


THE MINI SEQUEL TO THE ALEXANDER SECRET

A SECRET REVEALED

A large, ancient stone tablet with a carved figure, set within a wooden frame, illuminated by a warm light.

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The Mahabharata Quest: A Secret Revealed

Part 1

TWELVE MONTHS AGO

CHAPTER 1

Muynak, Uzbekistan

Van Klueck beamed with satisfaction at the collection of bags that lay on the floor. Each bag had bulges, which moved and shifted at intervals, as the snakes within them explored the confines of their prisons, seeking a way out. The sound of angry hissing filled the little room but he was not concerned.

The Order had secured their prize.

Instructions had gone out to the agents of the Order in Uzbekistan while they were en route here. Muynak had been the closest airport to the Kazakh border. After the flight from Aktau to the Ustyurt plateau, it had become imperative to land at the nearest airport to the border, lest the helicopters run out of fuel.

More helicopters had been commandeered and would be landing soon at Muynak to transport Van Klueck and his treasure to Bukhara, which had the nearest international airport. His Gulfstream jet was already on its way to Bukhara from Aktau and he would soon be on his way home.

There was much to do after he reached. The virus would have to be isolated, extracted from the snakes. There would be tests, experiments, to ascertain the nature of the virus and its effects on human physiology. He had no doubt that the virus would deliver the results they were seeking. Not after all that he had witnessed over the last few days. The ancient texts did not lie.

He stood and stretched. This had been a tiring adventure. Of all the projects of the Order that were being run concurrently across the globe, this was one of the most important ones. And, over the centuries, this had been one of the few that had succeeded.

Van Klueck reflected on this. To an outsider the Order's many unsuccessful missions would make little sense. Some people might even consider it a sign of weakness, of failure. But Van Klueck had been with the Order for long enough to know that the ambitions of the organisation went beyond the petty successes of minor missions. Their operations were vast and

their goal was too exalted to be bogged down by small-timers. But then, again, it didn't need more than a few successes in order to achieve their ultimate goal.

One thing was certain, his ambitions were about to be realised. His prestige and status in the Order were soon going to be elevated.

He was one step closer to the top.

And he would get there.

No matter what.

Auckland, New Zealand

Cathy Radford sat at her computer terminal, studying the reports that flashed on her screen, and sighed. At The TracKing Company, whose technology revolved around the tracking of aircraft using the Iridium network of satellites – a chain of sixty-six satellites that covered the earth in low orbit – her job as a tech assistant could get fairly boring at times.

It wasn't as if she didn't enjoy working for the company; it was young – just ten years old – and growing rapidly, with products sold in over seventy countries. And it deployed cutting edge technology, which was the reason behind its success. But, the same cutting edge technology did not leave much for her to do. Now, if only she had obtained a qualification that could have landed her a job in R&D; that would have been different. Working on product development or new product design would have provided a dynamism that her current job lacked sorely.

Cathy was lost in her boredom as usual, ruing things she hadn't accomplished. Her thoughts turned to the young man she had started dating two months ago. For the first time in her twenty-five years, she thought she had found someone who genuinely cared about her. Maybe there was hope... Maybe some excitement was in store... Cathy smiled to herself.

The sudden commotion outside her enclosed cabin jerked her back to reality. She stared out at the server bank outside the room, visible in the dim lighting through the glass walls of her cabin.

There was no movement. But what was happening outside the server room? *What was that staccato sound?*

She opened the door and slipped out of the cabin, taking long strides towards the outer office.

Before she could reach the door, it burst open, slamming against the wall

and a stream of men poured into the room, dressed in black and wearing black ski masks.

One of them caught her roughly by the arm and dragged her back to her cabin and dumped her in a chair.

As the rest of the men streamed into the cabin, she was shocked to notice that they were all armed with what looked like automatic machine guns.

So that was the staccato sound she had heard. They had been shooting in the outer office. How many of her colleagues had they killed?

Panic instantly took over, freezing her thoughts and immobilising her. She stared wide-eyed at the men, like a deer caught in the headlights of a car, unsure of what was going to happen. Or what they wanted.

The man who had dragged her spoke, his words muffled by the mask, 'I want you to pull up the data files on this machine.' He thrust a piece of paper at her with one hand, aiming a revolver at her with the other.

The threat was clear.

With trembling hands, Cathy took the paper and stared at it. For a few seconds, the words and numbers on the paper seemed to swim in front of her eyes. Then, they settled down and she realised she was reading the specs of a helicopter. One that had the TrackKing software built into it.

She realised what these men wanted. They were looking for the files that had tracked the helicopter and stored its flight path on the company's servers.

But she wasn't going to ask them why they wanted it. The guns that they carried, especially the one that was trained on the centre of her forehead, were incentive enough to act.

She turned to her computer and quickly typed in the coordinates that would pull up the files they wanted.

In a few seconds, the files were listed on the screen.

'Do you want a printout?' she wanted to ask, but in the terror of the moment, all that came out was a hoarse whisper, with a hint of a squeak.

'No. Delete the files.' The command was clear.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, hesitating.

A shot rang out in the room and an excruciating pain pierced through her thigh like lightning.

The man had shot her.

Cathy stared in horror at the blood soaking through her dress. She felt faint. 'Do it. Now.' The man's voice was cold as he repeated his order.

Fighting back her nausea and the blackness that threatened to overpower her, Cathy quickly deleted the files. When she was done, she looked at the man. The pain in her thigh was unbearable now. It was unlike anything she had experienced before. And the shock of being shot was now beginning to

manifest itself.

‘Now delete all the files on the server.’

Cathy recoiled at the command. She was finding it difficult to focus and her hands trembled involuntarily, as she tried to do the man’s bidding.

He stared at her through the slits of his mask. Cathy noted his blue eyes. It was the last thing she would see.

Another shot rang out.

