

THE LAST AVATAR

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THE LAST
AVATAR
— AGE OF KALKI 1 —

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Dedicated
to the brave soldiers of India and to their families.

Whenever there is decay of righteousness and there is rise of unrighteousness, then I manifest myself;

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil and for the sake of firmly establishing righteousness, I am born from age to age.

Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 4, Verse: 7-8

In the near future...

PROLOGUE



Professor Haridas and his associate ran for their lives. ‘We don’t have time. The package cannot fall into their wicked hands,’ shouted Haridas, gasping for breath as they treaded a treacherous terrain in the dead of the night. The fact that it was a moonless night didn’t help.

Deep inside the excavation site at Mohenjo-daro in the Sindh province of Pakistan, Haridas was part of an elite team of scholars and archaeologists gathered by the dreaded extremist group, Invisible Hand, to unearth the treasures of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization. The package he held in his hand was the prize of their two years of struggle. He had managed to steal it and escape as instructed by the Rudras, to whom he owed his allegiance as an undercover operative, and under no circumstances was he supposed to let it fall into the wrong hands.

‘What have you found? What does the package contain?’ asked Haridas’s associate, a trained agent sent to extract the professor from the excavation site.

They heard dogs barking and a chopper thundering to life at a distance.

‘This can’t be good. They know we are on the run! We have to hurry,’ Haridas said, struggling to see through the darkness. ‘Listen to me carefully,’ he continued. ‘It is, in fact, what we were hoping to find. It’s one of the original scripts of the Scripture of Gods. In the wrong hands, the Scripture possesses enough knowledge to destroy our planet.’

Since 316 BC, when Emperor Chandragupta Maurya and his Chief Advisor Chanakya first regrouped the ancient secret society called the Rudras, different people in power had tried to get access to the nine sets of scriptures that were believed to hold ‘absolute’ knowledge. They were collectively called the Scripture of Gods and had been protected by the Rudras since ancient times. But a few centuries ago, the Rudras had lost some of the scripts, and now that they had finally reclaimed at least one of them, they had to take it to safety—even if it meant giving up their lives in the process.

Haridas and his associate reached a steep slope that led to the river. It looked like a death trap. The current was too powerful, and with the dogs chasing them and the vehicles approaching with search lights, they had no time to think. The choppers were still relentlessly trying to locate them.

‘We have to jump,’ the associate said, and held the professor tightly as they slid down the slope.

By the time they reached the riverside, they were bruised and bleeding. To their horror, a chopper caught them in the spotlight and they were soon surrounded by mercenary trucks.

‘Professor Haridas! You turned out to be a clever little mouse,’ spoke a cold voice on the loudspeaker. He was the commander of the mercenaries and in charge of the expedition to unearth the scriptures. He stood at the top of the slope with a gun in his hand and cut a terrifying figure. ‘But if you thought I didn’t have my eyes on you, you were mistaken.’

Haridas and his associate tried to run but were outnumbered and surrounded.

‘Give me the scripture and I will consider sparing your life.’

‘Never. Not even if I have to die today,’ Haridas yelled.

‘I will not ask again,’ the commander said as he fired a bullet between Haridas’s associate’s eyes. His skull burst open and Haridas watched in horror as he collapsed to the ground.

‘You monster! This is exactly why you are not worthy of the knowledge this scripture possesses,’ Haridas roared.

Losing his patience, the commander fired another shot. It hit Haridas’s right knee; he screamed in pain as he fell to the ground but held the scripture close to his chest.

‘You and your secret society, the so-called Rudras.’ He laughed. ‘You’re nothing but a bunch of idiots. You don’t know how to wield power. The destruction of India is inevitable but with the help of this scripture, we will ensure that an age of slavery is cast upon you from which you will never rise again.’

‘Dear God,’ Haridas prayed as he raised his arm to throw the scripture into the river. ‘Protect this scripture. Protect it for the sake of the human race.’ But before he could move further, two quick bullets hit his hands and the scripture fell to the ground. He shrieked in pain.

‘Pray as much as you want but your gods cannot protect you or your country. This is the beginning of India’s end.’ The commander started to move towards Haridas; his men closed in from every direction.

