

Mission Impossible The Final Reckoning: Tom Cruise deserved better than a goofy Abbas-Mustan movie that chooses spoon-feeding over spectacle

Post Credits Scene: Mission Impossible The Final Reckoning is so Bollywood-coded that all the mask-ripping, triple-crossing, and spoon-feeding seems like sirka-pyaaz and chutney before the action-packed main course.

There's a scene in Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning where Hayley Atwell's character, Grace, looks Ethan Hunt dead in the eye, and suggests with stone-faced seriousness that he accepts his destiny and becomes God. Played by Tom Cruise, Ethan could soon gain possession of an incredible artefact that'll nudge him in that direction. His buddy Luther has invented a gizmo that basically functions as a magic lamp in which he plans to trap the rogue genie that he is after — an AI villain called The Entity. Ethan's reluctance to handle absolute power, however, is about as believable as something like The Entity being caught and captured in a fancy pen drive. But if there's one thing that we've learnt about him in these last decades, it's that when he's given a choice — there's always a choice — he doesn't say no.

But there is little left for Ethan to achieve as a mere mortal; he doesn't care much for basic human pleasures such as companionship, a nice holiday, or even breakfast waffles. For a character who could probably live on supplements and gels his entire life if it were up to him; for someone whose idea of a productive weekend likely involves not a lazy afternoon nap but a death-defying leap off a moving train; there are few endgames that a filmmaker can rely upon to carefully bring their arc to a close. Ethan can't simply be killed off like Daniel Craig's James Bond or Hugh Jackman's Wolverine. He demands a sendoff worthy of his demi-goddity. Is that a word?

Given that Cruise reportedly wasn't pleased about The Final Reckoning being marketed as the last chapter of his career-defining franchise, he probably sabotaged any discussion about having Ethan make the ultimate sacrifice at the end — not because he wants to leave the door open for a possible reprisal in the future, but because Ethan is above something as basic as death. Unlike the other big-budget Hollywood movies that take great pains to humanise their protagonists, Cruise and his co-conspirator, director Christopher McQuarrie, seem to run in the opposite direction. Everyone dies. Big deal. Ethan Hunt attains nirvana.

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The Final Reckoning grabs the premise that its predecessor, Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning, set up so clumsily, and hurls it towards its only logical conclusion. If an all-powerful, all-knowing Entity exists, the movie suggests, destroying it wouldn't be an option. At some point, a puny human must be tempted by the power that it offers. Too bad Ilsa Faust died in the last movie. Not that her passing appears to have left any impact on Ethan's psyche. Sure, we're told that he's upset about all his friends dropping like flies — the villain even taunts him about it — but Ethan treats their passing like a minor hurdle in his Sunday plans to free solo a cliff or something.

Remember, he just met Grace. She tried to pick his pocket in the last movie, whose events took place mere weeks ago. And he's already putting her on the same level as Ilsa and his ex-wife, Julia. Here he is, a fully qualified pensioner, melting at the sight of a younger woman turning into the

so-demure-so-mindful meme before his eyes. When she effectively declares Ethan to be worthy of Godlike power, there might as well have been a moon in the sky above her, and a 'thali' in her hands. But this isn't the only reason why *The Final Reckoning* resembles something that Abhishek Bachchan might rap in. Like most of mainstream Bollywood, it, too, worships at the altar of movie stars.

"You are always the best of men, in the worst of times," the President of the United States says about Ethan, letting us know that he isn't cut from the same cloth as the rest of us. He surrounds himself with hype men, as if he's in a Shahid Kapoor film, where supporting characters are contractually obligated to sing praises of the protagonist. It would be the least surprising thing in the world if fans in Hyderabad were to erect a gargantuan standee of Cruise outside a single-screen theatre and bathe it in milk. "Every risk you've taken, every comrade you've lost in the field, every personal sacrifice you made, has brought this world another sunrise," the president continues. This happens in the opening seconds of the movie. Hours later, she'll contemplate launching nukes at eight countries, including India.

But what pushes her to make this difficult decision, you might wonder (after you've marvelled at the fact that nukes need an OTP to be activated). It's because she's given Ethan a mission so impossible that only he can attempt to complete it. In *Dead Reckoning*, Ethan essentially challenged God to a game of chicken, probably because he'd run out of human foes who could believably take him on. In *The Final Reckoning*, he ascends the throne and turns into a deity himself. Unlike Harry Potter, he can't just snap the Elder Wand in two and toss it off a bridge. He can't just hurl the One Ring into Mount Doom like Frodo. Ethan turning into God is so Bollywood-coded that all the mask-ripping, triple-crossing, and spoon-feeding before it seems like 'sirka-pyaaz' and chutney before the main course.

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Despite being a near-maniacal advocate for the big screen experience — he risked his life to watch Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* in theatres at the peak of the pandemic — even Cruise can't deny the Netflix-isation that the *Mission: Impossible* franchise has been draped in. *The Final Reckoning* is written like ambient television. Not because of that karva chauth scene with Grace and Ethan, but because you could go for multiple pee breaks during its 170-minute run-time and safely follow the complicated plot. McQuarrie gets every character to repeatedly narrate the events unfolding on screen at least three times in quick succession, after all. This might be a note that McQuarrie received from Paramount following the incomprehensible *Dead Reckoning*, but it's more likely that the studio recognised that the majority of *The Final Reckoning*'s revenue will come from international markets where English might not be the audience's first language.

This is an odd move for a franchise that has typically relied on spectacle as a means of communication. The melodic, near-silent set-pieces of *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* remain a benchmark not only for the franchise, but for the action genre as a whole. *The Final Reckoning*, a lot like its predecessor, is extremely talky. And the thing about talky movies is this: if you don't latch on immediately, you don't latch on at all. Once you've lost the plot, you've lost interest. The filmmakers seem to be taking steps to avoid this scenario, because they know that if the audience loses interest in the plot, they wouldn't care about the action either. Ridley Scott was made to add a voiceover to *Blade Runner* by the paranoid studio; think of *The Final Reckoning*'s unrelenting exposition as something similar. They're dumbing the franchise down for folks who watch stuff like *Jewel Thief* and consider Prashanth Neel as the voice of the masses, instead of demanding that the audience keep pace with Cruise's intensity. *The Final Reckoning* is one plastic surgery away from turning into something that Abbas-Mustan would salivate at the sight of.

Post Credits Scene is a column in which we dissect new releases every week, with particular focus on context, craft, and characters. Because there's always something to fixate about once the dust has settled.

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