Cathy slumped in her chair, blood oozing out of a clean hole in the front of her forehead. Behind her, where her head rested on the chair, a mass of brain, bone and blood began slowly dripping down the form of the chair.

The leader of the group holstered his gun and motioned to a member of the group who came forward and busied himself at the terminal. His fingers flew over the keyboard for a few seconds. Then he straightened up and gazed at the terminal, as numbers and alphabets flashed on the screen and a progress bar appeared.

The men stood motionless in the cabin. Outside the server room, the outer office was eerily quiet. Nothing moved.

The minutes passed slowly as the progress bar on the screen grew in length.

Finally, there was a beep and a message appeared on the screen. ‘Deletion complete.’

The leader turned to face his men. ‘Find the back ups. Destroy them. Then burn this place down. Remember, no survivors. No witnesses.’

CHAPTER 2

Jaungarh Fort

Vijay sat in the secret chamber within the fort, surrounded by rows of stainless steel shelves, which bore upon them stainless steel containers.

When Vijay had first come upon this room he had also discovered that the containers contained rolls of microfilm.

He now sat at the stainless steel desk in the room and switched on the microfilm reader. His jaw was set, his face determined.

A thought had occurred to him during the last meeting of the task force. While discussing the Order, a mysterious organisation that no intelligence agency on earth had any knowledge about, he had remembered an extract from an ancient text that may have contained a clue to its origins. That clue had been part of a record maintained by The Nine, a secret brotherhood created by Asoka the Great.

Vijay had thought hard the past two months, seeking a means to find information that would enable the task force to understand more about the adversary they were up against. So far, all they knew was that it was ancient—over two thousand years old—and had tentacles spread across the globe. Nothing more.

At last he had had a brainwave. If the Order was ancient, so were the Nine. Could it not be possible that there existed a connection, a mention somewhere in their records? Here, in the depths of the mountain that the fort was built upon, the secret library of the Nine had been preserved on microfilm, some of it translated into English by his uncle. No one apart from him knew about the contents of this secret chamber. It had been his uncle's legacy.

To Vijay, this was the obvious place to look. Who knew what lay within these records? Perhaps more clues to the identity of the Order and its ambitions?

While Dr Shukla had been assigned to find any possible clues to the identity of the Order by exploring India's rich mythology—another area the task force felt, needed to be thoroughly examined, given their experience so far—Vijay decided to go through the microfilm records in detail.

It would take time, he knew. But he had promised himself, and Dr Shukla,

that he would track down the people who had killed his fiancée and Shukla's daughter, Radha, and recover her body. It had been a promise made in an emotional moment but he was determined to deliver on it. And he didn't care how long it took.

As long as he got there.

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CHAPTER 3

Gurgaon

Vijay stuffed his hands in his pockets, trying to hide his anxiety as he accompanied the young woman who was escorting him to his meeting. He didn't know why he was doing this. He didn't even know what he was going to say. He had come here on an impulse without bothering to fix an appointment in advance. And, to his great surprise, the man he had come to meet had agreed to see him – for five minutes. The young woman in the lift had been very clear about that.

He was shown into a large conference room fitted out with a mahogany desk and black leather chairs. At the far end of the room were two large television screens with a camera mounted above them for video conferencing.

'Dr Saxena will be with you in a minute,' the young woman smiled at him as she withdrew.

Vijay stood facing the door, his mind numb. For the last four months, he had nursed a growing resentment for the man whom he was sure was involved in Radha's death. He had wanted to go after Saxena but Patterson had made it very clear that the man could not be touched without concrete evidence.

And they had none.

Bill Patterson was the head of the Indo-American task force that had been set up a year and a half ago to monitor and investigate leads to technology based terrorism. A former US Navy SEAL with a double PhD, he ran the task force with an iron hand. The only time he had displayed compassion of any kind was in a brief conversation with Vijay after Radha's death. A veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, he was not inclined to be soft unless the occasion absolutely demanded it. And very few occasions seemed to demand it.

But Patterson's instructions to leave Saxena alone and focus on gathering evidence against the Order had had little effect on Vijay. He was convinced that Saxena had been involved in Radha's murder. For four months, he had held himself back, restrained his natural urge to go and confront Saxena. His natural instinct was to meet the challenge head on, even if he didn't have a plan of action.

And he didn't have one now. Having been unable to stop himself any longer, he had given in to his gut-feel, and was now in Saxena's office

without an idea of what he was going to do or say.

The door opened and Saxena walked in. The Chief Medical Officer of Titan Pharmaceuticals was a tall gaunt man with salt and pepper hair, standing a couple of inches taller than Vijay.

For a long moment, the two men eyed each other warily. Saxena was the first to speak.

‘Vijay Singh,’ he said slowly, as if trying to remember the name. ‘I know who you are.’

‘You do?’ Vijay was surprised. He had never met Saxena.

Saxena nodded and pulled up a chair. He indicated for Vijay to take a seat.

‘How do you know me?’ Vijay remained standing. He was damned if he was going to do what Saxena wanted, even if it was just a courtesy the other man was extending to him.

Saxena smiled, setting Vijay’s nerves on fire. He seated himself comfortably, ignoring Vijay’s decision to stand. ‘You’re the fiancé of the woman who came to meet me, impersonating a news reporter.’

Vijay didn’t know how to respond. It was true that Radha had met Saxena while pretending to be a news reporter.

‘Tea or coffee? Or a soft drink?’ Saxena asked affably. He didn’t seem to be perturbed at Vijay’s presence in his office. His behaviour puzzled Vijay. It was almost as if he had been waiting for this meeting but at the same time, there was no sense of anticipation in his voice or body language. He seemed to be quite dispassionate about the proceedings.

Vijay realised his fists were tightly clenched. He tried to calm himself. Saxena’s insouciance was getting to him. ‘And she was kidnapped and murdered after her meeting with you,’ he spluttered.

