suffered losses in the past five years that I, as a general, should be ashamed of. Rasool Elahi was first, ambushed by two demons stuck together like Siamese twins. They couldn't kill him, of course, but they seriously weakened us by taking his amulet. Then a year later, it was my kin, the Sinhalese agent. He held out until his wife was killed in front of him, and he had to surrender the amulet to save his and his daughter's lives. It was more important to live to fight another day. Then the wordkeeper from Bangalore didn't respond, so I had to take some action. We were being systematically hunted down by our opponents. Something was wrong.

Before I could act, the enemy struck a body blow. The wordkeeper was taken; abducted right under my nose. That left my final hope, the new wordkeeper.

So I waited and watched, trying to intercept this child—provided she wished to accept the challenge thrown at her. I had known her clan right from the beginning and had worked closely with them, from her great-great-grandmother onwards. Brave women, all of them. By rights, this girl should be a brave one as well, although at first glimpse, I have to admit I was sorely disappointed. I was thinking of approaching her and gradually introducing myself, but alas! Yet again, I proved to be unworthy of the responsibility my lord had placed on my shoulders.

ANYA

Anya realised with a start that she missed her mother, and was thoroughly surprised.

Anya's parents were both busy professionals with crazy travel schedules. Not that she was complaining. What with her school, her tutor, bharatnatyam classes and martial arts lessons, Anya was a very busy person in her own right. She largely preferred to leave them alone and to be left alone, thank you very much, not that anyone ever asked her for her opinion on the matter.

Even so, she, Daddy and Ma made it a point to be home together for the weekends. It didn't feel right that Ma was away at a conference and not at home, this Sunday. She had left the previous day.

'Did Ma call?' she asked her father casually, careful to keep her voice light. She and her father were sitting at the dining table for breakfast, tucking into steaming hot idlis and coconut chutney.

'She reached her hotel last night, sweetheart;

have some more idlis,' said her father, barely looking up from the Sunday papers. Another half a dozen unread newspapers lay neatly stacked to his right. Why anyone would want to read newspapers, when there were tablets and TV, Anya couldn't understand. It was 2028, after all, not the twentieth century.

But Daddy was like that. He worked hard all week and was supremely lazy on a Sunday, when he read newspaper after newspaper—both national and from across the world. If aliens attacked the earth on a Sunday he'd probably not know until the following morning. He was married to the Sunday papers, in her mother's opinion.

Anya stretched like a cat, her stomach full after the heavy breakfast, before stopping short with a frown. Sunday was also Miss Murthy's day, shit! Miss Murthy was one of those boring tutors people should legally be allowed to strangle. Her voice squeaked. So did her flat shoes. She taught with no imagination whatsoever, but by sticking to exam questions like a leech, she managed to get good grades out of her wards. Two hours of torture every Sunday with Miss Murthy ensured that Anya had both good grades and the right level of cynicism about the education system, a life skill in itself. She excused herself, got up from the breakfast table and headed to the shower adjacent

to her bedroom. The sooner she got it over with, the better.

It was then that she noticed the necklace. It was lying behind her shampoo bottle on the bathroom shelf. Her mother wore very little jewellery as a rule, but for as long as she could remember, Anya had seen her wear this necklace and her wedding band. She had once asked if it was an astrological thing, fearing a long lecture from her mother who was a dyed-in-the-wool sceptic. It looked like one—rather functional and a bit crude. But Ma had just laughed and said that it had belonged to her mother, and her grandmother before that. And that Anya would have it one day. An heirloom.

It was a simple necklace, a chain of small silver balls with a pendant hanging from it. The pendant was made of silver and had an old-fashioned ridged pattern on the side. It was oval, like the wickedly gleaming dark red stone inside it. The stone always grabbed Anya's attention. She fancied she could see other colours swirling in its depths. Today it looked maroon.

Why was it here? Ma never even took it off, let alone forgot it. She picked it up and put it away in her secret hiding place in the bathroom, the jar of washing powder. The necklace disappeared in the tiny white grains. Chop, chop, Anya—shower first—she told herself. Otherwise you'll need a couple

of toothpicks to prop up your eyelids when Miss Morphine arrives.

Her tutor looked at Anya's answer sheet and sighed. The opaque green, expressionless eyes looked at Anya, who stared back mutinously.

'Just write the answer in the textbook, child,' she cajoled. 'Why do you want to write so much more when both answers will give you an A?'

'I have a name,' muttered Anya under her breath.

'Pardon, dear?'

'I wrote those extra facts because I happen to find them relevant. I've given two extra examples of Akbar's liberal policies which are not even mentioned in the textbook.' Anya didn't bother to reiterate her earlier point.

'The Board-approved research texts are *Medieval India: A Guide* by Dr Rubina Singh and *Akbar: Flawed Genius* by Claudius Doyle, and don't roll your eyes at me, dear,' continued Miss Murthy, unperturbed. 'No other research will be considered for marks,' she added crisply.

