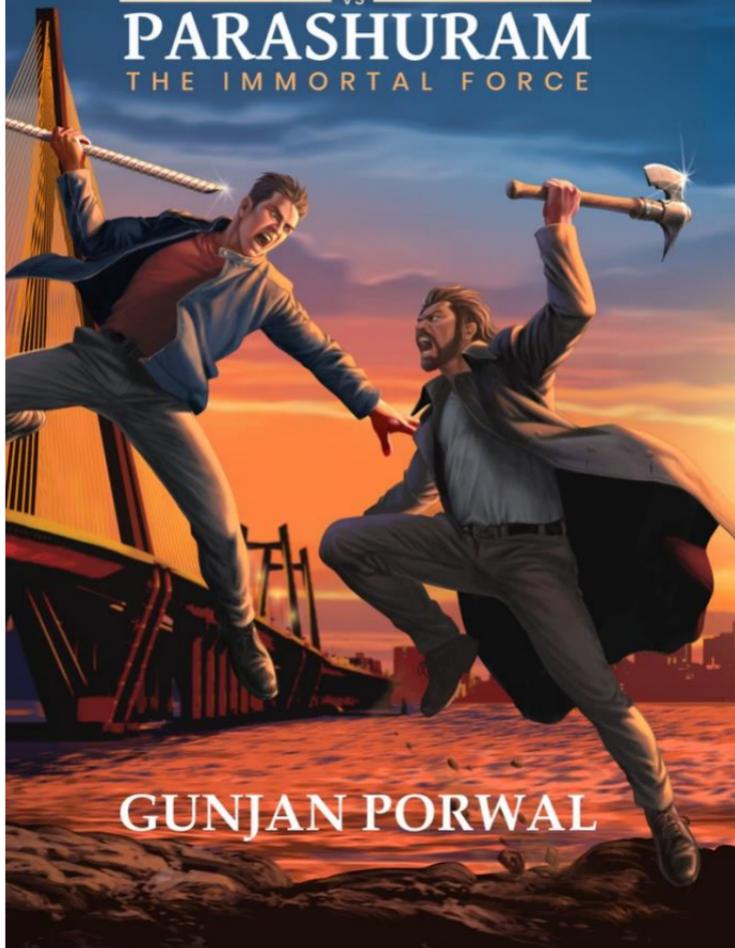


By the author of 'Ashwatthama's Redemption' series

ASHWATTHAMA VS PARASHURAM THE IMMORTAL FORCE



Gunjan Porwal is the author of the bestselling *Ashwatthama's Redemption* series. His debut book *Ashwatthama's Redemption: The Rise of Dandak* was published in 2018 and received good reviews. His second book *Ashwatthama's Redemption: The Bow of Rama* still ranks highly on the bestseller list.

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ASHWATTHAMA

VS

PARASHURAM

THE IMMORTAL FORCE

GUNJAN PORWAL

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For all caged and tortured animals and birds,
This world belongs to you too.
We need better laws to protect you.

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The Immortals: An Introduction

Vyasa

Vyasa, the immortal sage, is one of the first Immortals in Hindu mythology. Vyasa is not a single person or entity. According to the Vishnu Purana (Book 3, Chapter 3, 272.1), the universe is a cyclic phenomenon that is created and destroyed repeatedly. Right now, we are in the 28th Manavatara, a cycle of 4 yugas, each of proportionately declining morality in society. The four yugas are Satyayuga, Tretayuga, Dwaparayuga and Kaliyuga.

This is what the Vishnu Purana says regarding Vyasa:

In every third world age (Dvapara), Vishnu, in the person of Vyasa, divides the Veda, which is actually one, into many portions, for the benefit of mankind. Observing the limited perseverance, energy and application of mortals, he makes the Veda fourfold to suit their capacities; and the bodily form he assumes in order to affect that classification is known by the name Veda-Vyasa.

Of the different Vyasas in the present Manavatara and the branches which they have taught, you shall have an account. Twenty-eight times have the Vedas been arranged by the great rishis in the Vaivasvata Manavatara, and consequently, eight and twenty Vyasas who, in the respective periods, divided the Veda into four parts, and passed on. The first sectioning was made by Svayambhu (Brahma) himself; in the second, the arranger of the Veda (Vyasa) was Prajapati... and so it continued, up to twenty-eight times.

Thus, Vyasa, like Indra, is a title that needs to be earned. Every Manavatara has its own Vyasa.

In the current Manavatara, Vyasa is the son of Sage Parashara and Satyavati, before the latter met Shantanu. As per legend, the sage was once in a hurry to cross the river Yamuna and was ferried across by Satyavati, the daughter of a fisherman, on a boat. Enamoured by her beauty, Parashara wished to make love to her. However, Satyavati refused, saying that somebody might see them and that she did not want to lose her virginity.

A lascivious Parashara then enveloped the island in a dense fog. Allaying her second misgiving, the sage promised her that Satyavati's virginity would be restored after the love-making session.

And so, Vyasa was born, in the manner of a miracle, almost immediately, to Satyavati. Parashara took the newborn with him, to raise the boy.

Vyasa's role in the Mahabharata grew more prominent when he was called upon by Satyavati, after her son Vichitravirya's death, to sire children from the latter's wives, Ambika and Ambalika. The sons born to Vyasa were Dhritrashtra and Pandu, the future fathers of the Kauravas and Pandavas, respectively.

In a nutshell, Vyasa was the highly revered sage attributed as the one who compiled the Vedas.

Parashuram

Parashuram, the sixth avatar of Vishnu, was a Brahmin, sent to rid the earth of corrupt Kshatriyas.

Born to Jamadagni and Renuka, Parashuram was famous for his aggressive streak. Although born a Brahmin, he was inclined towards the Kshatriya way of life. His weapon was the axe (parashu), a divine weapon he obtained from Shiva.