Saxena’s face grew grave. ‘Yes, yes,’ he said, tapping the conference table with a pen. ‘I heard about that. Very sad.’ He looked at Vijay. ‘But you didn’t come here to tell me what I already know. What can I do for you?’

Vijay hesitated. There was so much pent up anger within him for this man who he was sure was responsible for Radha’s death, that he didn’t trust himself to speak. And yet, he knew he had to exercise caution, as he could not risk jeopardising the task force’s mission. Vijay would have to tread carefully.

Subterfuge was not one of Vijay’s strengths. He preferred to be direct in his approach. He believed that it was better to put your cards on the table and see where you stood rather than play a game of poker, trying to outguess and outmanoeuvre everyone else, in order to win. He decided to tackle Saxena head on. ‘Something happened in that meeting with you,’ Vijay began, emphasising each word. ‘I don’t know what, but I intend to find out. I am going to use every resource at my command to investigate the connection

between her meeting with you and her death. And when I'm done, I'm going to make sure that the people responsible for her death are brought to justice.'

Saxena stared at him for a few moments. Then he spoke. 'That's an admirable intention,' he said evenly. 'And I can help you out there.' He made it sound as if he was doing Vijay a favour.

'Nothing happened in our meeting. She asked me about some corpses in a lab to which we had outsourced some clinical trials. I told her we had no idea about what was going on there. That was the end of the interview. She left after that. I never saw her again.'

Vijay digested this. Something told him Saxena was lying through his teeth.

'I don't believe you,' he told Saxena. 'I think something happened in that meeting. I know Radha. She came to meet you for a reason and she would have ensured that she did everything to accomplish what she came here for,' Vijay thundered as Saxena kept regarding him with dispassionate eyes.

'I believe you were alarmed by what she told you. And I am almost certain that you had something to do with her subsequent disappearance. If you think that I will buy into your lies and agree that all this is mere coincidence, you are mistaken,' he finished, bitterly.

There was silence in the room. Saxena's face was grim. Vijay's words were closer to the truth than he cared to admit and that riled him. Another thought had crossed his mind. How could a lone man, a commoner in his eyes – with no political or financial muscle – come to his office and confront him so openly?

He stood up. 'This meeting is over,' he said conclusively and turned to go.

Vijay wasn't about to give up. He knew that he had struck a nerve. And he wanted to press home his advantage.

'You realise that you will be implicated in this,' he told Saxena. 'If you are involved, I won't spare you. I will ensure that you get your just desserts.'

Saxena whirled around, now clearly angry. 'Really?' he demanded. 'What are you going to do? Kill me on the suspicion that I had something to do with Radha's murder?' His eyes bored into Vijay. 'Go ahead,' he challenged, 'do your best. Let's see how far you get.'

He stalked out of the room.

Vijay stared after his retreating figure. His hands were trembling with the intensity of the emotions he was experiencing.

Then, to his surprise, the door opened again and Saxena re-entered the room. His face was drawn back in a sneer.

'Oh, and Vijay, I wouldn't go around accusing people of my fiancée's murder, if I were you. There is just too much happening that you don't know

about. My friendly advice to you would be to keep it that way.'

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Eight Months Ago

CHAPTER 1

Jaungarh Fort

Vijay took the last gulp of his beer and studied the empty, brown bottle. There was a maelstrom within him—thoughts and emotions churning and boiling. The encounter with Saxena hadn't gone the way he had thought it would. In fact, he feared, he had only succeeded in getting Saxena's guard up.

And then there were Saxena's parting words. The Chief Medical Officer of Titan had left the room after his cryptic statement, leaving Vijay in a state of bewilderment.

What had Saxena meant by that?

Vijay didn't know what to make of it. While he was still convinced that Saxena was somehow involved in Radha's death, he wasn't very sure about his link with the Order. Saxena's knowledge would certainly be useful to the Order in understanding the nature of the virus and its effects. Vijay was almost sure that Saxena would be involved in the study and analysis of the virus, now that the Order was in possession of the last available samples. But was he more than just a hired gun whom the Order employed for his expertise in virology? Or was Saxena a member of the Order, like Van Klueck was?

That last thought stirred another disturbing realisation, one that had haunted Vijay since Kazakhstan.

The task force had failed to prevent the Order from making off with the virus. Vijay knew that Patterson and Imran were working on tracing its steps; trying to find out where Van Klueck had taken the virus samples. The battle had been lost but the war had just begun. The final objective of the task force was the eventual destruction of the Order. That was the only solution to keeping the world safe from the machinations of that ancient organisation. For centuries, they had planned and plotted to enslave the world. And now, thanks to recent advances of technology, they were closer than they had ever been to accomplishing that goal.

Vijay stared out of the large bay windows of the study, at the darkening countryside surrounding the fort. He got up and helped himself to another beer from the small refrigerator in the study, and tried to make sense of the situation.

Saxena's words had hinted at something ominous. Patterson too had

seemed to have been anticipating trouble. Over the last few months, there had been active lobbying to convert the task force from a group of a few specialist members to a larger covert organisation that would fight the Order, and technology based terrorism in general. The organisation that Patterson wanted to build would have more specialists on board, resources of its own across the world to explore suspicious circumstances, follow up leads, and investigate mysteries that made no sense to the regular police forces. Their experience had shown them that the smallest inconsistencies could be symptoms of larger conspiracies.

Already, Patterson's plan had met with success. Governments of more countries had been roped in to support the new organisation, which had not yet been given a code name. While it would continue to be a joint Indo-US initiative, the new organisation would be able to hire resources in the countries that had signed up to support it.

But things were not moving fast enough for Vijay. Radha's body had still not been traced. He was chafing at the slow progress they were making in finding her. And then there was the promise he had made to Shukla, to find her body and bring it back. That was the only thing that would give them closure.

