



ASHVATTHAMA
THE ETERNAL CURSE
NIKHIL BAJAJ

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The Eternal Curse

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Author's Note

On Echoes, Eternity, and a Little Girl's Questions

There are characters in our grand epics who leap off the page, their triumphs celebrated, their wisdom revered. And then there are those who linger in the shadows, their stories a tapestry of pain, regret, and a profound, echoing silence. Ashvatthama, son of Drona, warrior of the Mahabharata, is one such soul – a name synonymous with an unending torment, a curse that stretches beyond lifetimes.

To write about Ashvatthama is to walk a path laden with sorrow and to confront the weight of choices made in the heat of battle, choices that ripple through eternity. It's a journey into the heart of what it means to be burdened by immortality, not as a gift, but as a relentless penance. What does one do with endless time, when that time is filled only with the ghosts of the past and the agony of a wound that never heals?

This story, "Ashvatthama: The Eternal Curse," is an attempt to explore that very question. It's about the man behind the curse, the warrior beneath the infamy, and the sliver of humanity that might still flicker in an existence defined by suffering.

But more than anything, this story, in its own way, is for Riham, my bright, curious, eight-year-old star.

My dearest Riham,

You might wonder why papa chose to write about someone so ancient and so sad. You, with your sunshine laughter and your eyes that find wonder in the smallest things, might find Ashvatthama's world very different from yours. And it is.

But even in the oldest stories, my love, there are lessons that whisper to us. Ashvatthama's tale, in its own somber way, reminds us how important our choices are, how much our actions matter, and how sometimes, the biggest battles are the ones fought inside our own hearts.

As you grow, you'll encounter many stories – some happy, some adventurous, some a little bit sad like this one. My wish for you is that you always keep asking questions, just like you do now. May you see the courage it takes to face difficult things, and may you always, always choose kindness and understanding.

This book is a journey into a very old legend, but it was your youthful spirit, your boundless imagination, and the simple joy you find in stories that kept me company as I wrote. Perhaps, one day, you'll read this and understand the complex world of Ashvatthama, but for now, just know

that even in the darkest tales, an author can be guided by the brightest of lights – and you, my Riham, are mine.

Thank you for being the most wonderful story in my life.

With all my love,

Nikhil Bajaj
Tech Professional | Storyteller-in-Progress

Glossary of terms

This glossary provides brief explanations of some key characters, concepts, and terms from the Mahabharata and from the novel "Ashvatthama: The Eternal Curse."

Mahabharata & Puranic Terms:

- **Arjuna:** One of the five Pandava brothers, a supreme archer, and a central hero of the Mahabharata. He was a disciple of Drona, alongside Ashvatthama.
- **Ashvatthama** (Aśvatthāmā): The son of Guru Dronacharya and Kripa. A powerful Maharathi warrior who fought on the side of the Kauravas. He is one of the Chiranjeevis (immortals), cursed by Krishna to roam the earth for millennia in suffering due to his heinous actions at the end of the Kurukshetra War.
- **Astra:** A celestial weapon, often divinely bestowed and invoked by powerful mantras (incantations). These weapons possessed immense destructive power.
- **Brahmastra** (Brahmāstra): A divine weapon of immense power, capable of great destruction. Ashvatthama possessed this weapon and infamously used it against the Pandavas and later against the unborn Parikshit.
- **Brahmashirsha Astra** (Brahmaśīrṣa Astra): An even more powerful celestial weapon than the Brahmastra, said to be capable of destroying the world. Ashvatthama also possessed this knowledge.
- **Chiranjeevi** (Cirañjīvi): Literally "long-lived" or "immortal". In Hindu tradition, these are beings cursed or blessed to live until the end of the current Kali Yuga, or even longer. Ashvatthama is one of the most prominent Chiranjeevis, his immortality being a curse.
- **Dharma:** A complex term encompassing concepts of righteousness, duty, cosmic law, moral order, and virtue. Adherence to one's Dharma is a central theme in the Mahabharata.
- **Draupadi** (Draupadī): The wife of the five Pandava brothers. Ashvatthama incurred her profound wrath by slaughtering her five sons in their sleep.
- **Drona** (Droṇāchārya): Ashvatthama's father, the royal preceptor to both the Pandavas and Kauravas, and a master of advanced military arts. His death in the war deeply impacted Ashvatthama.
- **Duryodhana** (Duryodhana): The eldest of the Kaurava brothers and the primary antagonist to the Pandavas. Ashvatthama was fiercely loyal to him.
- **Kali Yuga:** The current and final of the four ages (Yugas) in a world cycle in Hindu cosmology. It is considered an age of darkness, strife, and degeneration, which Ashvatthama is cursed to endure.

- **Karma:** The principle of cause and effect, where an individual's actions (karma) determine their destiny in this life and future lives. Ashvatthama's suffering is a direct consequence of his karma.
- **Kauravas** (Kaurava): The hundred sons of King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari, who were the cousins and primary antagonists of the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra War.
- **Kripa** (Kṛpāchārya): Ashvatthama's maternal uncle and also a Chiranjeevi. He was a respected teacher and warrior who fought for the Kauravas.
- **Krishna** (Kṛṣṇa): An avatar of the god Vishnu, a central figure in the Mahabharata. He was a cousin, friend, and guide to the Pandavas. It was Krishna who cursed Ashvatthama for his brutal actions.
- **Kshatriya** (Kṣatriya): The warrior and ruling class in the traditional Hindu varna system. Their dharma involved warfare, protection of the people, and governance.
- **Kurukshetra** (Kuruṣetra): The sacred plain in present-day Haryana, India, where the epic Mahabharata War was fought.
- **Mahabharata** (Mahābhārata): One of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India. It narrates the struggle between two groups of cousins in the Kurukshetra War and the fates of the Kaurava and the Pandava princes.
- **Mani** (Divine Gem): A divine jewel that Ashvatthama was born with on his forehead, granting him power over all living beings lower than humans and protecting him from hunger, thirst, and fatigue. Krishna ordered him to surrender this gem as part of his punishment.
- **Pandavas** (Pāṇḍava): The five sons of King Pandu and Kunti/Madri: Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. They were the principal heroes of the Mahabharata.
- **Parikshit** (Parīkṣit): The son of Abhimanyu (Arjuna's son) and Uttara. Ashvatthama attempted to kill him in his mother's womb using the Brahmastra, but he was saved by Krishna. He became the successor to the Pandava throne.
- **Rishi** (Ṛṣi): A sage or seer, often possessing great wisdom and spiritual power.
- **Sauptika Parva** (Sauptika Parvan): The tenth book of the Mahabharata, which details Ashvatthama's horrific night-time raid on the Pandava camp, where he killed Draupadi's sons and other warriors in their sleep.
- **Vyasa** (Vyāsa): A revered sage, traditionally credited as the author of the Mahabharata. He is also a Chiranjeevi and played a significant role in the epic's events.
- **Yudhishtira** (Yudhiṣṭhira): The eldest Pandava brother, known for his adherence to dharma and truth.