But suddenly, a distant sound rang through the skies and began to grow steadily. Everyone looked around. It sounded as if a supersonic jet was approaching with breathtaking speed. Lightning lit up the sky, accompanied by thunder that shook the ground.

‘Something’s coming,’ one of the men said. They checked the radar but there was nothing on the screen.

‘That’s impossible!’ the commander yelled. By then the sound had become a deafening thunder clap. They clutched their ears in pain just as a lightning bolt struck the earth, sending ripples through the ground and throwing everyone and everything up in the air. The trucks turned upside down, the machines stopped working and the choppers fell to the ground, exploding on impact.

‘Everybody take cover,’ the commander said loudly. Most of his men were dead, or too wounded to move, but the remaining ones did as ordered and held their guns ready to fire. The stench of their fear spread through the air.

‘Commander, what is happening?’ asked one of the men.

‘I have no freaking clue. But that was one hell of an entry ... Hit the spotlights,’ he ordered when he saw that the lights were still focused on where Haridas was lying motionless, holding the scripture close to his heart. There was too much dust in the air, making it impossible to get clear visuals.

There was a hush on the ground when the dust settled.

‘I can see its eyes,’ said a fearful soldier.

‘Eyes of a giant ...’ the commander gaped, then yelled, ‘Fire!’

The men immediately started firing bullets, missiles and rockets. A huge plume of dust, fire and smoke rose through the air. They stopped after a while to see if they had succeeded in destroying whatever the hell had landed amidst them.

‘Is that all you’ve got?’ asked a powerful voice. Startled, the mercenaries involuntarily flung back a few steps. The voice was so potent that it sounded like God himself. His laser eyes became bigger as he walked forward through the fire and, as he became visible, they saw something they had never in their wildest dreams.

‘That’s not possible,’ said the commander again in disbelief.

‘Am I hallucinating?’ asked a soldier, rubbing his eyes. Several of the men ran for their lives.

Through the fire, they could see a giant walking closer to them. His tail moved slowly, like a snake with its hood up. His towering structure and the mace in his hand sent shivers down the spines of the men who surrounded him. A variety of guns and swords hung all

over his body and the lightning sword in his other hand gleamed in the darkness. But it was his face that was the most terrifying of all.

‘What is that?!’

‘Hanuman ... Lord Hanuman,’ the commander stammered, horrified beyond his wits. He tried to report to his headquarters but all communications were jammed.

The soldier then saw the face of the giant. Powerful, fearless and awe-inspiring, the face of Lord Hanuman had a grandeur that was other-worldly.

‘How is this even possible?’

‘I have no clue,’ the commander whispered.

The massive figure moved towards Professor Haridas and turned him around. The old man had bled profusely; there was no way he was going to make it. He looked up at Lord Hanuman with prayers in his mind and smiled.

‘Jai Bajrang Bali ...’ he breathed his last and closed his eyes.

The giant took the scripture from him. A compartment opened up in his chest and he placed it inside. Then he turned towards the rest of the men.

‘He’s a machine! A cyborg! We can take him down,’ screamed the commander. ‘Attack him!’

Thousands of miles away in India, in a secret facility called the Garuda, a deep voice spoke on the transmitter to the Vanaroid, a next-generation combat machine built in the shape of Lord Hanuman.

‘Give them hell,’ he said in a measured tone.

‘Affirmative,’ responded the Vanaroid at Mohenjodaro. Swinging his lightning sword in one hand and his mace, the gada, in the other, he pounced on his enemies.

ONE



‘Where is Kalki?’ asked the prime minister.
‘Still incommunicado,’ answered General Ramsey over the secure phone line. ‘The last communication we had from him was a month ago in Amsterdam, when our covert mission went bust.’

There was a brief pause.

‘Any news from Tiger? Or anyone from his team?’ PM Subhash Acharya, one of the most loved Indian prime ministers in history, asked further, getting up from his chair in his office situated at 7, Lok Kalyan Marg, New Delhi.

‘None. Tiger cannot be traced either. Something unexpected has happened, that’s for sure.’ Ramsey sighed.

‘I’m beginning to worry now, especially when the Invisible Hand has upped its ante. We need him here,’ Acharya stressed.