Ordinarily, Parashuram would not have picked up weapons, had it not been for the king Kritavarya Arjun (different from the Arjun of the Mahabharata), who came to their ashram and asked for the wish-fulfilling cow Surabhi from Parashuram's father. When his request was denied, the enraged king ransacked the ashram and took the cow away by force, in the process severely injuring Jamadagni.

A furious Parashuram rode into the Mahishmati kingdom and killed the king after a fierce battle. However, when Parashuram returned, his father Jamadagni was displeased with him for having killed the king, and asked him to go on a pilgrimage in order to absolve himself of his sins.

Meanwhile, the king's three sons arrived with an army, ransacked Jamadagni's ashram and beheaded the sage. Upon his return, a livid Parashuram rode into Mahishmati again, this time killing every warrior in the kingdom.

After that carnage, Parashuram travelled the earth twenty-one times, killing corrupt warriors in different lands. Eventually though, he became disillusioned with all the

bloodletting, so he threw his axe into the Southern Ocean. Then he went to the Himalayas to meditate, and thereafter lived a life of non-violence.

Parashuram appears briefly during Lord Ram's reign, after the latter's wedding with Devi Sita. He gave Lord Ram the Saranga bow, which he had received from his father Jamadagni. The bow was gifted from Brahma to Ruchik, Jamadagni's father. It was with this bow that Lord Ram later killed Ravan. The passing of the bow from Parashuram to Ram was also symbolic of the passing of Vishnu's divinity from the sixth to the seventh avatar.

Parashuram is an Avesh avatar, which implies that unlike other avatars, Vishnu did not descend Himself, but entered the soul of another man.

Ashwatthama

Ashwatthama, the son of Dronacharya, was one of the fiercest warriors in the Mahabharata. Born with a gem on his forehead that granted him freedom from all beings 'lower than humans' and kept him free from hunger, disease and thirst, Ashwatthama was a demigod, an avatar of Shiva.

Dronacharya, the Brahmin who was trained by Parashuram, did severe penance for years to obtain a son whose valour would match that of Shiva himself. Although Dronacharya's favourite pupil was Arjun, he taught his son Ashwatthama too, how to master divine weapons. With that skill, Ashwatthama became one of the fiercest warriors of his time, a Maharathi, possessing many divine weapons such as the Brahmastra and Narayanastra, among others.

Ashwatthama was one of the saner people in the volatile Kaurava camp. He suggested that Duryodhana enter into a peace treaty with the Pandavas, rather than go to war. He loved both the Pandavas and Kauravas equally, but because his father Dronacharya was bound by oath to protect the Hastinapur kingdom, Ashwatthama too, had to fight on the Kaurava side.

Ashwatthama was not without flaws. He was one of the warriors who attacked Arjun's son Abhimanyu, going against the rules of war which stated that one warrior could not be attacked simultaneously by two or more warriors.

Due to the events of the eighteenth night of the war, Ashwatthama fell from grace and is seen as one of the villains of the Mahabharata. He was the last commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army, after the previous commander-in-chief Shalya was killed by Yudhisthir. Taking the defeat to heart, and desperate to be avenged for his father's Dronacharya's death by treachery, Ashwatthama conducted a massacre in the Pandava camp, thereby setting up a confrontation between Arjun and himself. It was at this confrontation that, for the first time in any battlefield, two Brahmastras were pitted against each other, endangering the entire world.

Failing to retrieve his Brahmastra, Ashwatthama subsequently tried to kill Uttara's unborn son, an act which earned him Krishna's wrath and curse - a curse to wander the earth till the end of Kaliyuga.

Ashwatthama, one of the fiercest warriors of the Mahabharata, thus, became the only Immortal who became so by a curse.

Mahabali

Mahabali, the son of Virochan and grandson of Prahlad, was the king of the lush green kingdom of Kerala. An asura king from the lineage of Hiranyakashyapu, King Mahabali ruled Kerala for a very long time.

Mahabali waged many wars against the devas, defeating them and conquering heaven and earth. The devas then went to Vishnu, asking him to intervene and kill the king. But the Lord refused since Mahabali was a staunch devotee of Vishnu, just like his grandfather Prahlad had been. He could not kill his own devotee.

However, Lord Vishnu assured the devas that he would rid the kingdom of King Mahabali. So, he took birth in a Brahmin family as a dwarf, a boy named Vamana.

To establish his supremacy over earth, the asura guru Shukracharya advised King Mahabali to conduct an Ashwamedh yagna, which would entail letting a horse loose over the entire continent, with an army contingent accompanying the creature. Whichever kingdoms let the horse pass through unmolested, would, in effect, agree to the sovereignty of King Mahabali. The ones which did not would have to wage war against the king.

Shukracharya advised Mahabali to conduct a total of a hundred Ashvamedha yagnas, after which his supremacy over the continent would be established. After the ninety-ninth yagna, Vishnu approached Mahabali in the form of the dwarf

Brahmin, Vamana, and asked the king for a gift. Shukracharya recognised the deception, and warned Mahabali. However, being the generous and benevolent king that he was, Mahabali told Vamana to ask for whatever he pleased, and promised to give it.

Vamana asked for 'three steps of land' from Mahabali, to which he agreed. Vamana then transformed into the *Trivikram* form of Vishnu, and placed his first foot down, covering all of heaven. He placed his second foot down and it covered all of earth. There was no place left for the third footstep. Mahabali realised that Vamana was none other than Vishnu and offered his own head for Vishnu's third step.

Thus, Mahabali had to relinquish earth and heaven but was rewarded by Vishnu, who made him the king of Sutala, a kingdom said to be more beautiful than heaven.

Kripacharya

One of the last few remaining survivors of the Mahabharata war from the Kaurava side, Kripacharya was the teacher of the Hastinapur royal scions, and taught them warfare before Dronacharya came along.