Novel-Specific Lore:

- **Echo-Catcher:** A term used by Amma Ratan to describe Riham Singh, implying an ability to perceive and interact with echoes of the past, energies, and ancient knowledge.
- **Great Seal:** An ancient, intricate web of incandescent energy, woven with unimaginable complexity, designed to hold back a roiling, chaotic darkness or void from a previous cosmic cycle. Its stability is tied to celestial alignments, resonant frequencies, and anchor points like Amma Ratan's shrine. It is currently decaying with the progression of the Kali Yuga.
- **Kalavritta (The Circle of Time):** A clandestine organization worshipping cycles rather than gods, believing the Yuga cycle has stagnated. They seek a "necessary purification" through collapse and revere the Kshanik-Veda. In the past, they sought "Kshanik-Mukti" – liberation through impermanence – by erasing historical records.
- **Kshanik-Veda:** An esoteric, lost scripture revered by the Kalavritta. It is described as a living entity that updates itself with each age, a dynamic, evolving consciousness encoded in geometry, mantra, and silence, rather than just a physical text. Riham eventually understands it as a chamber, a wound in time.
- **Mnemonic Conductor:** A black glass rod given to Riham by Ashvatthama, described as a tool that "triggers echoes, drawing them forth from the past". Riham learns it can also amplify her resonant abilities, potentially record or imprint echoes, and interact with ancient energies. It is later referred to by Sharma's specialists as "The hidden loom".
- **Resonant Key:** A complex energetic pattern or harmonic sequence perceived by Riham within the Protectors' lament. It is understood to be a diagnostic tool for the Great Seal's decay and a protocol for its controlled unravelling (failsafe), but also potentially a guide for reinforcing or mending its failing threads.
- **Shakti-Vahaka:** A term from esoteric lore used by Sharma to describe a "bearer, or conductor, of power". He believes Riham, through her connection to Suvrata, is such an individual.
- **Shakti-Shilpi:** Riham's understanding of Suvrata (and potentially her own evolving role) as an "artisan of power, a weaver of the very energies that underpinned reality", implying a more active and skilled manipulation of resonant energies than a mere bearer.
- **Star-Seal (Saptarishi-Mudra):** An artifact of dark, fire-treated clay given to Riham by Amma Ratan. It is a "key of echo," a focus to align one's inner constellations with cosmic harmonies and sacred site energies. It resonates with a copper twin found in a hidden chamber, which acts as a relay station or amplifier for the Great Seal's network.
- **Suvrata:** Riham's past life, a scribe and an artisan of power (shakti-shilpi) from an ancient epoch who understood and worked with the energies of the Great Seal and the Kshanik-Veda. Sharma believes her lineage carries hereditary resonant abilities.

- **The Unravelling:** The catastrophic breakdown of the Great Seal and the subsequent chaotic alteration of reality, ushering in an age of instability and the emergence of previously contained void energies or entities.
- **The Watchers:** Ancient, non-human intelligences with vast power and an inscrutable agenda concerning the Great Seal and the turning of the Yugas. They attempt to co-opt Riham to trigger the Seal's failsafe according to their design.

Prologue: The Wound That Walks

“Some are cursed to die.

Others are cursed to remember.

But the rarest ones are cursed to live,

So, the world does not forget.”

—Inscription found on a broken copper seal, unearthed near Dholavira, Kutch

I. The Desert of Antiquity

The Rann of Kutch held its breath, a vast, desolate expanse that seemed to absorb all sound, all fleeting human whispers. It wasn't merely the dry, relentless wind that scoured the salt pans, nor the rustle of shifting dunes that permeated the air, but a deeper, ancient thrum. It was a vibration felt more than heard, a profound vibration trapped beneath the earth, a forgotten lament that the very land seemed to have swallowed whole, a secret the world had long since abandoned. The air hung dry and bitter, clinging to the throat, a metallic tang of ancient dust, and the horizon stretched endlessly, pale and stark, like a wound that refused to scab over, bleeding silently into the vast, indifferent emptiness.

He walked across this unforgiving landscape. His bare feet, calloused and hardened by uncounted millennia, moved with a slow, steady rhythm, each step a testament to an unbearable endurance, a silent defiance against the ceaseless march of time. A coarse, undyed shawl, woven from fibres long forgotten by textile looms, draped over shoulders that seemed to bear the cumulative weight of all human sorrows, of forgotten empires and whispered curses. His skin, a tapestry of dry, cracked lines like ancient bark, spoke of an existence far beyond the natural span of human life, an impossible longevity that defied the very laws of decay. His eyes, deep-set and shadowed beneath a perpetually furrowed brow, reflected neither the wide-eyed innocence of youth nor the weary resignation of old age, but rather a tumultuous storm, a tempest of both, held captive within their fathomless depths. And from the very center of his forehead, precisely where the third eye might have opened, a fresh rivulet of blood, thin and dark, a living crimson thread, defied the relentless march of time, sliding perpetually downward, a constant, chilling reminder of his unending torment. He made no move to wipe it away; he never had. He had been bleeding for five thousand years.

His name, once spoken with reverence and awe in the hallowed halls of Hastinapur, was Ashvatthama. He was the son of Drona, the revered guru of princes, the greatest teacher of warfare, and the last valiant commander of the Kaurava army, a loyal and formidable force in a

cataclysmic conflict. He was a warrior, forged in the crucible of fire and guided by the unwavering principles of dharma, a man of profound martial prowess. Yet, he was also a man cursed by a god to become something the world no longer recognized, a living paradox. He was not merely a legend whispered around campfires, nor was he a demon summoned from the dark. He was a wound that walked.

II. The Curse

That night, etched into the very fabric of his being, remained as vivid and agonizingly clear as the moment it had unfolded. Kurukshetra. The great war, a cataclysm that had reshaped the very foundations of the world, leaving behind a scarred and grieving land, was finally over. Duryodhana lay broken and defeated on the battlefield, his once-indomitable will shattered. The Pandavas, champions of righteousness, or so the bards sang, had emerged victorious, their triumph echoing across the plains. But for Ashvatthama, there was no echo of triumph, no taste of victory—only the bitter, acidic sting of betrayal, a poison that seeped into his very soul.

His father, Drona, the greatest of teachers, a paragon of wisdom and martial prowess, had not fallen honourably in battle, sword in hand, facing his enemies. He had been slain through a cruel, deceitful trick, a lie, whispered by the righteous Yudhishtira, a man renowned for his unwavering adherence to truth, who had never once uttered a falsehood in his life. Ashvatthama knew, with a certainty that gnawed at his soul like a relentless predator, that this was Krishna's game, a divine manipulation orchestrated from the shadows, a cosmic chess match with mortal lives as pawns. And so, overwhelmed by a searing storm of sorrow, a grief so profound it twisted into a thirst for his own brutal brand of justice, he sought retribution.

In the pre-dawn darkness, a silence thick with the scent of death and damp earth, he crept into the sleeping Pandava camp, a vindictive phantom. Driven by a vengeful madness that clouded his judgment, he murdered Draupadi's five sleeping sons, believing them, in his blinding rage, to be seasoned warriors. But they were not warriors. They were children. Innocents. The sun rose, painting the sky with hues of nascent horror, crimson streaks across the dawn, and with it, the screams began, tearing through the quiet camp. And then, Krishna came, his presence radiating an inescapable power, a quiet authority that silenced the very air.

"You have not slain warriors," Krishna's voice resonated, calm yet devastating, each word a hammer blow to Ashvatthama's soul. "You have murdered the future."

Ashvatthama's sword, heavy with the weight of innocent blood, clattered to the ground, a metallic groan in the sudden quiet. Krishna's gaze, unyielding and condemnatory, pierced him to the core, stripping away his very essence. "For this, you shall live—but never heal. You shall walk this earth until the end of the Yuga. Alone. Bleeding. Watching. Remembering".

Then, with a touch that seared through flesh and spirit, a divine fire that left no mark yet burned eternally, Krishna touched him—precisely between the eyes. The pain came instantly, a blinding, all-consuming agony that transcended mere physical torment. And with it, the blood began to flow. It never stopped.