‘He’s your protégé more than mine. You know he’ll come back; he always does.’

‘I can’t help but feel guilty. I sent him on that mission ... We all got played,’ he said, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

‘He will return. Give him some time,’ Ramsey assured.

‘Find him. Wherever he is on Earth, bring him back and fast.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Acharya hung up the phone and Defence Minister Jagan Singh was sent in. The two had been as thick as thieves for decades and had climbed the political ladder together.

‘Acharya, I think we have underestimated what the Invisible Hand has been up to for the last decade,’ Jagan said as they took their seats.

‘I’m afraid you’re right. Any new information?’

‘Yes. After the debriefing of our undercover assets, we have concluded that they have been working on a grand plan of sorts.’ Jagan handed Acharya the reports.

‘What sort of plan?’

‘While people think the Invisible Hand has become a mere terrorist group operating mainly in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, we know that deep down their core philosophy to enslave the world has not died. Under the patronage of General Jian of China, they now have access to unlimited resources and are working on destabilizing several governments across the world.

‘They’re instating key assets in the governments and military ranks of several countries where democracy is either weak or non-existent. This includes Pakistan, Iran and various north African and south-east Asian countries.’

‘Pakistan?’

‘Yes, and it gets worse. There are reports that they have infested the Indian army.’

Acharya got up from his seat, shocked. ‘What are you saying? Are you sure?’

‘There is no concrete evidence, if you ask me, but it’s a strong theory. It’s very likely that it has already happened and there are one or more moles, deployed a long time ago, high up in our army ranks. They play their cards over decades.’

‘If they get to the top, they will become dictators and destroy our democratic system,’ said Acharya, worried.

Jagan took a deep breath and said, ‘No matter what, we need to find out who they are and weed them out ... I wonder what the Invisible Hand’s end goal is.’

‘Destruction. Slavery. Total control of the world. Think of your worst nightmares,’ Acharya said. ‘I have to alert the Rudras. It’s time we destroy them from their roots.’

‘Before we end this meeting, I want to understand one thing. Have we uncovered the nexus between General Jian and the Invisible Hand?’ asked Acharya.

‘Theories suggest that Jian was brainwashed by the Invisible Hand when he was young and inducted into their cult. Since then, he has been secretly supporting and funding their agenda, against the wishes of Chinese President Wang. He is acting independent of the Chinese government and President Wang hasn’t been able to reign him in. Because of all his connections and insane ambition, Jian has become the Invisible Hand’s most powerful weapon.’

‘A powerful, rogue general in the Chinese army in bed with the most dreadful terrorist organisation. God save this planet!’



General Jian was in a security review meeting at his office in Beijing when he got a call on his private number. He excused himself and swiftly moved out.

‘General, this is Zar,’ spoke a grave voice. The most-wanted terrorist mastermind on the planet, Master Zar was the head of the Invisible Hand’s military wing. ‘I have good news. Our mole in the Rudras has agreed to help us fast-track decrypting the map of Shambala.’

‘That’s brilliant! I’m sure they have no clue that we found two more scriptures at Mohenjo-daro after Haridas’s death. We were lucky that those scriptures contain the map of Shambala ... If the Rudras think that sending some mystery squad to kill our excavation party will make us give up, they’re wrong. They clearly underestimate us,’ Jian enthused.

‘We still don’t know what they sent to Mohenjo-daro that day. I lost a trusted lieutenant and an entire crew. I will avenge them,’ growled Zar.

‘Indeed, we will. For now, do whatever it takes to decode the map so we can find the *Weapons of Gods* buried in Shambala. Those ancient weapons would make a nuke look like a toy. Don’t forget that it was one of their scriptures that led to our technological prowess.’

‘How can I forget? My own powers come from the Scripture of Gods,’ admitted Zar. Master Zar’s extraordinary powers were both a myth and a legend; people spoke about them but no one knew for certain what they were.

‘Imagine if we could get hold of all their scriptures. We will be invincible—perhaps even immortal. That’s what I want; to rule the world,’ said Jian.

‘And together, we will, god willing ... I will ensure we break the code and get you the map of Shambala. We will possess those weapons at any cost.’