Kripacharya was born to Saravana and Janapadi. He and his sister Kripa, who later became mother to Ashwatthama, were adopted by King Shantanu.

After the Mahabharata war, Kripacharya wanted to retire to the forest with Dhritarashtra, but the latter advised him to stay with Yudhisthir. When the Pandavas too abdicated the throne and retired to the Himalayas, Kripacharya became teacher to Parikshit, son of Abhimanyu and king of Hastinapur. This was after Yudhisthir abdicated the throne, thirty-six years after the Mahabharata war.

Kripacharya was conferred immortality through a boon from Lord Krishna for being impartial in carrying out his duties and staying true to his ethics even in the face of extreme perilous conditions. He was reputed to be extremely righteous and is considered as one of the epitomes of nobility and virtue.

Markandeya

Sage Markandeya, born of Rishi Mrikandu and his wife Marudmati, was born with only a short span of life initially. The couple worshipped Shiva and had asked for the boon of a son. The Lord complied but with the condition that they could either get a righteous son with a short life span of sixteen years or one of low intellect but blessed with a long life. The couple chose the former.

Markandeya grew up to be a highly intelligent child, with deep knowledge of the Vedas and the Puranas. Being an ardent devotee of Shiva, the boy used to worship the Lord in the form of a Shivlinga.

As the day of his foretold death arrived, the God of Death Yamaraj descended to claim Markandeya's soul. However, as he threw the noose to lasso the boy's neck, the rope swerved and encircled the Shivlinga instead. That was all that was needed for Shiva to become enraged. He burst out of the Shivlinga (reminiscent of Lord Vishnu's Narasimha avatar bursting out of a pillar to kill Hiranyakashyapu), and engaged in a battle with Yamaraj. The God of Death was defeated and went back empty-handed.

Meanwhile, the young boy was near death, having been struck by Yamaraj earlier. Shiva then revived him, and granted him the boon that he would live forever, as an Immortal.

Vibhishan

Vibhishan, the younger brother of the mighty king of Lanka, Ravan, was one of the key elements in the defeat of the latter at the hands of Lord Ram.

Blessed with a boon to always be in the service of Lord Vishnu, Vibhishan tried time and again to convince the Lanka king to return Devi Sita to Lord Ram, and avoid going into an all-out battle with him. Angered by his repeated appeals, Ravan banished him from the kingdom and subsequently, Vibhishan took refuge under Lord Ram's wing.

Though the exploits of Vibhishan are not widely known, he was responsible for saving Lakshman's life by suggesting the cure to the *Shakti* weapon shot at the latter by Indrajit. Vibhishan's timely advice turned the tide in favour of the Ayodhya princes and helped them win the war without any major casualties on their side.

Crowned as the king of Lanka by Lord Ram, even before the war between the rakshasas and the *vanar* army led by Sugreev started, Vibhishan was the only one who had attended the coronation of both Lord Ram during the Tretayuga and of Yudhisthir during the Dwaparayuga, after the Mahabharata war.

Vibhishan was blessed to be an Immortal by Lord Ram.

Time travel used to be considered as just science fiction but Einstein's General Theory of Relativity allows for the possibility that we could warp space-time so much that you could go off in a spaceship and come back before you set out.

- Stephen Hawking

The key to immortality is first living a life worth remembering.

- Bruce Lee

PROLOGUE

September 23 1944, 1:45am CET (Central European Time)

Breslau, Poland

Destiny, they say, does not give too many chances.

And neither did Adolf Hitler, the Führer of Germany during World War II.

SS General Rudolf Voss, leader of the black-uniformed elite Nazi corps, knew that. He drummed his fingers nervously on his knees as the convoy zoomed ahead, cutting through a heavy downpour along the stony roads of Breslau, a sleepy ghost town in Poland. Voss knew that failure was not an option. Hitler was counting on this experiment to win the war. Of late, not much had been going their way. This experiment just *had to* turn the tide for the Germans.

The black Volkswagen Kubelwagen sped towards the massive power station atop the erstwhile salt mine of Breslau. Two heavy cooling towers spewed white smoke that sizzled in the rain. Beside the power station stood a massive structure with a ceramic ring supported by pillars. The henge or flytrap, as the structure was called by locals, had been a recent construction. Resembling the prehistoric monument of Stonehenge in Wiltshire, England, it stood by the side of the power station building, guarded by a Flak38 anti-aircraft gun

and dozens of armed soldiers. A Panzer III tank stood idly nearby.

A few yards away from the henge, the vehicle screeched to a halt. Designed especially for the German army, the military jeep idled as the tall and bulky General Voss darted towards the power station.

Spread over five acres, the Wieliczka salt mine in Breslau was the perfect site for carrying out secret military experiments. The entire area had been made off-limits to the few hundred residents who had been forced to abandon the town adjoining the mine, so it served as a perfect decoy for military research. The site was never lit from the outside and during daytime, the Panzer and anti-aircraft gun were camouflaged.

Nazi research installations like these were spread across Europe. Hitler had them deliberately set up scattered across different countries to avoid the facilities being destroyed in a bombing run. The majority of these sites were dedicated to creating Wunderwaffe or secret Nazi super-weapons. After Germany occupied Poland in the fall of 1939, Hitler ordered the salt mine to be converted into a research facility, with round-the-clock security.

Nobody could guess that 1072 feet under the ground, the Nazis were running an experiment that they believed would change the course of the war. Over the years, they had pumped millions of dollars into this experiment.

Reaching the door of the power station building, General Voss waited as two armed soldiers saluted and one of them turned to open the metallic door with a large iron key. The soldier held the door open as the general entered, surveying the dimly-lit room with its humming machines. The power

station was guzzling fuel at an incredible rate, to pump power to whatever experiment was being run in the depths of the mine.