III. A Thousand Deaths

For centuries, the singular purpose of his existence was to find an end that would not come, a sweet release that remained a cruel mockery. He yearned for oblivion, for the profound quiet of death, but it remained elusive, always just beyond his grasp. He sought out the most virulent poisons known to the Siddha alchemists of Tamilakam, concoctions capable of felling armies, yet for him, they turned to nectar upon his tongue, a taste of fleeting sweetness. He scaled the treacherous, icy peaks of Mount Kailash, defying the biting winds and thin air, to hurl himself into the abyss, only to find his bones knitting back together in mere hours, his body defying the crushing impact, spitting him back into accursed life. He buried himself deep within Samudra caves during the fury of cyclones, praying for the sea to swallow him whole, to extinguish the spark of his accursed life. But death, a malevolent entity, only laughed at his futile attempts, a mocking, unseen presence.

Fire, a force that consumed all, scorched his skin, yet left no lasting mark, no permanent scar on his accursed flesh. Even the most ravenous wolves, their hunger driving them to feast on his flesh, fell ill and died, their bodies unable to stomach the cursed essence of his being. In the year 1206, driven by an insatiable desire for an end, a desperate longing for oblivion, he volunteered for Alauddin Khilji's suicide cavalry, a desperate charge into the maw of certain death. He returned, the sole survivor, his face untouched by the arrows that had rained down upon his comrades, his life clinging to him with relentless tenacity. In 1857, amidst the brutal Siege of Delhi, he stood defiantly before British cannons, a solitary pistol clutched in his hand, inviting the oblivion he craved. They shot him twice in the heart. He lived.

He walked through the charred ruins of Hiroshima in 1945, mere hours after the atomic bomb had unleashed its devastating fury, barefoot and weeping amidst the ashes, a silent testament to human destruction. His skin did not blister; the radiation, a silent, invisible killer, somehow

avoided him, unable to touch his cursed form. In 1991, near Kanyakumari, he laid himself down on the rails, awaiting the final southbound freight train, hoping its monstrous weight would finally grant him release. It was delayed that night. He attempted drowning, prolonged fasting, the unforgiving bite of freezing cold. Nothing worked. He was not alive in the human sense of the word. Nor was he dead in the divine. He was cursed into being.

IV. A Spectator in History

Sometimes, he deliberately avoided the turbulent currents of history, seeking the solace of forgotten corners of the world, places where time seemed to slow, where the echoes of humanity were faint. Yet, at other times, he found himself inextricably drawn into its tumultuous flow, a silent, unwilling participant. He walked the crumbling ruins of Nalanda as the fires consumed its ancient texts, watching centuries of invaluable knowledge vanish into ash, a profound sorrow etched on his face. He was mistaken for a ghost during the brutal plunder of Somnath, a silent witness to sacrilege, his presence an unseen testament to human avarice. He walked alongside Shivaji through treacherous mountain passes, adopting the name "Tatya," never once revealing the perpetual wound upon his forehead, his true identity concealed. In 1897, amidst the devastating plague that swept through Bombay, he carried sick children out of the quarantined streets, his ancient strength undiminished, only to be chased by superstitious priests who believed him to be possessed by malevolent spirits. He once warned Gandhi, on a bustling railway platform, about a coming storm, a tempest of change that would reshape the nation. The Mahatma, with a serene smile, blessed him, unaware of the ancient burden the man carried, unaware of the vast stretches of time he had witnessed. He met no one twice, a solitary figure traversing the tapestry of time, a transient presence in a constantly changing world.

And yet, the world always called him back. His wound, a constant throb of ancient pain, pulsed stronger when the world teetered on the brink of disaster, when chaos threatened to consume everything, as if time itself was inexplicably tied to his accursed body. But the world, caught in the relentless march of progress and reason, no longer believed in him. Not even in curses. Only the ancient land itself recognized his presence, the deep earth remembering its oldest secrets.

V. The Girl and the Seal

Her name was Riham. She was not supposed to be part of the dig team that fateful week, a twist of fate that would unravel centuries of forgotten truths and pull her into a destiny she could scarcely imagine. An independent researcher, specializing in the complex hydrology of the proto-Indus civilization, Riham possessed an innate impatience for myths, viewing them as entertaining

but ultimately fictional constructs, and an even deeper disdain for the intricate dance of politics that often entangled academic pursuits. Her upbringing had been a unique blend of archaeological sites and ancient scriptures, rendering her fluent in both the intricate details of Sanskrit inscriptions and the subtle art of bureaucratic evasion, a necessary skill in her field.

The Gujarat excavation was meant to be a routine affair – a collapsed stepwell near Bhuj, choked with layers of sediment accumulated over centuries of relentless flooding, a straightforward archaeological task. What they unearthed, however, was neither Harappan nor Vedic. It was pre-temporal, existing beyond the conventional boundaries of known history, defying established timelines. On the ninth day of the dig, amidst the swirling dust and ancient earth, her trowel struck something hard and unyielding. She found it – a copper seal, lodged stubbornly in blackened stone, buried under what carbon dating would later unequivocally declare to be nearly 7000 years of layered history. It was older than any known city grid, its surface marked not with legible text, but with interwoven conduits, intricate patterns converging into a singular, central figure. Upright. Unadorned. Bleeding. Etched beneath, in a script that no epigrapher could identify, a proto-script from a time before recognized languages, was a single, resonant name: Ashvatthama.

When Riham's fingertips brushed against its ancient surface, the earth itself seemed to exhale, a deep, primal sigh that vibrated through her very bones. She blacked out, the world dissolving into a profound darkness. She awoke hours later, the name already forming on her lips, a whispered utterance that felt both foreign and intimately familiar, a profound recognition. She didn't know how she knew it, nor why it felt as though she had always known it, a piece of knowledge imprinted on her very soul. That night, her dreams were haunted by the spectral image of a battlefield, shrouded in a chilling mist, and a lone man, bleeding perpetually, his ancient eyes watching her with an unsettling intensity that pierced her waking thoughts.

VI. The Kalavritta: Keepers of the Cycle

They called themselves Kalavritta – The Circle of Time. To the waking world, they were phantoms, a whispered myth,

The Kalavritta, a clandestine society whose name means "Circle of Time," has silently influenced events across epochs.

Their origins trace back to ancient ascetics, disgraced scholars, and exiled mystics unified by a belief in cosmic cycles.

Operating in shadow, the Kalavritta meticulously orchestrates events to ensure that history unfolds according to their interpretation of ancient prophecies.

Their doctrine revolves around the notion that humanity must experience cyclical destruction and rebirth to achieve cosmic balance.

A clandestine organization that simply did not exist, their presence as elusive as smoke. Their members, ethereal figures, possessed no permanent homes, left no discernible records, and cast no digital footprints upon the modern age, moving through the world like unseen currents. Forged from the ranks of excommunicated monks, brilliant but failed mathematicians, and scriptural extremists, they worshipped not gods, but cycles. Their fervent belief was that the Yuga cycle, the grand cosmic dance of ages, had grown stagnant, its natural decay arrested, holding the world in a perpetual, undesirable state. The Kali Yuga, the age of strife and darkness, was not progressing swiftly enough for their grim prophecy of ultimate purification. The sins of the age, they observed with chilling detachment, had become sustainable, efficient, and, most disturbingly, monetized, allowing humanity to comfortably perpetuate its own downfall. They believed in collapse – not as a destructive force, but as a necessary purification, a violent but essential reset.