Until then, he knew, sleep would come with great difficulty. He could not rest until he had unearthed the truth.

There was just one problem.

He didn't know where to start looking.

Intelligence Bureau Headquarters New Delhi

Vijay stared at the smooth, polished surface of the conference table as Patterson spoke. The video conference had not gone smoothly.

Imran had contacted Vijay the night before, informing him that Patterson wanted to speak to both of them together. Urgently. They had scheduled this call the first thing in the morning, so that the meeting could take place before Patterson's day ended in the US.

'You visited Titan.' Patterson's opening words were uttered in a cold, matter of fact tone.

Vijay, surprised at the speed with which Patterson had learnt of his visit to Saxena, could only nod wordlessly. He had had no time to prepare for what he knew was going to follow.

'You are aware that Titan is out of bounds for us,' Patterson had

continued. 'I have received an official complaint from Kurt Wallace that you visited Titan's Gurgaon office and physically intimidated and threatened Titan's Chief Medical Officer. Apparently Dr Saxena wanted to file a police case against you but Wallace dissuaded him and said he would speak to me instead.'

Vijay was aware that Wallace knew about Patterson and his team's involvement with the IB's investigation into the mystery of the corpses found last year in a laboratory facility affiliated to Titan, in New Delhi. Wallace also knew, through Patterson, of Imran's discovery, in Jaipur, of a massive medical centre housing over two hundred people in high-tech prison cells—guinea pigs for the experiments the Order had been conducting on them for years. Wallace had also been informed about Radha's death in that same medical centre.

However, Wallace did not know about the task force or Patterson's role as its head. Saxena, also oblivious to the existence of the task force, would have assumed that Vijay had met him as the grudge bearing fiancé of the woman who was killed in the Titan medical centre near Jaipur. It was only natural that Wallace had thought of lodging a complaint with Patterson, as he seemed to be the only person in the US who knew of Vijay.

Vijay opened his mouth to protest. He had not physically intimidated Saxena, though he conceded that he had threatened him. But Patterson was speaking again.

'I thought we had gone over this quite clearly,' the task force leader said, his voice hard. 'You don't call the shots in the task force. I do. You had no business taking a decision to visit Titan without discussing it with me. I've told you this before—this is not a personal war you're fighting. Radha's dead and you can't change that. Under no circumstances can we compromise the task force. But if you go running around playing your own little games that is exactly what will happen. And I will not stand by and allow that. We have a responsibility. And if you cannot discharge that responsibility, you don't deserve to be a member of the task force. Don't push your luck, boy.'

Vijay nodded, numbly. Patterson hadn't given him an opportunity to speak. Not that it would have done him much good anyway. He knew that Patterson was speaking sense. But what could he have done? If he had consulted Patterson before visiting Saxena, the former Navy SEAL would have undoubtedly forbidden it.

'I'm sorry,' Vijay mumbled, feeling rather like a reprimanded school boy. 'It won't happen again. I'll ensure that.'

'Good,' Patterson responded. 'Because we've been working our asses off trying to figure out how to locate the Order and we don't want you messing

things up with a private agenda of vendetta.’ He looked at Imran. ‘You can now brief him on the developments. Talk to you later.’

The screen went blank.

The call was over.

Imran looked at Vijay. ‘I’m not going to say anything about what you did at Titan,’ he said. ‘I think Patterson said it all.’ He paused. ‘But I have some news to share with you. We have a lead.’

Vijay looked at him enquiringly.

‘It has taken us four months to work on this and Patterson has pulled every string he could in Washington to make this happen. So you’d better be grateful to him.’

Vijay felt a surge of hope rise within him. ‘You mean you know where they took Radha?’

‘We are hopeful. At first, we tried to find out if any helicopters had taken off or landed at Jaipur airport on the day Radha was shot. But we drew a blank. There were the usual flight arrivals and departures. But no helicopters.’

‘That’s assuming they used a helicopter,’ Vijay argued.

Imran shook his head. ‘It seemed quite obvious that she was transported out of there by helicopter—there was no other way they could have got out so fast. We had the roadblocks up within an hour of my receiving her email. And we were in Jaipur barely ninety minutes after that. Less than three hours passed between my reading her email and our touchdown in Jaipur. And Radha was shot a short while after the email was sent out—the time stamp on the video confirms that. Yet, when we arrived, the servers had been wiped clean, the hard disks for the security camera recordings had been erased and the medical centre abandoned. Only the patients were there. It would have taken them some time to organise their getaway, unless they had pre-planned the evacuation. I’m guessing they hadn’t. If they had left by road, they would definitely have run into the roadblocks. So it had to be a helicopter.’

‘What about radar?’ Vijay asked.

‘We checked with Jaipur airport but their radar hadn’t detected any choppers. This could mean that either they flew under the radar or the pilot had switched off the transponder. We then started exploring all possible satellites that may have tracked the helicopter. But nothing seemed to work out. The problem is that no one really knows how many satellites are up there or whom they belong to. The Russians and Chinese refused to help, citing national security. We tried checking with the CIA but they too were pretty tightlipped. At the best of times it is difficult to get information from the CIA about their satellites, and this wasn’t the best of times. We thought we’d run up against a wall. Then, we got lucky. We came across a report filed about a

massacre four months ago at the offices of a company called The TracKing Company. It sells products that help track aircraft, using satellites. Everyone in the office in Auckland was killed. The building was burned to the ground and their servers were wiped clean. The tech employee in charge of the data centre was found with a bullet to her forehead. They possibly got her to pull up the files before deleting them.'

'The Order,' Vijay murmured. 'And you had a hunch that this was related to the helicopter in Jaipur?'