The general cast a quick glance at the maze of metal in front of him. He was filled with anxiety. This was one of the projects the Nazis wanted completed and quickly, at that. The project had made a lot of noise at inception, and rightly so. It was spearheaded directly by General Hans Kammler, Hitler's right-hand man and Rudolf Voss' peer. General Kammler had tasked Voss with building a weapon that would win the war for them. Among the hundreds of ideas that the Nazis had collected from different sources, Voss had picked this one up and proposed it to General Kammler. Hitler had given the project the green light but the construction and setting up at the salt mine had taken many months. However, it seemed that finally the Nazi scientists had managed to create a successful prototype.

This was the night that Rudolf Voss had been waiting for, a chance to reverse fortunes for Germany. And as Germany would raise its flag on the lands of the Allied nations, Rudolf Voss's name would be written in golden words as the inventor of this deadly weapon.



As the soldier unlocked the elevator door using another key, General Voss climbed into it, followed by the soldier. The elevator started with a metallic clink and descended to the basement. The general took a deep breath as darkness enveloped the iron box. Any other person would have been

apprehensive about the rattling ride down to the heart of the forsaken mine but Voss' mind was occupied with the thoughts of the experiment and what it meant to Germany.

The journey seemed never-ending; Voss held the iron bar more as reassurance than for safety. A small bulb illuminated the elevator which was plummeting down a hole carved from stone. Voss felt an uneasiness in his stomach but knew it was the effect of gravity.

After what felt like ages, the elevator finally touched the base. Rudolf Voss climbed out, drenched as much in sweat as rain. A group of men waited for him outside the elevator as he stepped out, and raised their hands in the Nazi salute.

‘Heil Hitler.’

Rudolf Voss reciprocated the salute, casting an uneasy glance down the narrow and dark snaking tunnel. A lone rake, capable of seating six persons, stood waiting for the general. Taking a deep breath, Voss climbed into the rake, followed by some soldiers. The rake started with a screech, slowly picking up speed along the dark tunnel, which was lit by warm white bulbs at frequent intervals. As the rake chugged on the rails, Voss noticed the bloodstains on the walls of the tunnel, the blood of the many Jews who had been commandeered into digging the tunnel in conditions of extreme heat and a suffocating lack of air. Unsurprisingly, many had died during the construction of the mile-long rail track.

But that was not what made the Breslau mine a dreadful place. The site was infamous among the higher Nazi echelons for its experiments on human subjects. Of the different experiments being carried out, human serums were the nastiest ones, resulting in innumerable casualties. The Jews were deemed to be as disposable as lab rats, their lives not

worth a dime. Hundreds of subjects were transported from the nearby concentration camp, given the false hope of freedom, and brought to this mine where a terrible fate awaited them.

A whiff of fresh air brought the general's thoughts back to the present. As the rake came to a stop, Rudolf Voss stepped out hurriedly, thankful that both the rides had been completed without him throwing up. As sweat and water trickled down his forehead and arms, he took off his hat and overcoat. A soldier took them and hung them on a coat rack near the entrance. Voss took a hazmat suit with a face respirator mask attached, and a small oxygen cylinder at the back. He put on the suit without a word. He knew the risks of radiation, having seen flesh liquefying before his eyes.

After donning the suit, Voss strode through the enormous mine, which was like walking inside a cavern plastered with cement on the sides. Traversing the maze of corridors, the general could not stop himself from casting a sidelong glance; many of the chambers had been lined with lead and concrete. Many humans, subjects of the experiments as well as those who were affected by radiation, were often left to die in those chambers.

Crossing the chambers, Rudolf Voss soon reached a massive open area which seemed to be a renovated version of the former mine. He looked at the enormous space, where scores of scientists in suits similar to the one he wore, shuffled around. Large machines adorned different sides of the four-acre space, the size of almost three football fields. It was lit by new, high-powered magnesium lamps installed as high as forty feet on the roof, flooding the entire area with brilliant white light. The general surveyed the surroundings, delighted at the makeover done to the erstwhile mine – it was his own design.

A man in a hazmat suit similar to his, holding a black diary, hurried over to the general, raising the Nazi salute.

‘Welcome, Herr Generalfeldmarschall!’

‘Dr Karl Klauss,’ General Voss said authoritatively in a high tone. ‘I hope I will not be disappointed today. You have been given much time to finish this project. The Führer is awaiting good news.’

‘Ja.’ The scientist nodded. ‘All experiments have been done. We are nearing the successful end of this project.’

General Voss nodded without looking at the scientist, instead glancing at the intricate machinery in front of him. He was impressed, even if he didn’t show it. If not for the functioning, the design itself was marvelous.

The device in front of him was *Die Glocke* or The Bell. Standing tall at about twelve feet high, the Bell was made of a three-inch-thick metal and ceramic composite. It was suspended two feet above the ground, to allow for heat dissipation from the particle reactor that was built inside. Large fans installed around the base of the Bell dissipated the heat, as did the innumerable coolant pipes running across the circumference. With a diameter of nine feet, it was shaped exactly what it was named after, a bell.

‘I will explain to you, Herr Generalfeldmarschall,’ Dr Klauss began excitedly, speaking in German. ‘What we have here will transform Germany into a superpower, at one go. We will be creating a weapon so deadly that a single bomb will be able to wipe out an entire city.’

‘That’s what we started to do, isn’t it?’ General Voss said coldly, still looking at the device. ‘Had Heisenberg given us

the power of the atomic weapon, we would not have needed this.'

The undermining remark increased Dr Klauss' nervousness. 'True, Herr Generalfeldmarschall. And where we had been lacking was in obtaining uranium for creating the atomic bomb. But this device,' he pointed excitedly at the Bell, 'this beast will solve that for us.'

General Rudolf nodded impassively. 'How many days would it take to create forty pounds of uranium, Doctor?'

'Um... we can get forty pounds in roughly five months, once the Bell is operational.'

'Too long,' the general replied disapprovingly, raising his voice and hands in unison. 'Five months is a lifetime in a war like this. Create more devices like this and get it done in two months.'