The Kalavritta revered a lost scripture, an esoteric text known as the Kshanik-Veda. This sacred text was said to update itself with every passing age, a living entity that defied the confines of paper and ink, constantly evolving. It was not merely a book, but a dynamic, evolving consciousness, passed through time like a sacred fire in a sealed chamber, its flame never dying. They believed it to be buried, guarded, hidden from unworthy eyes. And they believed the cursed man, the bleeding, eternal warrior, was its sentinel. Ashvatthama – the bloodied threshold of the Kshanik-Veda, the living gate to their ultimate truth. To awaken the scripture, to unleash its transformative power, they needed the wound-bearer to bleed within the sacred chamber once more. But he had vanished, lost to the annals of history, a phantom even to them. And now, through a forgotten relic unearthed by Riham's innocent hand, he had stirred again, a dormant power beginning to hum to life, resonating across the ancient land.

The Kshanik-Veda was no ordinary scripture. It existed in a state beyond ink or voice, etched not on paper but within shifting geometric forms and ever-changing patterns that evolved with each era.

The Kshanik-Veda, often referred to as the "Momentary Scripture," transcends conventional texts.

Its wisdom exists beyond static ink and paper, evolving through patterns, symbols, and geometric alignments, responsive to the seeker's perception and intent.

Interaction with the Kshanik-Veda is not merely an intellectual pursuit but an immersive experience that reshapes understanding and identity.

The Veda is guarded by esoteric rituals and concealed within ancient structures, awaiting those deemed worthy of its profound revelations.

Unlike static texts, it responded to context—it resisted being read passively. Scholars who gazed upon it saw not the same words twice, for the Veda tuned itself to the seeker's depth of understanding. It is said that it stores memory not in narrative but in recursion, where the very act of recognition was the mechanism of access. Ancient protectors guarded its whereabouts through symbolic misdirection, disguising maps as myths and truths as riddles. To awaken the Veda was to risk your identity dissolving into the folds of time itself.

VII. The Desert Shifts

Ashvatthama stood in the open salt flats of the Rann, the vast expanse stretching around him like a canvas of bleached despair, devoid of all life. His brow throbbed with an intensity that transcended physical pain, a deep, internal ache that mirrored the ancient wound on his forehead. And the fresh rivulet of blood, his eternal torment, grew heavier, a testament to a connection re-established, a bond reforged across millennia. He felt it—a taut string in his chest, pulled to an unbearable tension, vibrating with an ancient energy that spoke of awakened power. The copper seal, ancient and potent, had been touched. The great wheel of time, which he had silently observed for millennia, had turned once more, setting in motion events long dormant. “Another Yuga begins,” he whispered, his voice a dry rasp against the whispering wind, a sound like ancient leaves crumbling to dust, laden with the weight of centuries.

And far away, nestled within a research camp dimly lit by the harsh glow of floodlamps, Riham stared at the copper seal resting in her palm. She was blissfully unaware that her discovery would not merely rewrite history, altering dusty scrolls and academic theories. It would awaken it. It would unleash forces that had long slumbered, hidden beneath the dust of ages, and draw her into a conflict that transcended the boundaries of mortal understanding, a battle between recognition and oblivion.

Chapter 1: The Desert Beneath the Dust

“What you unearth is never just in the ground. It’s always in you too.”

I. Gurugram: The House of Dust and Sarson

Riham’s earliest memories were a vibrant montage of sensory impressions: the comforting scent of spice jars mingling with the earthy aroma of wet soil after a monsoon shower, a smell that promised life and renewal, and the deep, metallic thrum of the Gurgaon Metro lines under construction, a pervasive hum that underscored her childhood in a rapidly changing world. Her world unfolded within the narrow confines of a familiar street in Palam Vihar, a time when Gurugram was still known by its older name, Gurgaon, its horizons not yet dominated by towering glass edifices and corporate parks, but by the more humble, evocative sights of woodsmoke curling from chimneys, endless laundry lines fluttering in the breeze like colourful prayer flags, and the bright, hopeful garlands of marigolds adorning temple gates, each one a small offering of faith.

The house she grew up in, a sturdy, two-story brick-and-lime structure, was built by her grandfather, its thick walls echoing with the vibrant tapestry of family life, of laughter and whispered secrets. The kitchen, a warm heart of the home, was perpetually busy with the cheerful clatter of pots and pans, the sizzle of spices blooming in hot oil, and the aroma of simmering curries that promised comfort and nourishment. The living room, a sanctuary of intellectual curiosity and familial comfort, was always cluttered with stacks of books, hastily prepared lunchboxes, and the faint, comforting sound of AIR Punjabi playing softly in the background, a gentle backdrop to their lives.

Her father, Nikhil Singh, was a government historian, a meticulous guardian of the past within the Ministry of Culture’s heritage division. A stern man, whose serious demeanour belied a profoundly soft heart, Nikhil had dedicated decades of his life to traversing the diverse landscapes of India, cataloguing forgotten ruins, documenting remote tribal shrines, and meticulously transcribing ancient temple inscriptions. His love for ancient India was not merely academic; it was an obsessive, meticulous passion, a devotion to the echoes of what once was. He favoured simple linen kurtas and always carried a fountain pen, a distinguished blue one, tucked into his front pocket—never any other colour, a small but telling detail of his precise and unwavering nature. Her mother, Saloni Singh, a research librarian at Jawaharlal Nehru University, was equally sharp-witted, fiercely independent, and possessed a surprisingly delightful sense of humour that could cut through any intellectual fog. If Nikhil brought the past into the present through his tireless explorations, Saloni ensured that the present was legible, ordered, and safely

preserved within the meticulously catalogued halls of the library, a conscientious keeper of knowledge.

Dinner conversations in the Singh household were never mundane. They were lively intellectual sparring matches, debates that ranged from the ethereal, discussing the nature of existence, to the deeply practical, dissecting modern politics. They debated whether the mythical Sarasvati River was a tangible geological reality or merely a poetic invention, a product of human imagination. They questioned whether Ravana, the antagonist of the Ramayana, was a purely villainous figure or a tragic hero, a victim of circumstance, a man undone by his own flaws. Puranas and poetry were treated with equal reverence, their narratives dissected, analysed, and celebrated. Yet, beneath the rigorous academic discourse, theirs was a profoundly warm and nurturing home, a haven of intellectual curiosity and deep affection. Riham grew up imbued with the understanding that history was not merely what one found within the pages of dusty books. It was also the subtle scent of turmeric-stained heirlooms, the tactile sensation she felt when touching the peeling paint of an ancient haveli wall, or the profound recognition she perceived in the drowsy voice of a grandmother retelling epic Mahabharata stories during a blackout, their wisdom woven into the very fabric of existence, a living history.

From a remarkably young age, Riham was distinctly different from the other girls in her class. While her peers were engrossed in cartoon serials and the fleeting joy of collecting stickers, Riham meticulously collected fossils, each one a tangible link to a primeval past, a piece of deep time in her small hands. She meticulously drew intricate floor plans of lost temples in the back pages of her textbooks, their imagined grandeur unfolding beneath her careful hand, their secrets waiting to be unearthed. Her obsessions were not fleeting whims but deep-seated fascinations: sediment and sound—how ancient ruins cracked and crumbled under the relentless assault of monsoon waters, their slow decay a testament to time, and how languages died, yet left indelible footprints, silent echoes in the evolving linguistic landscape.

Her first tangible brush with the raw, exhilarating reality of archaeology came at the tender age of eleven, when Nikhil took her to the Harappan ruins near Kalibangan. There, amidst the grey ware pottery and brittle bones of a long-lost civilization, she touched a shard of pottery, its surface bearing an unrecognizable symbol etched into its ancient clay. The archaeologist on site, a seasoned but perhaps less perceptive figure, dismissed it as insignificant. But Riham felt a distinct static charge in her fingers, an almost imperceptible hum, as if the fragment had somehow transmitted a message to her across the vast chasm of time. That was the pivotal moment. From then on, she knew, with an unshakeable certainty, that her life would be dedicated to digging—not just for the objects, but for the profound historical knowledge they held.