‘Excellent! I cannot wait. Before you leave, when is our prisoner Kalki being shipped to China?’ asked Jian.

‘He is en route. Our men should hand him over to your intelligence wing today.’

Jian chuckled. ‘I want him crawling at my feet. He’s ruined our party too many times. But not anymore. I will have him begging for mercy before I cut his head off.’

TWO



‘Neel ... Neel, wake up,’ she said softly, running her fingers through his hair. He breathed in her fragrance when the ends of her long tresses tickled his face.

‘I don’t want to wake up. Come back here,’ he whispered.

She planted a kiss on his forehead. ‘It’s time.’

He smiled and took a deep breath, reaching out for her as he lazily opened his eyes. His smile died instantly when he encountered only darkness. He looked around, trying to find a ray of light, but it was pitch-black. The floor felt hard and cold as ice.

He closed his eyes and saw her beautiful face again, smiling brightly at him.

It was morning and the summer breeze was hopelessly romantic. It felt like heaven.

‘I have to go,’ she whispered, getting up.

‘What’s the hurry?’ he said, holding her hand.

She escaped his grip. ‘You know I have to.’

‘Arya ... No. Stay with me.’ But she was gone.

He reopened his eyes and came back to reality. This was a new room—he always woke up in a different

setting—and his head felt heavy with sedatives. He cursed himself for getting into this situation. *Don't trust anyone; that was the one rule and you broke it ...* He knew he had been betrayed in the worst possible way, handed over to the enemy on a silver platter. It hurt that his countrymen had done it but it was not the first time he had been betrayed by someone he trusted.

His last known location was Amsterdam in the Netherlands. He didn't know where he was now; they hadn't provided him a view of the outside world. For all he knew, he could be halfway across the globe right now.

He couldn't say who his captors were with certainty. They could be the Chinese, Pakistanis or any of India's enemies or friends. It could also very well be the Invisible Hand. All he knew was they wanted the information he possessed. He was a catch; the biggest catch. At the same time, he was surprised to be alive for he was worth more dead than alive to his enemies.

In Amsterdam, he had been beaten, tortured, starved, questioned under a truth serum and subjected to every trick you could find in the torture rulebook but had still kept his mouth shut.

His left arm hurt intolerably and his skull seemed ready to burst open at the slightest movement. He couldn't move much; he was tied to the walls with what seemed like magnetic chains, which were impossible to escape.

Blood dripped from his arms and legs, running out of sutures and bandages. *They can break my body, but they can't break my mind.*

‘Water,’ he croaked out loud, mustering the energy left in him. His voice echoed in the silent room. He shivered as the chill from the floor and the walls seeped into his bones. *It’s a freakin’ mortuary.*

The lights suddenly came on and he cried out as they hit his dilated pupils. He squeezed his eyes shut and his hands jerked in their bonds, trying to cover his eyes.

Two men came inside and removed the chains from the wall, leaving the magnetic handcuffs on so he couldn’t move his limbs. They dragged him outside to an interrogation room and pushed him to the floor. He tried to place who they were.

‘Chinese?’ Neel mumbled to himself.

‘Yes, you piece of shit,’ yelled one guard in a heavy Chinese accent before they pulled him up, tied him to the table and left the room.

The room had an earthy feel, with an eerie chill in the air. He sensed that he was somewhere up in the mountains. The place looked at least a few hundred years old but was obviously renovated. The furniture in the room looked old and somewhat Tibetan. *Could be the Himalayas*, he deduced.

‘Give me some water, you scumbags,’ he growled.

There was no glass wall or window but he knew they were monitoring him. A minute or two later, another Chinese officer walked in with a water bottle in one hand and a laptop in the other.

‘Good morning, Mr Kalki. How are you feeling today?’ he asked.

‘Just terrific. Your hospitality is out of this world,’ said Neel, eyeing the bottle of water.

‘You have a sense of humour; I like that. Now, we can do this in two ways. First, we continue the way it has been going. You refuse to cooperate and you don’t speak. You can expect a lot of pain, should you choose this path, until we get the information we need from you. Your second option is to tell us everything and you will be free to go.’

Neel laughed.

‘You know why you have been brought to this facility?’