Imran nodded. 'There were only two possibilities. Either it was the helicopter in Jaipur or the helicopters in Uzbekistan—the ones with the amrita. We couldn't tell since the data files had been erased. But it didn't matter. Someone was trying to ensure that their helicopter couldn't be tracked. It gave us a stick to beat the CIA with. Patterson went all out to establish motive and managed to get someone in the CIA to cough up the data files from one of their satellites monitoring the Indian subcontinent. Again, we struck gold, at least from your perspective. It was the helicopter from Jaipur, not Uzbekistan. Using the data from the satellite, we were able to pull out the tracking data from the Iridium network and follow the helicopter to its final destination. So, while we have no clue where Van Klueck and his men disappeared to after landing in Uzbekistan, we do know that the helicopter from Jaipur landed at Delhi.'

'Is that all? That isn't very helpful,' Vijay said, looking crestfallen. While they could track the helicopter, there was no way to track its occupants once they had left it.

'That's what we're working on now,' Imran said, still sounding positive. 'We're checking all possibilities. Scanning the manifests of all commercial flights out of Delhi within an hour of their landing. Checking out all private jets that took off around that time. And, in case they are still in Delhi, we're checking the records of all CCTV cameras to see if we can spot them anywhere. It shouldn't be difficult—they'd be wheeling her out on a stretcher. It is just a matter of time. We'll track them down.'

Six hours later

Jaungarh Fort

Vijay couldn't believe what he was hearing. Imran had just called and breathlessly updated him on the latest development.

'We're closing in on them,' Imran had said. 'We went through immigration records, just in case they'd fled the country. And we found that Dr Saxena and three other men flew out together in a private jet within an hour of the helicopter landing in Delhi. And guess what? They had a patient with them. Female. But the patient's passport doesn't have Radha's name on

it. And here's something interesting. The other three men were not employed by Titan pharmaceuticals. We're trying to find out who they are.'

'So Saxena was involved,' Vijay breathed.

'We can't say for sure,' Imran replied. 'It could be that the so called patient was Radha and they used a fake passport. But it could just as easily have been a genuine patient whom Saxena was accompanying on the flight. We'll know better once we've identified the other three men and learned more about their background and profiles. But if Saxena is involved, we now know where they went.'

'And that's where they took Radha.' Vijay's eyes were shining with a bittersweet mix of tears and excitement.

'Presumably.' Imran sounded unsure. 'That doesn't mean that we'll find her body there, though. They could have always taken it onward somewhere. But at least we have a location to start looking.'

'Where is it?' Vijay demanded.

Imran told him.

SEVEN MONTHS AGO

CHAPTER 1

Starbucks, Cyber Hub, Gurgaon

Vijay looked at his watch impatiently. Six months ago, when he had returned from Kazakhstan, he had received a mysterious call, late at night. The caller, who was unknown to him, had a baffling request. He had asked for a meeting six months hence and had sent an email to persuade Vijay to agree.

The contents of that email had been enough to convince Vijay that he had to take the caller seriously. It had confirmed that the stranger on the phone had, indeed, been acquainted with his father, Pratap Singh. The caller had also hinted at something else. Apparently Pratap Singh had given him something, shortly before his death in a car accident fifteen years ago.

Just two days ago, exactly six months to the day, the stranger had called again and specified a date and time for the meeting. Vijay looked at his watch again. It was ten minutes past the scheduled time of the meeting. He was beginning to think that the entire set up was an elaborate hoax.

Vijay wondered if the mysterious caller was linked in any way to the Order. Could it all be a part of a devious plan hatched to eliminate him? He knew that the Order had an axe to grind. He had crossed their path twice and had lived. Not because the Order had been careless or merciful; it had been sheer good fortune, nothing more. He surreptitiously glanced at the two young men who sat a few tables away to his left, busy with their smartphones.

His security detail.

They could pass for two techies on their day off, but of course Vijay knew better. He had spent six months in their company, ever since his return from Kazakhstan. He had observed them at close quarters and had grown to respect their expertise. With them around, he felt safe.

Though, so far, things had been quiet. Vijay couldn't understand why the Order had not attempted anything yet. Not that he was keen that they should. But everyone on the task force had been sure that, in addition to him, Shukla, Colin, Alice and Imran would be targeted for elimination. There was a rationale behind this apprehension. Their identities were all known to the Order, even if the existence of the task force was not. Imran had already been the target of an attempted RPG attack last year, while Alice had also been

targeted both in Greece and in Delhi. Vijay himself had narrowly escaped death in Kazakhstan.

So why was the Order lying low?

It wasn't just his security cordon. Apart from the two men in the Starbucks outlet, there was a posse of men discreetly patrolling the length and breadth of Cyber Hub. The others had been provided with similar protection.

But Vijay doubted that the Order knew about the security he and his friends had. The security team had instructions to keep a low profile and ensure that they kept a distance from Vijay—far enough to be inconspicuous and close enough to be of help in case it was required. If the Order hadn't struck yet, there had to be a reason for it. And that worried him.

His mind wandered back to the email he had received from the mysterious caller six months ago.

Vijay,

You don't know me. I am a friend of Pratap, your father. We worked together at the ASI. I was with him at Kishangarh, at the only dig that he had taken you to see. You found a terracotta seal there. I remember and I hope you do too.

I need to meet you. It is important. Your father found something at Kishangarh which he hid from me at the time. It was something big. I didn't know it then but I do now. And I have to share it with you. It is imperative. All I can tell you right now is that there is a link between several archaeological discoveries over the last fifty years. The implications are enormous. The world as we know it is in peril.

We must meet. I will call you to fix a meeting.

Regards,

KS

The unknown caller had sent this email as validation of his relationship with Vijay's father. And it had served its purpose. Vijay remembered the dig at Kishangarh and his discovery of the seal. He had been so excited at the time. He also remembered how ecstatic his father had been.

'Your first archaeological find, my son,' he had murmured proudly, clapping the young boy on his shoulder. 'Someday you will make a fine archaeologist!'