II. The Path of Dust and Discipline

Riham's educational journey was neither easy nor linear. On paper, she was an average student, easily distracted by the profound mysteries of the world that rarely appeared on standardized tests. Yet, outside the rigid confines of the classroom, she was relentlessly driven, her curiosity a boundless well. During school holidays, she shadowed excavation teams in the arid landscapes of Rajasthan, her enthusiasm undimmed by the scorching sun and endless dust. She meticulously documented vanishing folk traditions during vibrant harvest festivals, absorbing the rich tapestry of Indian culture, its ancient roots still alive. By the age of seventeen, she had already begun working part-time at the Archaeological Archives Repository in New Delhi, immersing herself in the dusty scrolls and forgotten narratives of the past, inhaling the scent of history.

At Delhi University, she carved her own academic path, specializing in ancient Indian urbanism, with a complementary minor in paleo-script systems. She devoured more epic poems than economic theories, her intellectual curiosity drawn to the grand narratives of ancient India, its rich mythology and history. Her thesis, a ground-breaking exploration, focused on mythic cartography—a study of how legendary places like Lanka, Hastinapur, and Indraprastha, though geographically fluid, transcended eras, never truly vanishing from the collective consciousness. She argued, with fierce conviction, that India was not merely built atop layers of history; it was inherently layered inside it, a palimpsest of time and recognition, a living testament to the past. Her professors, while acknowledging her fierce focus and unwavering refusal to speculate without concrete evidence, also noted her occasional discomfort with established authority. She challenged accepted chronologies. Debated dating methods with incisive clarity. Pushed relentlessly for the integration of rich oral histories into mainstream historical interpretation, seeking a more holistic understanding of the past.

It was during a two-month excavation at an abandoned Jain monastic cave in the rugged terrain of Bundelkhand that she made what she considered her first truly significant discovery—a half-obliterated mantra fragment, carved in an older-than-expected Prakrit form, its ancient syllables whispering secrets across millennia. This ground-breaking find earned her publication in the prestigious *Indian Journal of Subcontinental Archaeology* and, more importantly, a coveted research assistantship with the renowned Professor Asha Kulkarni. And it was Kulkarni who, five years later, sent her the email that would irrevocably alter the course of her life.

The subject line, cryptic and intriguing, read: "Layer 9. Bhuj. Unusual anomaly." The message itself was brief, almost terse: "There's something. I think it's older than the site. And it shouldn't be here. If you can come, do." Attached was a single, blurred image: a copper seal, partially

obscured by dust, its surface etched with an unusual pattern. Barely visible on its bottom edge, a name: Ashvatthama.

Riham didn't hesitate for a moment. She packed her satchel with the efficiency of a seasoned archaeologist, booked her train ticket to the desert, and called her father. Nikhil answered on the second ring, his voice oddly steady, almost expectant.

"So, it begins?" he asked.

"I think so," she replied, a strange mix of apprehension and exhilaration in her own voice, a thrill of discovery.

There was a profound pause, thick with unspoken understanding, a shared knowledge that stretched back to her childhood. Then his voice returned, softer now, imbued with a gentle solemnity. "Remember what your Dadi used to say? Some stories wait in the ground for the right person to pass by. Don't let it follow you home unless you're ready to carry it."

Riham smiled, a faint tremor of unease creeping up her neck despite the warmth of his words. "I won't. I promise." But promises, like ancient relics, were things the earth, with its deep and patient history, did not always respect.

Her father, Nikhil Singh... his love for ancient India was not merely academic; it was an obsessive, meticulous passion... She remembered stumbling upon one particularly dense folder years ago, one he'd dismissed as 'esoteric geology' when she'd asked. It was cryptically labelled 'Chthonic Resonances.' Inside were scans of water-damaged parchments. One, seemingly from a forgotten bestiary, had a translation in Nikhil's neat hand: 'Where the earth's breath is deep, time itself lies tethered. The guardians of the sunless strata count not in solar years, but in the slow, rhythmic pulse of the telluric heart. To such beings, an age of man is but a fleeting dream, a single exhalation.' Beside this, a scribbled note in a more urgent script: 'Not allegory. Resonance patterns match the deeper seismic anomalies. Elemental guardians. The passages are real. Possible sustained bio-stasis for organic entities attuned to the frequency. They could be down there. They are down there.' Riham had barely understood it then, filing it away as another of her father's more fantastical tangents...

III. Bhuj: The Wind Beneath the Layers

The journey to Gujarat was, as Riham expected, far from glamorous. She preferred the slow trains, the erratic buses, the kind of travel that left her skin caked in fine sand and her mind

brimming with the whispers of unseen histories, the unfolding narrative of the land. She took the Shatabdi to Ahmedabad, where the city pulsed with the vibrant energy of festival lights and the rhythmic drone of garba rehearsals, a stark contrast to her intended destination, the quiet desolation of the dig site. Then came the sleeper train to Bhuj—a smaller, sleepier town where the air, thick and heavy, carried the distinct, evocative scent of burnt salt and cumin, a fragrance of the arid plains.

Professor Asha Kulkarni had arranged for her pickup by a local volunteer, a wiry man named Tejan, who spoke little but drove with the unwavering focus of a monk in prayer, his eyes fixed on the distant horizon. Few words were exchanged during the two-hour drive to the site, allowing Riham to immerse herself in the shifting landscape unfolding outside the window. Fields of parched earth gradually gave way to the skeletal remains of dried riverbeds, then to scrubland, and finally, to something infinitely older, a land steeped in ancient time. Crumbling watchtowers, half-swallowed by the relentless march of sand, stood as silent sentinels of a forgotten past. A gnarled banyan tree, its ancient branches twisted into a shape that resembled a silent question mark, seemed to beckon her deeper into the land's mysteries.

Tejan, who had been mostly silent, gestured vaguely towards the shimmering salt flats visible in the distance. "The Rann, she is a strange mother," he said, his voice low. "Holds many secrets. Old folks, they whisper stories of the Luni Dai – the Salt Mother, an oracle who can taste the past in the crystals and reads the destinies in the stars. They say she guards a hidden way, known only to the ancient winds." He chuckled, a dry sound. "Just tales to scare the children, of course. But the desert remembers everything."

Finally, they arrived at the dig zone—a humble scattering of tents, meticulously laid surveyor's lines, and the faint, almost imperceptible sound of brushes sweeping away centuries of accumulated soil, a quiet ritual of uncovering. The main trench, the focal point of the excavation, sat nestled on a low hillock, flanked by ancient acacia trees that stood like silent guardians, their twisted forms bearing witness to countless ages. From above, the carefully layered cuts of the excavation looked like a wound opened by the earth itself, revealing its hidden depths, its stratigraphic memory laid bare.

Professor Kulkarni stood beside it, her face shaded by a floppy hat, a clipboard clutched firmly in her hand. "You're late," she said, her voice dry, devoid of true accusation, merely a statement of fact.

"The earth isn't going anywhere," Riham replied, a faint smile touching her lips, a shared understanding between them.

Kulkarni grinned, a rare, fleeting expression of warmth that softened her usually stern features. They embraced quickly, a brief, almost perfunctory gesture, the only softness either woman allowed herself amidst the rigors of their profession.