‘I don’t give a tiny rat’s ass,’ he snarled and jerked in an attempt to free himself from the chains. The officer stepped back reflexively.

Neel laughed again. ‘Where do they find chickens like you to join this “elite” intelligence wing of yours?’

The officer slapped Neel across his face.

‘Behave, Mr Kalki. I don’t want to slap you again. You are the pride of your nation. The avenger of the righteous. That’s what they call you right? The saviour, the protector!’ He laughed. ‘What would they say if they knew you were getting slapped and beaten like a dog by Chinese intelligence agents?’

‘Chinese intelligence agents, you say? You clown; you slap like a two-year-old.’

The officer slapped him with more force this time.

Neel continued to laugh. ‘Is that your best?’

‘So what they say about you is true. You are a maniac; a dog that needs to be put down. Do you know why your own people betrayed you? Because you are a pain in the ass for a lot of important people and they decided to remove you from the equation.’

Well, I can’t disagree with that, Neel thought.

‘You’re wasting your time. Shoot me right now and get it over with. I’m not telling you jack shit,’ Neel growled.

The officer opened his laptop and pulled up an Indian television news clip on the screen.

‘It’s quite impressive, what your country thinks about you,’ he said.

‘Hero of a billion,’ read the news ticker at the bottom of the screen. The anchor said, ‘No one knows who Kalki is! Where was he born and who is his family?’ Rare pictures and video clips of Kalki in his trademark mask followed.

‘He likes to operate in the shadows, never showing his real face. It’s clear that he wants no fame or credit for his deeds; he only wants to destroy India’s enemies ... He shows no mercy to anyone who hurts our country. Who could this guardian angel be?’

‘The only thing we know about him is that he is the man behind the Astras group, who supply futuristic weapons and technology to the Indian defence forces. How does he manage to do business with the government yet remain invisible? That’s the billion-dollar question. Either no one in the government has any answer or they are covering it up.’

The next clip showed hundreds of people wearing his mask marching on the streets, chanting his name and thanking him.

‘This footage was taken five years ago when Kalki saved 236 passengers on the Air India plane that was hijacked over the Indian ocean.

‘In another story, some believe he was the one who undertook the mission to kidnap the most-wanted

terrorist Ali Haider from Karachi, a task no one thought was possible. The stories of Kalki's heroics are numerous yet no one has any clue who he is,' the anchor said.

'That's enough,' said Neel. 'Where are you going with this?'

'Mr Kalki, your company Astras is the largest defence equipment manufacturer for the Indian defence forces. Your firm created the ultra-drones that man the Indian borders right now. And no one knows how you build such advance weapons. Perhaps that is the reason every country wants you dead. Be happy that we have kept you alive—the orders were to shoot you on sight. The only reason you are alive is because you can help us.'

'Help you? Don't you get it? No matter what you do, I won't say a word.'

The officer gave him a third whack across the face.

'Listen to me carefully if you want to stay alive ... First, we want to know what you are planning next for the Indian army. Next, we need the details of your cyber warfare division. You are the only external agency guarding Indian cyber assets and I want to know how you do it.'

Neel just chuckled.

'What is The Vanar Sena?' the officer pressed.

'The what?' Neel asked in disbelief.

'The army of ape-shaped robots. Does it really exist?' he held up a blurry picture of what looked like Lord Hanuman.

'Seriously, officer, are you high?' Neel said, getting annoyed.

‘Who are the council members of the Rudras?’ the officer moved on.

‘The Rudras? I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

The officer punched his stomach. ‘Mr Kalki, either you give me the information I need in the next twenty-four hours or you die. It’s your choice.’

‘The only person I will talk to is your boss. Otherwise, you’re not getting anything!’

‘I’m the boss around here,’ the officer shouted.

‘I’m talking about your real boss: General Jian,’ Neel stressed in fluent Mandarin. Among several other languages, he could read and write Mandarin effectively.

The officer called the guards inside. ‘Don’t give him any food or water. Before you throw him back in that dark room, torture him to the brink of death. Do that every day till he’s ready to speak to me. I want him begging for mercy,’ he ordered.

He then looked at Neel. ‘I’ll make you talk, Kalki.’