Dr Klauss looked at the general, brows furrowed in anxiety.

'My apologies, Herr Generalfeldmarschall. This device is the first of its kind. Powered by our own superfuel Xerum-525, this is the world's first particle accelerator that we are using to convert Thorium 232 to Protactinium 233. Once the latter is obtained, it naturally degrades in twenty-seven days to bomb-grade Uranium 235. The process has been advocated by none other than Dr Werner Karl Heisenberg. But we cannot hurry it up. Building another Bell would take at least three months.'

'Leave the logistics to me, Doctor. You will get all you need if this works, including a special place in the SS,' General Voss said haughtily. 'Now, I don't have all night for this.'

'Yes, Herr Generalfeldmarschall,' Doctor Klauss motioned to his attendants to prepare the device for the trial run.

Doctor Klauss ordered all staff who were not part of the demonstration to leave the site. One soldier with a large black camera on a tripod, stood behind the doctor, recording the proceedings of the experiment.

Reading the entries off the black diary, Dr Klauss communicated the numbers to a nearby attendant so he could switch on the supply of Xerum-525, a purple mercury-like substance that was the fuel powering the Bell. As soon as the supply was switched on, the liquid metallic substance gurgled through the transparent tubes inside the Bell.

‘In a few minutes, we will be getting the first samples of Uranium 233.’ Doctor Klauss pocketed the diary, handing General Voss a Geiger counter.

Dr Klauss continued speaking, the deluge of technical details slowly getting on the general’s nerves.

‘There are two large cylinders, separated by nanometres, rotating inside this device at incredibly high speeds. We create an artificial vacuum between these cylinders and pass heated mercury vapour through the gap. These are ionised by powerful electricity discharges to create photons which collide with highly energetic electrons to create Gamma rays. These rays would emit thermal neutrons from Xerum-525 and those would be absorbed by thorium to transform it into protactinium. After that ...’

General Voss held up his left hand impatiently, his face shining from the purple luminescence emitted by the outer alloy shell, which had started glowing.

‘Not interested in the theory, Doctor. Why is this thing glowing?’

‘Oh!’ Dr Klauss raised both hands towards the Bell as if weaving magic. ‘It is the ionisation of mercury that is causing the glow. The colour is enhanced from the interaction with Xerum.’



General Rudolf Voss looked at the glow of the Bell, and felt his knees go weak for no reason. He suddenly felt the weight of the whole mine on his head. Cursing silently, he looked at the Geiger counter, whose needle was slowly climbing its way towards the extreme end of the scale.

And then he realised that the feeling was not a mental but a physical one. As all eyes focused on the Bell, the general felt a strange rumbling in his stomach. He felt uneasy as the hair on the back of his neck rose. A cold fear washed over him. He had been in the presence of radiation long enough to realise when its effects would start showing up as symptoms. And now, it seemed the suit would be no protection against what was coming.

However, more than that, he felt that strange uneasiness in his stomach as if something was pulling him in different directions. His eyes began to quiver as the scene in front started dissolving, being replaced with another view, another world. He felt he was hallucinating, something not uncommon as a side-effect of radiation. The scene in front of his eyes went hazy as if someone had superimposed one photograph on another.

'*Was zu Holle!*' the general swore, but his German oath was cut short by a tremendous vibration that shook the mine, loosening stones on the roof that immediately fell down.

'*Abbrechen! Abort!!*' General Voss shouted, asking for an immediate halt to the operation. He dropped the Geiger counter and took a few steps back, unsure how he would make it to a safe zone in the hazmat suit.

Dr Klauss shouted to his attendants to cut the power to the machine but it was too late. The Bell was now glowing in its entirety, filling the immediate surrounding with a violent purple hue. It shook violently, threatening to break free of the thick metal chains that bound it from the roof.

The next moment, a brilliant flash of yellow light started emerging from inside the Bell and filling the vicinity, accompanied by the strong pungent smell of burning sulfur. Despite the radiation-proof suits, the strong smell assaulted the noses of everyone present. The light continued to burn stronger, as the men cried out, unable to look at it. The magnesium bulbs in the mine exploded one after another as the Bell shook vigorously. And then, as soon as it had happened, the yellow light went out and the whirring of the Bell died, the purple glow on the outside fading away.

The general did not feel the pain. It had all happened in less than a second, almost as quick as a bullet shot to the head. Before the bulb shards could hit the ground, the men dropped like flies, their faces melting, their eyes fused to their skulls.

The Kodak Cine-16 camera on the tripod toppled over as its handler dropped to the floor, knocking it over as he fell. With a click, the camera recording stopped.

Darkness enveloped the site as the luminescence of the Bell died down. The whirring of the rotating cylinders slowly fell silent.

Hitler's most ambitious project had failed.

PRESENT DAY

DAY 1

31 July

The Beast

8:38 P.M. IST

McLeodganj, Dharamshala

The colourful little town in the peaceful state of Himachal Pradesh was preparing for its biggest event, the Sair festival due to be held in a month. Once a year, the town came alive with the colours and sounds of its native culture, rather than the ones it put on for visitors. The people shed their inhibitions and worked together to make the event a grand success, not for anyone else but for themselves. The festival had begun centuries ago, to mark the end of the crop harvest with the offering of *rakhi* threads to the local deity. Some believed it to be the return of the Gods from the heavens and the celebrations were accompanied by loud drums and the blowing of trumpets. In some areas, bullfights were organised, although that practice was decreasing with activists trying to put a cap on atrocities perpetrated on animals in the name of tradition. The festival was a matter of cultural pride for its locals. It had grown year on year, bringing visitors from all over the world to the valley, passed down by one generation to another, celebrated with full gusto, the tradition thus kept alive.