“This one’s strange,” Kulkarni said, leading her to the trench’s edge, her voice dropping to a near whisper, as if sharing a sacred secret. “Not just because it’s deep. It’s what’s in it. Or... what’s out of place.” Nine distinct layers of civilization had been meticulously uncovered, each marked by the faint yet undeniable traces of human endeavour: fragments of clay bricks, shards of ancient pottery, a single, exquisite bead of lapis lazuli. Even charred husks that might once have been grains of a forgotten harvest.

And then—Layer 9. A patch of earth unlike any other. Dark, impossibly dense, laced with fine ash and metallic fragments that glinted faintly in the slanting sunlight, hinting at a profound event. It carried a distinct smell—not of decay, but of something profoundly scorched long ago, something that defied the natural order by lasting this long. In its very center lay an seal, half-buried, partially obscured by the ancient soil. The copper seal. They hadn’t removed it yet, not fully. Only dusted it. Documented its precise location. And photographed it meticulously, awaiting Riham’s expert opinion, her discerning eye for the truly anomalous.

Riham crouched beside it, the late afternoon sun casting long, dramatic shadows across her face, deepening the lines of concentration. It was copper, darkened by the relentless passage of ages and the intense heat of an archaic fire. Circular in shape. Etched with concentric patterns—not perfectly symmetrical, but deliberate, imbued with a profound purpose that spoke of ancient knowledge. At the very core of the pattern lay a distinct mark. A symbol. No—a name. Ashvatthama. It wasn’t in Devanagari, the script of modern India. It wasn’t even classical Brahmi, the ancient script from which many Indian languages evolved. This script was older. Proto-script. Pre-literate. And yet... clear. The letters didn’t look written. They felt recognized, as though her mind instinctively understood them.

Riham’s hand trembled as she reached forward, her fingers hovering just above the ancient surface. And then—She felt something. A ripple deep within her blood, a profound and immediate recognition. She pulled back, her breath caught in her throat, a primal sensation coiling in her gut, a chill that had nothing to do with the desert air. Kulkarni, her gaze unwavering, watched her with a mixture of concern and a strange recognition.

“You felt it too.”

Riham nodded slowly, her mind struggling to process the impossible.

“We haven’t told anyone about the inscription yet,” Kulkarni added, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Didn’t want to... influence perceptions. You perceived the name before reading it. How?”

Riham couldn’t answer. Because she didn’t know.

IV. The Whispering Soil

That night, the desert wind didn’t howl with its usual ferocity; instead, it hummed, a low, resonant drone that seemed to vibrate through the very earth, a deep, ancient song. The excavation team, unnerved by the day’s strange discoveries, had retired early, seeking the fleeting comfort of sleep, a fragile escape from the unsettling reality. Riham lay on her rusted cot in the tent, her gaze fixed on the canvas ceiling where the erratic shadows of moths flickered against the hanging lantern, dancing like restless spirits, ill omens in the dim light. The day’s oppressive heat still radiated from the ground, clinging to everything like a second skin. The air in her tent smelled of old tarpaulin, sweat-soaked cotton, and the faint, earthy sting of disturbed soil, a primal scent of ancient secrets unearthed.

The copper seal, that enigmatic disc, had not left her thoughts. Ashvatthama. The name itself was not foreign to her. She had encountered it countless times: in the devotional bhajans sung in temples, in the captivating stories told in school, even in the casual jokes exchanged by old shopkeepers, a name woven into the very fabric of Indian folklore. The cursed warrior, condemned to roam the earth until the end of time, the blood from his forehead a perpetual testament to his ancient sin. The man who, in a moment of vengeful madness, had slaughtered Draupadi’s sons in their sleep. A tale, she had always believed, that was more legend than historical personage, a myth passed down through generations. But this seal wasn’t myth. It was copper. Real. Tangible. Buried for millennia. And it undeniably carried his name.

Riham turned on her side, pulled out her worn field journal, and began to scribble furiously, her pen scratching against the paper, trying to capture the elusive truth. “The mark is older than Brahmi. Possibly Indus-influenced, but not Harappan. The concentric patterns—seem deliberate. Not geometric. Not decorative. Almost... mnemonic.” She paused, chewing thoughtfully on the end of her pencil, her brow furrowed in concentration. “Why does it feel like it’s looking back?” Then she felt it again. A profound sense of a presence, a subtle shift in the air, a cold breath against her skin. Not from outside, carried on the wind. From the copper seal itself. Still packed securely in its lockbox, meticulously wrapped in archival gauze. She perceived a low, firm

presence, devoid of discernible gender, resonating deep within her. She shot upright, her heart thudding violently against her ribs, a cold sweat breaking out on her neck, a prickle of dread. She waited, every nerve alert. No movement. No further sensation. The profound silence of the desert night returned, heavy and oppressive, unbroken by any earthly sound.

In a tent two rows away, Farooq, the site's young epigraphy intern, had also woken in a cold sweat. He stared, wide-eyed, at the unzipped flap of his tent, where dust seemed to swirl in faint, patterned movements, dancing in the moonlit air. In the very center of the swirl, he perceived a faint footprint. Not human. Not animal. Something in between. He muttered a prayer beneath his breath, a desperate invocation, and quickly sealed his tent shut, as if to ward off an unseen presence, a shadow from the ancient past.

Near the perimeter of the dig site, a man stood, unnoticed, a silent sentinel in the vast darkness. He wore no badge. Carried no equipment. No distinguishing marks. His skin was brown, deeply sun-scorched, and his eyes were red-rimmed and dry, as if sleep had forever forsaken him. He was one of them. Kalavritta. He wasn't here to sabotage, not yet. He was here to observe. And to report that the cycle had, indeed, begun to turn.

In her sleep, Riham dreamt of blood. Not the visceral horror of violence—but the chilling weight of consequence, of ancient sin. She stood on a blackened plain, vast and desolate, beneath a sky choked with ash, the silence of a long-dead battlefield pressing in on her, a profound calm. In front of her, a towering figure, larger than any man she had ever seen, stood wrapped in robes tattered by centuries of silent wandering. His brow dripped crimson, an eternal wound, and his eyes, deep as ancient wells, seemed to encompass endless suffering, a profound sorrow. In his hand... he held a living, moving form, a coil of ancient power and knowledge, pulsating with an unseen energy. "The seal is not the key," he conveyed, his presence a ripple in the calm. "It's the door." Riham reached out, compelled by an invisible force, an irresistible pull. The moment her fingers brushed his hand, the earth beneath her trembled profoundly, a soundless, agonizing tremor that ripped through her very being, a cosmic shriek.

She woke gasping, her body convulsing, the cot rattling violently beneath her. The lantern, extinguished by an unseen force, left her in a profound darkness. Dust motes, suspended in the air, seemed to float mid-air, almost breathing, imbued with an eerie life. She sat there for what felt like hours, a chilling awareness settling upon her, a cold certainty. And the desert, vast and ancient, stayed awake with her.

V. Beneath the Stillness

The morning after the dream descended with an unnerving quiet – too quiet. The usual sounds of the dig site – the cheerful chatter, the rhythmic clang of tools striking earth – were muffled, swallowed by an unnatural hush, a profound absence of ordinary life. Even the birds, which had begun nesting around the outer trenches, seemed to have vanished, leaving behind an eerie void, a silence that spoke of something deeply wrong. A strange silence lay over the site like an invisible net, taut and oppressive, pressing down on everything.

Riham sat cross-legged by the trench, sipping bitter camp chai that tasted more of smoke than tea, her mind still reeling from the visceral dream. The copper seal, though safely locked away in a reinforced metal case nearby, its presence seemed to warp the very space around it, a silent, powerful anchor to unseen forces, a vortex of ancient energy.