‘Good luck,’ said Neel, before he was dragged out.



A week later, the officer, who was called Agent Chow, along with the deputy chief of the Chinese intelligence wing entered the cell where Neel was lying unconscious on the floor.

‘Sir, he is impossible. I have never seen anyone like him before,’ the guard said in Mandarin.

‘No one could possibly take this torture for so long. He doesn’t even talk under the truth serum. You must

report this to General Jian before Kalki dies,' Agent Chow muttered.

'General Jian is occupied with something critical at the moment; but I will leave him a message ... He won't be happy that we weren't able to break Kalki,' the deputy chief said, calling Jian's office.

THREE



There was a knock on the door of the most powerful man on earth at the White House, Washington, D.C., USA.

‘Mr President ... Mr President, sir,’ the voice behind the door said loudly.

‘What time is it?’ President Cooper asked his wife, who had woken up in surprise.

She looked at the clock with blurred vision. ‘It’s 2.05 a.m.’

Cooper hurried to the door. He knew it must be a matter of great urgency if he was being woken up at this hour.

Another terrorist attack? He worried internally.

‘What is it, Michael?’ he asked, opening the door.

‘Mr President, there is a situation. You are needed in the situation room immediately,’ he said, even as the president grabbed his overcoat.

They started walking hurriedly. ‘For the love of God, what is the emergency? Tell me before I get a heart attack.’

‘China is being nuked, sir.’

‘What?!’



‘The prime minister is in an important meeting. We cannot disturb him,’ said the secretary in New Delhi.

‘Trust me, Ritesh, he would want to be disturbed with the kind of news we have. I’m not going to repeat myself,’ warned Defence Minister Jagan Singh.

Ritesh ran into the meeting, looking visibly worried.

‘Sir, Defence Minister Jagan Singh is on the phone.’

‘What’s the matter, Jagan?’ asked Prime Minister Acharya.

‘We’re tracking a nuclear missile right now. The trajectory shows it’s going to hit Beijing in fifteen minutes.’

‘What? Are you sure?’ Acharya gasped. A nuclear strike was nearly impossible in today’s times unless the weapons got into terrorist hands because the nuclear strike codes were only accessible to the heads of the state.

‘Yes, we are one hundred per cent sure.’

‘How is this possible?’

‘We don’t know yet. It originated somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. Come to the war room; I’m waiting.’

‘Right away.’



‘What’s the origin?’ asked President Cooper. All the key members of the defence council and his cabinet were gathered in the situation room at the White House.

‘Sir, we are tracing it as we speak. You will have the answer in two minutes,’ said his Chief of Staff.

‘Did you alert the Chinese?’

‘They already know, sir. They can’t possibly evacuate a city of thirty million people in ten minutes,’ added the Chief of Staff.

‘Sir, we traced the origin and you are not going to believe it,’ said the defence secretary, walking in through the door.

‘Where?’

‘It was shot from a Chinese warship cruising in the north Pacific Ocean near Papua New Guinea!’

There was a stunned silence in the room.

‘What is going on here?! Why would China bomb itself with a nuclear missile? Is it a coup? What are the possibilities?’ Cooper asked.

‘It could be a coup or it could be militants. There is no guarantee; it could be anyone,’ the defence secretary said.

‘The missile will enter the Chinese airspace in five minutes, sir.’

‘Do we have a visual?’

‘Yes, sir. Coming on-screen now. It’s a direct feed from our satellites.’

They waited with baited breath. Although Beijing had deployed the missile defence system, there was no guarantee that it would work as advanced missiles tech could outsmart anything.

Thirty million people could die today, bringing one of the most powerful countries on Earth to its knees. It would be a blow that the human race would never recover from.

‘Sir, Chinese media have a visual from the ground. It’s live on TV.’

‘Coming on screen two now.’

They could see alarm bells ringing in all parts of Beijing. Mass evacuation was being undertaken with whatever time they had on their hands. It was chaos—

stampedes on the streets, looting in shops, burglaries in houses.

They saw the missile enter the Chinese airspace over their waters and got their second shock. The missile, which was supposed to travel all the way to Beijing, blasted mid-way in the air as soon as it entered their airspace.