Anya stifled a snort and looked out of the window. Her two hours were nearly up. Why rock the boat? She nodded.

For the next twenty minutes, while Miss Murthy read an extract in an unbelievably boring monotone, Anya's mind drifted as she sat and watched her tutor. Although dressed in a silk sari, Miss Murthy had a European complexion, just a shade more yellow than pink. Green eyes peered through thick-rimmed, almost opaque, high-powered glasses. Sandy hair, not blonde, but not the typical Indian dark brown or black either. Anya labelled her tutor's colouring as 'Caucasian; almost.'

'Miss Murthy,' she blurted out. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Hem?' Miss Murthy cleared her throat and blinked. She was not used to being interrupted while reading out loud. She stared blankly at Anya for some time, and then said eventually, 'Ask away, dear.'

'You don't look typically Indian—you know, brown skin, dark hair, dark eyes—are you half something else?' Anya was not happy with how nosy she sounded, but she plodded on nonetheless. Life's too short.

Miss Murthy turned a strange shade, half pink, half yellow—Anya thought she was going to throw up, until she realised that her tutor was blushing! She stammered shyly, fluttering her sandy eyelashes, 'Well, em, I'm half Irish; my late mother was Irish.'

That's how I'm so fair.'

Anya smiled her thank you. Vanity, she reflected, was a wonderful thing. For the next ten minutes, Miss Murthy didn't ask her a single question and Anya let her mind drift blissfully, not listening to a word that was being said.

The best part about Sundays were the afternoons. Anya loved the freedom of hanging around, doing nothing. Today she was swinging on her bungalow gate.

The city of Bangalore was dusty, and filled with skyscrapers and sprawling apartment complexes. It had succumbed to the postcolonial pressure of being reborn as Bengaluru, but Anya loved the old name and refused to use the new one. Old-timers in the city—people her parents' age or older—would sigh and look meaningfully at each other when they talked of the old Bangalore, the garden city with its quaint bungalows, where the climate was pleasant throughout the year and so were people's manners. Then they sighed and talked about concrete jungles and the water mafia and the lines in front of posh complexes, where residents queued up with buckets.

Anya didn't mind. She loved this vibrant new city and her life here, warts and all, and didn't particularly care about times gone by.

She and her parents lived in one such posh

complex full of bungalows with garages and gardens and all the mod cons possible, which were considerable, if you were willing to pay. *They* didn't have any water problems, thank goodness. Anya quite enjoyed being rich. A flat is pleasant in its own way—she'd been to a few of her friends' flats—but this was just so much better.

She pushed hard with her left foot, making sure this last swing was a really good one, and braked with the right foot once she'd reached the second gate. Having secured the latch, Anya looked around with a happy sigh. What next? The huge expanse of the garden beckoned and she walked towards it, trying out a little tune unsuccessfully. Anya was a terrible singer, hence her parents' focus on bharatnatyam and taekwondo. She walked in her loose-limbed, athletic way towards the garden. Anya had her father's walk and her mother's complexion.

The garden was her mother's special project. Ma had green fingers. Unlike most self-proclaimed gardeners, she hoed, weeded and pruned her own plants, and they thrived under her care. Every Sunday afternoon, she was to be found in the garden, humming away, talking to her plants. Their garden wasn't one of those ultra-manicured ones with impeccable lawns, but something out of a fairy tale. It was a beautifully undulating space with large trees and almost felt like a wood if you were in the middle.

Anya continued to hum tunelessly as she picked her way through the mulched path at the perimeter; and tripped over something.

She frowned and stopped in her tracks. Yet another rich neighbour who didn't think twice before littering. Her mother always told her she was overreacting when she ranted about people throwing plastic bags in their garden. But honestly, what's the point of living in a fancy place if you don't even have the sense to keep it clean? Clucking with annoyance, she bent down and picked up the offending item.

It was a cheap blue plastic bag, one among countless others strewn across the entire country. This one was recyclable. Wait, there was something solid inside. Anya put her hand in and pulled out a standard-sized glass medicine bottle, the kind that holds multivitamin capsules. It had probably been used to weigh the bag down, so it would land in the right place instead of floating in the air. But why throw an empty bag, and why take so much trouble to make sure it landed just here? Anya gave the bag a good shake to see if anything else came out. Zip. Just bin it, she thought.

Hang on. What were those black marks? Someone had scribbled inside the bag. She turned it inside out, half expecting a rude message, some idiot's idea of a practical joke. She frowned as she read aloud:

Anya, I am taken. Open my red locket and follow the code. Trust no one. Not even Daddy or me.—Ma.

Bullshit.

Did people really think she would fall for that? All I have to do is call Ma, you stupid jerks, she thought. She made a rude gesture in the air with the hand that held the medicine bottle. It rattled. There was something inside. Something glinted in the sunlight. She put in her forefinger and thumb and pulled out a wedding band. It was gold, with an engraving on the inside which said: *Tanya*.

Anya's heart leaped to her mouth at the sight of the familiar object. She had played with her mother's wedding band a million times.