A few miles away from McLeodganj, verdant with its lush greenery and mountainous terrain, the forest of Triund attracted the most adventurous trekkers. The hill offered

seclusion and anonymity to anyone who wished to disappear from the radar of the world. The trekking path started from the topmost point of Dharamshala, where trekkers assembled after driving through narrow winding roads, lined on both sides with colourful houses with green and red sloped roofs. Along the trek, the exquisite stone path snaked through the coniferous forests, surrounded by tall deodar (Himalayan cedar) trees. As one climbed up the trekking path, the surrounding valley filled with lush green of pine was a mesmerizing sight. Occasionally, one would meet maroon robe-clad Buddhist monks, who would smile and utter greetings in their broken Hindi. Entry to the main Triund trek was restricted after 12 noon, as the return itself took close to two hours. So, trekkers needed to have ample amount of time and energy to get back to base.

At the furthest point on the trek route, a small single-room shop – Himalaya Tea Café – invariably attracted a few hikers who were returning to their hotels after a tiring day's trek. Today, the trekkers enjoyed warm cups of the hot beverage while they chatted happily and then left the place hurriedly, as clouds gathered overhead. Nobody wanted to get stuck in the rain, not in this area. One never knew when a minor landslide could block the arterial road to McLeodganj and force the tourists to spend an uncomfortable night in their vehicles.

As the trekkers rushed back towards Dharamshala, the owner of the tea shop sat quietly, sipping freshly-brewed ginger tea, watching the drizzle drenching the hills. His ancient eyes scanned the valley, waiting for the first drops of rain to arrive. He had been here for decades and hardly anyone had noticed that he had not aged, probably because his face looked as wrinkled now as it had many years ago. Generations came and went, and he remained the old tea-seller on the hill.

The old tea-seller who did not die.

Kripacharya.

An Immortal, like seven others.

Today had been an easy day for him, one with few customers. He stroked his chin calmly, staring into nothingness. The first cold drops of rain filtering through his broken tin shed made its way onto his face, streaming down the furrows of his wrinkles, finally trickling down through the innumerable strands of his white beard. He didn't mind. The rains brought him peace; it was a favourite time of the year, when he would have a lot of time to himself. The meagre amount of cash he got from the tea shop was sufficient for his survival, he didn't need more, just enough to buy a few books now and then, and pay the monthly rental on his broken phone. There was no family to feed, no children to send to school.

However, more than the money he earned, it was the information he garnered that interested him. He was always hungry for knowledge - about anything and everything. And a tea shop was the best place to be, to hear such conversations. People would talk on a wide range of topics, right from what the politicians and cricketers of the country did/should do, to the latest movies released. He liked this overheard information better than what he gleaned from reading newspapers. The rest of the time, he spent in reading books on various topics. The library card in the nearby town of Dharamshala had his - false - name stamped in almost all the books. As newer books kept coming in, Kripacharya remained busy.

Today he had seen off the regular share of visitors, and the valley was now enveloped in the regular fog that came on in the late evening. It was a precursor to heavy showers, and then

the nights would become unbearably cold. He wanted to close shop early, to retire to his home - a small one-room hut at the end of the town, far from any hustle-bustle. Every evening, he waited to get to the mahogany armchair on the front porch of his hut, the only luxury he had invested in, his spot to sit back and read.

The forests of the hill were beginning to come alive with the sounds of animals and birds resuming their nocturnal routine. The howls of wolves and hyenas came in waves, as if announcing the start of their hunt. Darkness in the hill area was terrifying, to say the least. There had been reports of supernatural entities being spotted, from a woman clad in a white sari to a little girl holding a doll. But of course, all these were rumors spread by local tour guides to increase the eeriness of the place and provide value for money to their customers. A terrified customer usually went back sooner and happier.

Still, there definitely was an eeriness that wrapped itself about the forest. Like all other dense foliage near the region, the forest too was impenetrable by night. Apart from wild animals, the terrain was unpredictable, with a number of cliffs and gorges seemingly appearing suddenly out of nowhere, making it a trekker's nightmare. Several trekkers had died, and there had been pressure on the government to shut down the area for adventure activities, but the local tourist organisations had successfully fended off the efforts so far. That had worked in Kripacharya's favour, for he hated moving from one place to another every few years, though that went against the advice of his peers. Vyasa had advised him repeatedly that his identity was not safe if he remained in one place for too long.

‘Whom should we fear? We have no enemies.’ Kripacharya would always reply when he was asked to keep moving.



As the rain started picking up pace, the beast paced through the dense trees, running on all fours. It sometimes rose up on its hind legs, taking stock of its surroundings, then sprinted again. Its gait indicated that it knew its speed and strength. The breeze blew on its naked body but it felt no shame.

Why should it? It was an animal today.

Its paws crunched the dry leaves and thorns alike on the forest floor, and it felt at home. Its raw ferociousness gave it an edge, the feeling of being at the higher end of the food chain – an apex predator.

Passing through centuries-old tall pine trees and shrubs, the beast made its way towards the only beacon of civilisation in Triund hill, the tea shop.



As he took his last sip of tea, Kripacharya felt a strange sensation on the back of his neck. For the first time in decades, he sensed danger. Spending years in close proximity to the forest, Kripacharya had developed a deep bond with nature. Today, he could sense a disturbance from the restless creatures of the forest. Something unknown was lurking in the

shadows. He strained his eyes to gaze at the edge of the forest which had started to blur in the darkness. The forest began right in front of his dilapidated tea-stall by the road. A few hyenas and jackals strayed across once in a while, but scampered off when shooed away.

Today, something felt different.

It felt larger, much larger. A beast. But one that did not belong. An outsider.

Kripacharya threw the *kulhad* away, and picked up the wooden log which he used often to chase away unwelcome carnivores. He lit the kerosene-dipped cloth at the end of the log and walked out of his shop. He scanned the scene in front of him, trying to figure out movement in any direction. Many animals usually recognized and feared fire, and kept away.