Professor Kulkarni approached, her usual clipped, decisive stride replaced by an uncharacteristic slowness, her movements hesitant. She looked as though she hadn't slept either, her eyes shadowed with a shared apprehension, a silent acknowledgment of the unsettling events.

“I kept feeling the same sensation,” Kulkarni said without preamble, her voice a low murmur, barely above a whisper. “In my dreams.”

Riham turned toward her, a cold knot forming in her chest as a chilling recognition began to dawn. They both conveyed a shared understanding, almost in unison, a silent agreement between their minds.

Kulkarni exhaled slowly, a long, weary sigh. “I thought I was losing it. But then I checked my notes. There’s something you need to see.”

She led Riham back to the command tent—a makeshift sanctuary of canvas and repurposed furniture, its interior filled with the scent of old paper and stale coffee. From a battered file chest, Kulkarni pulled out a thick envelope, its faded label reading “Kalpi Site: 1997 — Fragment X.” Inside was a grainy photograph of an unmarked shard—bone or stone, it was difficult to tell—engraved with a distinct pattern. At its base, barely visible, was a symbol. The same proto-script mark for Ashvatthama.

“Found thirty feet below the riverbed,” Kulkarni explained, her voice hushed, as if speaking of forbidden knowledge. “At the time, we had no context. The site was declared geologically corrupted—too many mixed strata. It was archived and buried in paperwork.” Riham stared at the image, a profound sense of recognition, of an ancient connection, settling upon her, connecting the dots of history.

“Why bring it now?”

“Because there’s a pattern. The same sensation. The same pattern. The same impossibility.” They sat in a heavy silence, the weight of a dawning realization building palpably between them. This wasn’t the first time the pattern had surfaced. And every time it did, something in the world cracked, a fissure in the fabric of reality.

Elsewhere on the site, Farooq stood at the edge of the trench, staring fixedly into Layer 9. He held a piece of charcoal in one hand and his sketchbook in the other. Over the past 24 hours, consumed by an inexplicable compulsion, he had drawn the same shape over and over, not fully realizing it until this very moment. A distinct shape. Not just any shape. The exact same one on the copper seal. A strange obsession that he couldn't explain.

In the mess tent, Ameya, seemingly engrossed in a mundane task, was meticulously scribbling a coded email to a private address she hadn’t used in years, an address hidden deep within a forgotten network, a secret world within their world. Her fingers, usually steady, trembled almost imperceptibly as she typed. “Stage One confirmed. The bearer has been marked. The chamber threshold has opened.” She stared at the message, her gaze unreadable, her thoughts veiled, then backspaced the line, erasing it with a practiced caution. Too soon. The Kalavritta did not tolerate premature conclusions. Even among the faithful, caution was survival.

By sunset, the oppressive heat returned in shimmering waves, a tangible weight in the dry air, a suffocating presence. Riham walked the trench alone, her boots crunching softly on the compacted dust, each step echoing in the profound hush. The setting sun cast long, elongated shadows across the dig, making every excavated object seem infinitely older than its true age, imbued with a spectral quality. She paused beside the copper seal’s protective box, a heavy, unyielding container. Unlocked it. Inside, the copper disc pulsed faintly, a subtle, internal glow, though no external light touched it, a silent, internal fire. She reached out, her fingers trembling with a mixture of apprehension and an undeniable pull.

The moment her fingertips brushed the seal’s ancient surface, the world went silent, the desert wind a forgotten whisper. A pressure built behind Riham's eyes, and the air filled with the scent of ozone and millennia-old dust. It wasn't just a feeling; it was a low-frequency vibration that resonated up her arm, making her teeth ache. The intricate patterns on the copper seemed to writhe, to breathe. Her heart hammered, not from fear, but from a terrifying, exhilarating recognition, a chilling sensation. She gasped, a sharp, involuntary intake of breath. Behind her, a sudden gust of wind, inexplicable in the still air, scattered her meticulously organized notes

across the trench floor. She spun around, her heart pounding against her ribs. And from the far side of the trench, she saw them—just for a second. Two figures. Dressed like ordinary workers. Watching. Then, as quickly as they appeared, they were gone, swallowed by the deepening twilight. The Kalavritta had arrived.

VI. Ancient Marks in the Firelight

The copper seal, now a focal point of intense scrutiny, rested securely inside a reinforced containment box. It was meticulously wrapped in seven layers of archival gauze and further protected by ritual copper netting. This elaborate procedure was standard for ancient relics possessing potential mythic relevance, but Riham suspected it served more to offer a fragile peace of mind than actual preservation, a symbolic warding off of the unknown.

She couldn't escape the concentric patterns. They were everywhere. They manifested in her increasingly vivid dreams, haunting the landscapes of her subconscious, repeating in an endless loop. They appeared in the cracked mud at the trench's edge, faint yet undeniable patterns mirroring the ancient design, as if etched by an unseen hand. Even the formation of the clouds above the site at dusk seemed to mimic them—twisting inward, like water inexorably circling a drain, drawing everything to a central point. By the third day, driven by an obsessive compulsion rooted in her historical knowledge, a profound need to understand, she began to map them, meticulously charting their occurrences.

Kulkarni, observing Riham's intense focus, her unwavering dedication, granted her unrestricted access to the site's documentation tent, a sanctuary of charts and historical data. Riham meticulously pinned sketches, excavation photos, and aerial layouts—anything remotely circular—onto a makeshift board, her mind driven by a burgeoning theory. When viewed together, a chilling realization dawned upon her: the pattern wasn't merely decorative. It was topographical. The site itself had been excavated in an uncanny pattern—unintentional, yet unmistakably present. Every excavated layer curved subtly inward, as though following ancient instructions etched into the very land long before human hands had disturbed its surface.

And then came the journal. She had called her father for an update, his voice on the phone sounding tired but undeniably intrigued by her reports, his own historical curiosity piqued. He promised to delve into his vast personal archives, a labyrinth of forgotten files and hidden knowledge. Two hours later, her phone buzzed with a new message, a photo received on WhatsApp. It was a journal entry—one of his earliest, from the Kalibangan dig when she was a curious eleven-year-old. The hurried script read: "Saw her touch the shard today. No one else

reacted. But she... froze. Eyes wide. Perceived something responding. The mark was unreadable. A circle within a circle. A pattern, maybe? Not recorded in official notes. Marked for personal history. I will watch. Closely." Below that, in her father's unmistakable hand, a single, potent word had been added much later, etched in striking red ink: Ashvatthama. The copper seal had marked her, chosen her, long before she even knew of its existence, long before she could comprehend its profound significance.

That night, a sense of profound purpose guiding her, Riham carefully unwrapped the copper seal from its multiple layers of protection and lit a ring of camp-safe ghee lamps around it, their flickering flames casting dancing shadows on the tent walls, imbuing the space with an ancient aura. Farooq and Ameya watched in uneasy silence, their faces reflecting a mixture of fascination and apprehension, drawn by the strange ritual. Kulkarni, after a brief, reluctant protest, finally allowed the experiment. "If it responds, we need documentation," she had stated, her scientific rigor overriding her caution, prioritizing data above all else. They watched, their breaths held. And slowly—like ink dropped into clear water, expanding and diffusing—the air above the seal began to shimmer. A pattern emerged. A vision—but not quite. More like a past experience being replayed, an ancient echo emanating from a being that transcended the human. They saw fire. Not the destructive flames of ruin, but a sanctifying, purifying fire, an ethereal blaze that consumed nothing, a sacred light. A temple? A shrine? No—something far deeper. A vault. Walls made not of ordinary stone, but of an older, unknown material, covered in shifting marks that subtly moved, twisting and reforming when looked at directly, defying static form. At the very center, a figure knelt, his brow bleeding perpetually, his presence resonating with an ancient chant, a silent invocation. The copper seal pulsed with an internal light. And then the vision vanished. The lamps, as if in silent obedience, extinguished simultaneously. Silence descended, profound and heavy.