But fate had other plans for Vijay. The death of his parents in a car crash and his informal adoption by Vikram Singh, Pratap's elder brother, had led to an entirely different career for Vijay.

The email had struck another chord with Vijay. Last year, Vijay had discovered a room on the fifth floor of the sprawling fort, which was filled with the belongings of his late parents. Included in this collection were

cartons containing books, papers and documents. Vijay had begun to go through these with great interest hoping to learn more about his parents.

Most of the documents had been fairly mundane but Radha and he had stumbled upon a file and a journal. The journal had revealed a secret connected with Alexander the Great and his journey to the land of the Indus. The file, on the other hand, had been a mystery. It had contained clippings of newspaper articles and notes in his father's handwriting that referred to archaeological digs all over the world.

Why his father had painstakingly collected these articles, notes and diagrams and filed them so meticulously was something that neither he nor Radha could guess at that time. But Vijay had been convinced that there had to be a reason for this extraordinary effort.

When he had received this email, it had all made sense. He had instinctively pieced together the puzzle. His father had unearthed something in Kishangarh. Something big, as the sender of the email had described it. Whatever it had been, his father had thought it necessary to keep the discovery a secret.

But why?

And then, there was the other revelation in the email— there was a link between several archaeological discoveries in the past fifty years. The unknown caller had only learnt about this link now, but what if his father had figured it out earlier? What if the discovery at Kishangarh had led his father to an even bigger discovery? That could be a possible explanation for the carefully compiled articles.

Vijay suddenly arrived at a conclusion.

His father had been studying the links between all those archaeological discoveries in the file!

And two of the entries in the index to that file had been labeled “KS-1” and “KS-2”, respectively. It had to be more than a coincidence that the initials of his mysterious caller were also KS.

The realisation had struck Vijay like a bolt of lightning. It had also intrigued him that an article relating to the Alexander Secret, which they had pursued unsuccessfully last year, had been among the articles in that file.

Moreover, the journal that had recorded the story of Alexander's secret mission to India had been labeled “KS-1”.

Too many coincidences.

Was the Alexander Secret linked in some way to all the other archaeological discoveries in the file? And if it was, then how? The thought had not left Vijay's mind in the past six months.

And a bigger question had emerged as he ruminated on his father's

intentions in creating the file. The Mahabharata had a strong link to the Alexander Secret. He had seen the evidence for himself last year. So, was the Mahabharata also connected to the discoveries in the file? He couldn't fathom how, but the possibility couldn't be ruled out.

Despite the frenzy in his head, Vijay had been unable to connect all the dots. He had waited impatiently for the day of the meeting to arrive.

And now, he was sitting and waiting for someone whom he didn't know, hadn't met and who might not even turn up. The thought that this was an elaborate hoax crossed his mind again and Vijay grew a bit despondent. All his hopes and the excitement generated over the last six months were like a drive down a highway ending in a desert. A thrilling ride that went nowhere and was doomed to die in the desert sands of disappointment.

CHAPTER 2

Starbucks, Cyber Hub, Gurgaon

The tables around Vijay were now occupied but his unknown caller still hadn't shown up. It was time to leave, he decided. It didn't make sense to wait any more.

He rose and made his way out of the coffee shop and began walking back to his car, which was in the parking lot. Behind him, in the coffee shop, the two young men who were part of his security stayed at their table but a message had swiftly gone out to the team assigned to Vijay's security detail, mingling with the crowds outside, informing them that he was on the move.

Vijay had barely walked a few yards when a tall, thin man, wearing a large hat that covered most of his face, suddenly appeared by his side and grabbed his arm. Alarmed, Vijay tried to shake the man off but, despite his lean appearance, the stranger had a strong grip which only tightened in response to Vijay's efforts.

The man was walking fast and pulled Vijay with him as he hissed in his ear, 'Quick, come with me. We have to get away from here. I've been followed.'

Vijay opened his mouth to speak but the stranger quickly raised his face and glared at him, giving Vijay a glimpse of his face.

'I'm KS,' the man said, half dragging Vijay now as he tried to keep pace with the stranger. 'Pratap's friend. Kishangarh.'

The two men walked away from the direction of the Cyber Hub car park and towards one of the office buildings adjoining the popular shopping and restaurant complex. As they emerged from the crowd, into the open space that

separated the building from Cyber Hub, KS broke into a run, still holding on to Vijay's arm.

'Where are we going?' Vijay gasped, sprinting alongside KS.

There was no reply but Vijay knew what KS was aiming for. He was trying to shake off the people who had followed him.

What worried Vijay was another thought that had struck him. Was KS also trying to shake off Vijay's security cordon?

A commotion had broken out behind them, but neither man glanced back. It sounded like a fight but ignoring the brawl and the screams, the two men continued to run farther away from the scene.

KS ran straight through the gap in the building ahead of them and turned right, heading down the sloped driveway towards the exit onto the Delhi-Jaipur expressway. As they dashed down the slope, Vijay realised where he was heading.

The stilted car park. Vijay wondered how this man had gained access to the car park of a building with ultra high security.

Who was this man? And what did he have to tell him? The only reason Vijay had come this far with this stranger was because he was hoping to unearth the mystery behind his father's documents. Somewhere deep within he also hoped that he might learn something about his father; something he may have missed during his teenage years. Something he could cherish now as the only thing that was left of his parents.

They sprinted through the exit of the parking lot but, to Vijay's surprise, KS ignored the path towards the car park and headed, instead, towards the two-wheeler parking. As he ran, he tugged off his hat, crumpled and stuffed it in a pouch around his waist.

A black motorcycle, clearly in the 200 plus cc range stood nearest to them and KS made for it. He swiftly donned a helmet, mounted the bike and started the engine as Vijay climbed on the pillion seat. With a roar of acceleration, KS guided the bike out of the exit. He threaded expertly between the cars and two wheelers on the road leading to the highway and revved up again once they were on the slip road that ran alongside the highway.