The cold raindrops and the fire met like sworn enemies and fought for survival, as the fire on the end of the torch struggled to stay alive. The smell of kerosene filled the surroundings as Kripacharya moved the torch about, surveying the forest border, rubbing the pendant of the chain around his neck absentmindedly with his other hand.

Nothing.

It seemed like a false alarm. Or maybe the rain was playing games with his mind. Kripacharya returned to the shop. He opened the drawer of his table, and fumbled for something in the darkness. Putting his hand deep in the drawer, he brought out an old mobile, the second-generation Nokia model - Nokia1100, which surprisingly still worked. He pressed the power button, and the screen lit up. As the menu appeared, Kripacharya pushed a few buttons. He strained to look for the

messaging app. Once he found it, he quickly typed out a message and sent it.

With that, he took one last glance and proceeded to pull down the shutters of the shop.

Kripacharya walked the lonely mile from the shop to his home, taking a shortcut through the unmotorable road towards his hut. It got sinisterly quiet in the nights but that was what he wanted more often than not.

The hut was not a big place by any standard, but the erstwhile sage had used the space available to him wisely. Nobody cared if an old tea shop vendor lived in a small one-room cottage. Out of pity for his age, and owing to his gentle nature, nobody bothered to complain about the illegal structure to the Municipal Corporation. The officers too turned a blind eye, instead focusing on other important issues.

As he walked towards the hut, Kripacharya gave a sidelong glance at the forest. He was not sure if what he heard was the rustling of leaves or the patter of rain. But he felt uneasy, felt as if he was being followed. He could not shake off the disquiet he had felt from the moment he had stepped out of his shop.

And he knew that whatever was stalking him, it was no man.

Fumbling with the keys for a moment, Kripacharya opened the door of his cottage and switched on the lamp. Then he froze. The tingling that he felt at the tea shop was extremely prominent now. He turned around and looked at the dark road outside. Except for the constant sound of the falling rain, everything looked as usual.

Kripacharya closed the door, intending to lock it, something he rarely did as soon as he arrived. Before he could reach for the latch, the door came crashing down, throwing him back onto the floor. A large animal had crashed into the front door of his home, sending the frames slamming to the ground.

Kripacharya's eyes widened as he looked at the beast in front of him. In over the five thousand years that he had spent on earth, he had not seen a more frightening creature after the Mahabharata war. The beast sprang back to its feet, and then in a quick move, stood up straight on its hind legs, dripping water all around. It was panting heavily, baring its pointy teeth. This was neither man nor animal. And Kripacharya knew what it was, knowing the ancient as well as the modern term for the attacker.

नरवृक

Werewolf.

And those who encountered it also knew the consequences of getting bitten on a full moon night: they would turn into the beast themselves, in a chain reaction. Actually, he himself had never believed the tale; yet, as Kripacharya looked at the night sky through the broken door of his hut, the full moon stared back at him mockingly. And Kripacharya found himself harking back to the legend, which he devoutly hoped was just a ridiculous legend which had become folklore.

The beast extended its yellow pointed claws and moved into attack pose, snarling. The old warrior, with amazing agility, dashed towards the corner of the room and drew out a sword attached to the roof of the tin shed, hidden from plain

view. The werewolf, amazed at the speed of his prey, growled, and crouched further in the attacking position.

The next instant, it jumped.

Kripacharya slashed at it with his sword but the werewolf was faster than anything he had seen – or fought – in recent times. With a quick move, the beast dodged the attack and dug its claws into the back of the old fighter, tearing out a small chunk of flesh. Kripacharya groaned in pain, unable to evade the attack. He jumped outside the hut where he would get some space to wield the sword. The beast followed him, growling and licking its paws. Kripacharya gritted his teeth in pain but readied himself for the next attack, determined not to miss this time.

The beast stood up on its hind legs and flexed its muscles. Kripacharya cocked his head to measure his opponent, and gauged that it easily would be seven feet tall. The werewolf growled as Kripacharya ran towards him, flipping mid-air in an attempt to land a quick blow on the animal. Before the blade could touch its neck, the beast held out its left hand, gripping Kripacharya's right one in it. It twisted the old sage's wrist until it cracked. With a loud cry, the old warrior let go of the sword, as the bones broke out of his skin, spraying blood all over the muddy ground. The beast then raised its right paw and struck Kripacharya hard on the neck. He fell down with a soft thud. As he fell, the beast jumped on his body and let go a barrage of punches on his face, till it was covered in blood, unrecognisable.



The beast rose, gloating over its victory. It wiped the blood on its fur and looked around. The street was deserted, and anyone who might have ventured out at this hour would have definitely fled in panic on sighting the beast. Nevertheless, it was running short on time already.

With a quick heave, the werewolf picked up Kripacharya and slung him on its shoulder. It looked first towards the forest and then the town, as if undecided which way to proceed. The next moment, it turned and disappeared into the forest, blending into the cover of the trees.

DAY 2

1 August

Faster than a Train

8:13am CET

Thalys, Cologne Station, Germany

The tall, lanky man boarded the Thalys, the high-speed Eurail train between Germany and France. Dressed in a beige overcoat, khaki pants and wearing Canadian Woodland boots on his feet, he sported a clean-shaven look with a hint of a stubble. His crew-cut hairstyle with sunglasses betrayed his long and violent history. A thin black scar from his right brow to hairline went across his forehead – a grim reminder of his dark past.

Aswath Acharya, as he was known now in the new world, had been known by many other names throughout history. He had seen many civilisations, many kingdoms, rise and fall, from Mohenjodaro to Indus Valley, from Roman, Greek, the Medieval kingdoms and the rise of Christianity and Islam. There had hardly been any major events in history which he had not witnessed, as a silent spectator sometimes, an active participant at other times. He had caused blood to flow on many occasions, irrespective of the side he played from. His metaphysical powers had waned as Dwaparayuga had transitioned to Kaliyuga, and boons and curses no longer held the same meaning, but he still bore the fire inside him. His life had been well-nigh doomed by a curse that had almost driven him mad. But he had persevered through that. Found a way.