‘What stopped it?’ asked Cooper, mouth wide open.

No one had the answer.

The blast shook the earth below with shockwaves. This was followed by a brilliant flash of light and a loud booming sound. A firestorm raged on all sides.

Any human who might have seen the blast with naked eyes was sure to have lost their vision to the intensity of the light. A blast such as this one had not been seen by humanity since the atomic blast at Nagasaki in 1945.

‘Mother of God! That was at least a five-megaton yield nuclear warhead. It would have been enough to annihilate Beijing,’ said the defence secretary.

Suddenly, it looked as though the firestorm was contained in a giant invisible dome spanning a radius of two kilometres. The massive ripples in the sea created by the blast didn’t escape the dome either.

‘What is that dome? How did it appear out of thin air?’ Cooper asked in disbelief. Beads of sweat had appeared on his forehead.

An invisible shield seemed to be preventing the blast from spreading into the airspace by creating an impenetrable dome. The water directly below had risen due to the blast, but only inside the dome. The sea

outside it was calm, as though nothing had happened. This technology was unheard of. History was being made.

Within minutes, the blast was diffused and the dome disappeared.

‘What just happened?’ Cooper asked. They stared at each other in silence.

‘It looked like a shield, sir. A nuclear shield,’ breathed out General Smith, the head of the US Army.

The sea and the sky were once again calm and clear.

‘General, did we just witness a demonstration of the Chinese nuclear shield?’

‘I’m afraid that seems to be the case, sir. That’s the reason Chinese media had cameras set up ahead of time to showcase it to the world,’ said Smith.

‘An invisible shield that can diffuse a nuclear explosion mid-air?’ he yelled and threw a chair at the screen. Everyone sat silently as it broke into pieces. ‘Would any of you say my reaction is uncalled for? Tell me!’ He banged his fists on the table.

‘No, sir.’

‘Do you know what this means? It means China can screw us at will.’



Prime Minister Acharya drank a glass of water as the occupants of the room looked at him, dumbstruck. No one had seen the PM sweat before but, then, no one had witnessed such an event either.

‘What was that, Jagan?’ he asked, trying to digest the gravity of what had unfolded in front of them.

‘Looks like some defence shield that can absorb blasts and diffuse the radiations.’ The Chinese media were playing the news in a loop, claiming the shield absorbs even the nuclear radiation after diffusing any fission or fusion particles; there was no trace of radiation whatsoever.

‘What do we know about this?’

‘It’s codenamed the Great Shield of China. We have no knowledge about the technology behind it but we know they have been experimenting for the last three decades. No one knew how far they had reached and whether it was feasible to deploy it on the field, but today we saw a demonstration,’ said Jagan.

‘So, we can’t strike back in case a war emerges with China?’

‘With such technology in their hands, no one can. We have very few options remaining against China now and they can strike us anytime.’

‘Do we have anything close to their shield technology?’ Acharya asked. ‘I know your ministry always has classified projects going on.’

‘Not that I know of. The Chinese have huge funding and a great determination for getting results in their advanced weaponry programme. Not to mention the success they had in their super-soldier programme.’

Acharya removed his spectacles and rubbed his face. The event was a game changer; it would totally shift the power balance in the world and could take Earth back to the dark ages.

‘Any reports on who authorized it?’

‘It cannot be a planned strike. Something’s cooking on the Chinese side. It was probably General Jian who orchestrated this. It’s not the typical Chinese way of operating; it’s too dramatic. The demonstration must have shaken the entire country; there was panic everywhere in Beijing.’

‘In that case, the situation is much worse than one could possibly imagine. It was very irresponsible of China to allow this. They have played a practical joke on themselves and the world ... It couldn’t have been worse for us; the Invisible Hand is raising its hood again and we know Jian is in bed with them. If he gets to power in China, it’s the end of peace in this world,’ Acharya said.

There was a long silence.

‘Let’s call an emergency meeting of the defence forces and the Security Council,’ he spoke after some time. ‘Next, let’s speak with the US President and the allies. In parallel, start discussions with the Chinese and the UN to bring peace to the region.’

The mood in the room was grim and it was not without reason.

‘Prepare for war without triggering any panic. It’s only a matter of time.’