Vijay wondered where his security cordon was. Surely they couldn't have fallen behind? And where were the people who were following KS? Why weren't they in hot pursuit? If they had followed him all the way here, why were they letting him get away so easily?

A cold chill gripped him as he contemplated the possibility that KS had lied to him about being followed. What if it was a ruse to get Vijay out of his security shield and away from safety? After all, what did he know about this man? How could he have trusted him? A multitude of doubts and suspicions

flashed through Vijay's mind as he gripped the bike hard to maintain his balance while KS zigzagged his way at top speed through the traffic.

But it was too late. The bike was speeding along the highway now, having taken a U-turn under a flyover, at a speed of well over 100 kilometres per hour. He would have to wait for an opening to get away from this man. Or, he could try and overpower him at a suitable opportunity. KS was much older than him and didn't look like he could put up much of a resistance. Which was probably why he had resorted to skullduggery to get Vijay into a situation where he would be vulnerable. He probably had accomplices waiting somewhere.

For now, all Vijay could do was hang on as they sped down the highway, towards Delhi.

CHAPTER 3

Saket, New Delhi

To Vijay's utter surprise, KS, who had zoomed through the Delhi traffic, was now entering the underground parking lot of one of the busiest malls in the city. He had expected KS to head for the seedier parts of town where it would be difficult to locate them, if someone decided to mount a search.

Vijay decided to suspend his judgment of this man until they had a chance to talk. He wasn't happy at his vacillation over the last hour; he had always considered himself to be a fairly good judge of character. Yet, he had already changed his mind several times about KS. It was an indication of how troubled Vijay was—he had so many questions he wanted to ask. So many things he needed to know... And this was clouding his faculties.

KS apparently saw the confusion on Vijay's face and nodded. 'They haven't followed us here. Come on, let's go up. We don't have too much time. They'll track us down sooner or later. And there's a lot we need to talk about.' He spoke in a hurried fashion. The helmet had now been replaced with the hat.

They took the lift and headed for the Starbucks in the mall.

'Why Starbucks?' Vijay wanted to know.

KS allowed himself the shadow of a smile. 'It's high profile. Too high profile for them to try their tricks. Anything that happens here will be plastered all over the media. And they won't like that. It is the safest place to be under the circumstances.'

‘So why did we leave the Starbucks in Cyber Hub?’

KS clicked his tongue impatiently. ‘You left Starbucks. I didn’t even make it in. And it’s a good thing I didn’t. We would have been safe inside but we’d have to leave sometime. And that’s when they would have targeted us. Maybe in the car park. Who knows?’

They ordered their coffees and sat down. For a few moments, there was silence. Both men seemed to be contemplating where they should begin.

Finally, KS spoke up. He stared at his coffee cup as he spoke. ‘I know you must have a lot of questions. This must all seem a bit strange to you. You won’t remember me from Kishangarh. That was twenty-five years ago. I wasn’t sure if you even remember your experience at Kishangarh. You were a small kid then.’ He looked up at Vijay. ‘And you are right not to trust me. You should not trust anyone.’

Vijay stared back at him. Even though the hat still covered most of his face, the scars that KS bore on his right cheek were visible to Vijay, now that he was sitting directly across the man. He had no idea how KS had acquired them but it must have been extremely painful. It was no wonder that he tried to conceal the disfigurement.

‘Let me try and pre-empt some of your questions,’ KS continued, oblivious to Vijay’s stare. ‘As I mentioned in my email to you, your father and I worked together at the Archaeological Survey of India. As you know, your father was one of the leading archaeologists in India. My work was that of a historian and a specialist in the preservation of ancient documents and artefacts. We often worked together as a team—his work was in the field and mine was in the lab.’ He looked at Vijay to ensure that he had his attention.

Vijay nodded.

‘We were together in Kishangarh,’ KS said studying his coffee cup once again. ‘It was a good dig, an interesting dig. The stratification was interesting. We reached a level that was dated to around 10,000 BC.’ He gazed at Vijay again. ‘You remember the terracotta seal you found? That was also dated to the same time period. 12000 years ago.’

Vijay shrugged. ‘I’m no archaeologist but this certainly sounds like a momentous find. I would think that there is no other site in India that has been dated so far back in time.’

KS nodded. Vijay realised that there was more to what KS was saying and he was expected to figure it out. Vijay’s sharp mind was already whirring and the wheels within were snapping into place, driving his thoughts forward.

‘But if this dig was so important why haven’t we heard about it?’ Vijay muttered, thinking back to his father’s file. He couldn’t recall any article that mentioned the Kishangarh dig, though it was possible that his father had

started the file after the dig. ‘Or is it so esoteric that only archaeologists know about it? I would have thought it would make headlines.’

KS smiled for the first time since they had met. ‘I knew my confidence in you wasn’t misplaced. You have your father’s instinct. And you’re right. This major find was never publicised. Like so many others.’

Vijay’s thoughts flashed back to his father’s file, painstakingly put together. Was there a connection between the file and this conversation? There were enough discoveries that had been publicised otherwise they wouldn’t have been in that file in the first place. He pushed the thought away. There was more to learn here. The file could wait. It had waited so many years.

‘Your father discovered something there,’ KS resumed. ‘I don’t know what it was but I know that he was hiding something from me. I’m only guessing here but I think it was either connected to the layer that was dated to around 2000 BC or the layer that was the deepest at 10000 BC. These were the only two layers where your father insisted that there was nothing to be found, apart from the seal you discovered.’

‘But that doesn’t mean anything,’ Vijay retorted sharply, a trace of asperity creeping into his voice at the insinuation. ‘Maybe he was just being honest about it. Maybe there was nothing to be found in those layers.’