Ashwatthama was alive. And nobody, except perhaps Bali, another wanderer like him, had seen so much of the world. Ashwatthama wandered the world through the ages and he never wanted to stop.

He was a lone wolf who acted alone, not bound by any fraternity, club or cult. There was nobody to stop him, nobody to dictate to him, and he preferred it that way. He didn't care to be judged by any of the Gods. Those who were already under a curse didn't usually bother about ethics and morality.

Freedom. Total and complete.

Today, his mission was tracking a European gangster, a man who traded in the kidnapping and trafficking of women from Eastern Europe and South East Asia, to be sold as sex slaves in Western Europe and South America. The business had grown to billions of dollars, and was primarily controlled by the Albanian and Ukrainian mafia. Any outsider who dared to enter the business was eliminated swiftly. Whistleblowers met with the same fate; no matter how well-known or rich the whistleblower was, he would be silenced immediately. The police and local mafia steered clear of these men who operated across almost all Europe through different channels and identities.

Their network included scouts who lured women into their trap using the channels of social networking, job promises and fake friendships, to the end clients, consisting of billionaires and men from the highest echelons of society. Some of these names were powerful enough to topple governments. These deals happened under the cover of guns and trigger-happy assassins. Hush money then flowed across different layers, from cops to the media and the judiciary.

This had been an unspoken secret for the past two decades, ever since the business started. Nobody wanted to die, nobody messed with the mafia.

Today, Aswath Acharya aka Ashwatthama had entered their den uninvited. He had accepted a contract from an anonymous billionaire to kill this mobster. He knew the motive was personal; the mobster had destroyed the life of a girl very close to the billionaire. Ashwatthama knew the stakes were high. He also knew his identity was safe where people had not even heard of Ram and Krishna.

He looked out of the window as the Thalys picked up speed, running with the wind. He recalled the first day he had started working on the case. It had taken him six months to zero in on the leader of the ring, a Ukrainian man named Vladimir Slaveski. The man was untouchable, his real identity untraceable and invisible to authorities. His cover was flawless, a defense contractor middleman, moving across the world making business deals. This cover gave him the benefit of an armed escort every moment of his waking hours. While the defense contracts earned him a decent profit, the trafficking business was the real goldmine. Tracking him was like trying to finding the queen in a colony of honeybees.

However, luck favoured the persistent. And Ashwatthama was nothing if not persistent. His target was taking the high-speed Thalys from Germany to France today, and this task needed to be done quickly. His client was losing patience, and so was Ashwatthama.

As the Thalys' wheels drummed out its staccato beat, Ashwatthama's spirits lifted. He loved speed, whether it was horses, bikes or cars; everything fast fascinated him. For him, slowness was akin to death. He glanced at the meadows

running past the windows. The LED screen above the window displayed the speed of the train as it picked up speed steadily to over 300km/hr.

It was time to make his move.

Ashwatthama felt his age as he moved past romantic couples and backpackers. He had forgotten how old he was now. Not that he did not care, it did not make sense any longer. One counted the days and years only when the end was imminent. For Ashwatthama, the numbers did not play out in decades or centuries, it was more a rough count of the thousands of years he had been on earth. Something close to five thousand years, he deduced.

Still, his face exuded a sharpness, a raw ferocity that could and did chill an opponent to the bone. He rarely smiled, as if life had played a cruel joke on him. And of late, he felt the line between good and evil was blurring. Not that it mattered much to him.

From afar, he noticed his target, who was sitting surrounded by his bodyguards, absorbed in a newspaper, chewing on a cigar despite the train's no-smoking policy. The mobster looked as if he had stepped right out of a Rocky movie – not Rocky Balboa himself but his Russian nemesis, Ivan Drago – blonde, muscular and clean-shaven, with a flat-top haircut. The perfect cut of his jawline highlighted the obsession for keeping himself strong. In one glance, Ashwatthama deduced that in a hand-to-hand fight, it would be a close call...if Ashwatthama were to play fairly. However, that was the last scenario he wanted. In real life, the faster fights moved, the more the chances of getting out alive, or in his case, in one piece. A bullet or more he could take and heal easily, but maiming or decapitation was another story

altogether. It was beyond his understanding, and he did not give a damn what happened to him.

On his part, Ashwatthama needed just a bullet to achieve his target. A single bullet to the head. He counted the security detail, there were about fifteen men.

He stepped forward, about half-a-coach's distance from Vladimir Slavesky. Two men in black suits and sunglasses immediately stood up. They were almost as tall as his 6'2" frame. One of them placed his palm on Ashwatthama's chest.

'*Privater Bereich. Geh zurück,*' the man commanded, in a clearly acquired accent, asking him to stay away from the private area.

Ashwatthama knew enough German to get what the man said. But he was in no mood to go back. He had to complete the mission before the next station. Do what he had to do and get out. That was the plan to escape the law agencies.

But things rarely went as planned.

Ashwatthama blinked.

Before the man could retract his arm, Ashwatthama grabbed it in the Cow Hand move, a wrist-locking move he had learnt when he had studied Brazilian jiu-jitsu, half a century ago. Ashwatthama twisted the wrist further, and the sound of cracking bones was accompanied by the man's cry. With a swift karate chop, Ashwatthama landed his palm on the second bodyguard's neck. Then he pushed his palm into the first man's solar plexus, a Touch of Death move. Not a drop of blood flowed but the men fell down like rag dolls.

Ashwatthama blinked again.

The next moment several guns clicked at once, including Ashwatthama's own. A barrage of gunshots rang in the compartment, echoing inside the closed compartment. The alarmed cries of men and women rang out from the adjoining compartment, as word of a gunfight spread among the passengers.

----- End of Preview -----

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