Kulkarni whispered, her voice barely audible, a profound revelation. "Kshanik-Veda." The living scripture.

VII. The Cycle Breaks

By the fourth day, everything changed, irrevocably. At dawn, Farooq was gone. Not merely missing—erased. His cot remained undisturbed, his meagre belongings untouched, no sign of forced entry. But his journal lay open on the floor, its pages scattered like fallen leaves, a silent testament to a frantic last moment. A single page had been pinned to the side of the tent with a broken charcoal stub, its crude message screaming across the void of his absence. On it, scrawled in looping, frantic handwriting, were the repeating, desperate words: "Within the pattern. Within

the pattern. Within the pattern.” His boots were gone, a stark absence, but his glasses remained, perched on a stack of books. His medication, untouched. A chilling, impossible disappearance.

Ameya was the first to report his disappearance. Her voice, normally sharp and confident, trembled perceptibly as she spoke to Kulkarni, a tremor that betrayed her carefully constructed composure, her usual stoicism crumbling.

“Maybe he walked out,” she offered, her voice lacking conviction, a desperate attempt at a rational explanation. “Disoriented. Dehydrated?”

But no one believed it. The silence of the team was a collective acknowledgment of something far more unsettling than a simple walkabout.

The search that followed was methodical, systematic, yet ultimately futile. Teams fanned out across the unforgiving ridge, into the maze of dried streambeds, and through the wind-scoured caves, their hopes dwindling with every passing moment. Drones were launched, their mechanical hum a stark contrast to the ancient stillness of the land, their technology useless against the unknown. Police were called, their presence an unwelcome intrusion, their questions inadequate. Nothing. No prints. No trail. No scent. Only the air felt different—as though a veil, thin and imperceptible, had been drawn over the land, obscuring more than just vision, a shift in the very fabric of reality.

That evening, Riham returned to her tent, a sense of growing dread coiling in her gut, and found something folded meticulously under her pillow. A slip of parchment. Coarse to the touch. Frayed at the edges, unmistakably ancient. On it, written in what looked like iron gall ink, a chilling message: “He guards what must never speak. The Veda is alive. If you engage with it—it recognizes you.” And beneath that—a hand-drawn concentric pattern, composed entirely of salt. She blinked, her mind struggling to comprehend. The wind, a gentle breath across the desert, blew softly, and the salt scattered before she could react, dissolving the ephemeral message, leaving no trace. When she turned, she saw Ameya watching her from outside the tent—her face unreadable, her jaw tight, an almost imperceptible tension in her stance.

“Are you alright?” Ameya asked, her voice flat, devoid of true concern.

Riham nodded too quickly, a lie she knew was transparent. But neither believed the answer.

Later that night, the first tremor struck. It wasn’t an earthquake—not by seismograph standards, leaving no official reading, no alert. But the ground shook, unmistakably. Short. Sudden. Centred

directly on the dig. The trench walls cracked with an audible groan, a deep protest from the earth. A crate of brushes tumbled, scattering across the floor. Kulkarni, caught off guard, struck her head on a lantern pole. Riham was thrown across her cot, her body a ragdoll in the sudden jolt. When they regrouped outside, amidst the dust and disarray, silence reigned once more, heavy and ominous.

Then the wind came. Not a gentle breeze—a vortex. Concentric. Sand lifted into the air like a breath held too long, then violently exhaled. The gust swirled directly above the trench, and within its turbulent embrace—visible for only fleeting seconds—was a shape. A face. Crimson-streaked. Eyes like bottomless wells, ancient and filled with an unbearable sorrow. Watching. The turbulent pattern collapsed inward, a sudden implosion of air and dust. And the copper seal inside the containment box, deep within the command tent, glowed a pulsating, ominous red.

VIII. The Line Crossed

By morning, Professor Kulkarni, her face etched with a profound weariness, lines of stress deepening around her eyes, called for an immediate halt to all digging operations. “We’ve breached something we don’t understand,” she declared, her voice firm despite her apprehension, her scientific curiosity now tinged with fear. “We need to reevaluate protocol.” But Riham, driven by an irresistible force, a profound sense of purpose, was already back in the trench. She hadn’t slept. She barely spoke, her focus narrowed to a singular purpose, her every action deliberate. The ancient pattern was inside her now—not as a voice, but as a visceral pull, an undeniable directive that guided her hands. Each movement of her trowel was instinctive, guided by something far deeper than mere archaeological method, a primal knowledge.

She uncovered a layer beneath Layer 9—darker, impossibly denser, almost obsidian in its composition, radiating a strange, ancient cold that seeped into her bones. Within it, etched into the very fabric of the earth, was the faint outline of a path. Stone steps. Angled sharply downward, descending into an unseen depth. They were etched with symbols that shimmered in and out of focus, as though actively repelling logic, defying the rational mind, twisting perception.

Kulkarni, pale with a dawning horror, stood at the edge of the trench, staring down into the impossible revelation. “This wasn’t here,” she murmured, her voice barely a whisper, a disbelieving gasp. “We’ve surveyed this ground six times.” But now it was. Riham, with a determined hand, brushed away the final layer of ash. And the first step revealed a complete inscription—perceptible not with the mind, but with a profound recognition of history: “The Veda

that breathes—Cannot be caged. It recognizes what the world forgets.” It wasn’t Sanskrit. It was before Sanskrit.

The others gathered, drawn by an invisible force, a silent magnetism. Ameya. Tejan. Even the laborers who had been warned away, their faces etched with a primal fear, their eyes wide with apprehension. The air grew denser, heavy with an unseen energy, a palpable weight. And as Riham stepped onto the first stone—the wind, which had been a constant companion in the desert, ceased abruptly, leaving a profound, unnatural quiet. Farooq’s presence was felt from the void, a chilling pulse, repeating his last, frantic words: “Within the pattern.” They all felt it. And in that chilling moment, Riham knew. She frowned at the shifting symbols. "So the Kshanik-Veda... it's not a book?"

A voice, ancient and resonant (or a thought, clear as a bell) answered in her mind: "Never a book. It is the breath of the moment, the echo of what is, and what might be. A living scripture, yes, but its pages are the turning of ages, its script the geometry of choice and consequence. The Kalavritta seek it, but they see only the wound, not the weaving."

The Kshanik-Veda was not a manuscript. It was a chamber. A wound in time. And the pattern had opened again.

She looked up. The dusk had thickened, swallowing the last vestiges of daylight. The stars, usually a brilliant tapestry against the desert sky, refused to shine, veiled by an unseen presence. Somewhere—deep in the earth—something stirred. Watching. Waiting. The chapter had ended. But the story had just begun.

Her father’s warning echoed in her mind: “Some stories wait in the ground for the right person to pass by.”

Riham’s fingers brushed the copper seal again. The metal pulsed faintly, as though alive. The desert wind fell unnaturally still, carrying no sound — only a silence that pressed hard against her chest.

For the briefest moment, she thought she heard a voice. Low, ancient, and impossibly close.

It whispered her name.

She gasped, stumbling back, but the seal remained inert in the shifting sand, glinting faintly under the harsh lamp-light. Her pulse thundered. She knew, with a certainty that felt older than history itself — this was no ordinary discovery.

It was a threshold.

And she had just crossed it.

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