KS studied Vijay for a few moments. ‘I’m not accusing your father of stealing anything,’ he clarified. ‘I think he was scared of something he found. And that is why he hid it from me, from the ASI. There was nothing in his report about the excavation that justified digging all the way down to the lowest level. And his report just mentioned the layer at 2000 BC. One sentence. That’s all.’ He paused, hesitating. ‘And he didn’t mention the terracotta seal you found. It wasn’t in the report.’ He stopped, allowing his words to sink in. He stared hard at Vijay, hoping that the gamble he was taking would pay off.

‘Just what are you saying?’ Vijay demanded, his voice hard. ‘Why would my father hide anything in an official report?’

‘Precisely. In June that year,’ KS replied, ‘I received an unexpected package from an academic in the US whom I had met a few years earlier at a conference. In that package were two journals in English. I read them both but they seemed to be from the realm of fantasy...’ He stopped as he saw the expression on Vijay’s face. ‘What’s wrong?’ he asked.

CHAPTER 4

Starbucks

Saket, New Delhi

‘Let me guess,’ Vijay’s sharp mind had connected the dots even as KS was speaking. ‘One of those journals was a translation by a Professor Fuller. A translation of a Greek journal written by Eumenes, a general of Alexander the Great.’

KS looked surprised. ‘Yes, that’s right. How did you guess?’

Vijay hesitated. Did he know this stranger well enough to confide in him? Especially since he was insinuating things about his father that Vijay was reluctant to believe in? He decided to take the plunge.

‘I found the journal in my father’s papers,’ he explained. ‘Just last year. Dad never told me about it when he was alive.’

KS nodded. ‘I didn’t think he would have. I was just curious about how he had passed it on to you. If I understand you, he didn’t actually pass it on. You found it purely by accident.’

‘I was going through cartons with their stuff in them when I stumbled upon the journal,’ Vijay clarified. ‘It was pure chance.’

‘There were only two people in whom I had confided regarding these journals,’ KS continued, apparently satisfied with the explanation Vijay had provided. ‘When I received the journals, I tried to contact the academic who had sent them. His name was Mike Ashford and he taught at St. James College in Philadelphia. We weren’t really friends. We had met at a conference, got along well and kept in touch over the years. He would send me greetings for the New Year and Diwali and I would send him a Christmas card every year. Then, there were the occasional letters we would exchange. With the internet, our correspondence became a bit more frequent through emails, but it came as a bit of a surprise to suddenly receive this package from him one day. With these two journals, no less. There was no advance email informing me; no letter accompanying them, no explanation for the strange contents of the package. And when I tried to contact him to find out why he had sent them to me, I was told that he was missing. He had disappeared mysteriously the day the courier had been dispatched from Philadelphia. The police had nothing to go on and the case had been left unsolved,’ KS paused. Vijay noticed that he looked considerably distressed.

‘I read the journals and they didn’t make sense to me. Like I said, they sounded like some fantasy stories written by some ancient scribe. What struck me however, was the number of coincidences that seemed to be associated

with these journals. First, Professor Fuller, who had translated both journals into English, according to the inscription on the first page of both journals. He, too, had mysteriously disappeared in Chicago, two weeks before Ashford's disappearance. And one of the professors of the college had died in a motor accident on the day Ashford sent the journals to me. So I figured, fantasy or not, there was something important about the journals. There had to be a reason why Ashford had sent them to me,' he finished.

Vijay listened intently. He had not known the story behind the journals. And, unlike KS, he knew that the contents of at least one of the journals were no fantasy story. The journal of Eumenes and the story it contained had been very real.

'I didn't know what to make of it,' KS continued. 'So I consulted two people. One was your father. I gave him both journals to read. I hoped he could make sense of them. The other person was a man I had met at another conference in the US. He had been invited as a guest speaker to present a counter point on the historical data that explained how mankind had evolved over the millennia. You may have heard of him. He has written five books on the theme of mankind's forgotten roots. He's also a successful businessman. Kurt Wallace.'

Vijay sat up. Kurt Wallace was the man who had sponsored Alice's project in Greece and was also the single largest shareholder of Titan Pharmaceuticals. There were several members of the task force who suspected him of being a part of the Order.

'Did you share the journals with Wallace?' Vijay wanted to learn if this could prove that Wallace knew about the Alexander Secret.

KS shook his head. 'No. Only your father had the journals. And those were the only copies. To be honest, I thought they were lost. I had given them to your father for safekeeping. I guess I was also scared. If so many people had disappeared or died because of these journals, what if someone learned that Ashford had sent them to me? By giving them to your father, I assumed I had rid myself of any trouble.'

'But Dad was killed,' Vijay pointed out, a bit fiercely. He was wondering now if the car crash hadn't been a mere accident. Had these journals been responsible for his father's death? One of them had almost got him and his friends killed six months ago.

'The car crash happened almost nine years later,' KS pointed out. 'And no one ever came to me asking for the journals. That would have been a logical step if someone wanted to track them down. How would they have known your father had them?'

Vijay had to agree.

‘The Kishangarh excavations were ongoing when I gave your father the journals. We had spent close to a year digging there. Just a couple of months after I gave him the journals, something changed. He started avoiding me. Within a few months, he decided to shut down the excavation saying that there was nothing more to be found. And he submitted the report that I told you about. We didn’t work together after that. I don’t know why.’

Vijay held the historian’s gaze. ‘Is this why you wanted to see me? To tell me that my father hid something about a twenty-five year old excavation from the ASI?’

‘No. There’s more. Almost nine years after Kishangarh, I suddenly got a call from your father. He wanted to see me. I agreed. We met briefly, for not more than five minutes. He was in a hurry. He had to go somewhere. But he didn’t offer an explanation. He gave me this.’

KS reached into his waist pouch and pulled out an artefact. He placed it on the table.

Vijay bent to look at it. It was an octagonal prism with strange inscriptions carved along its length on all eight sides.

It was unlike anything he had ever seen.

Eight months ago

CHAPTER 1

Starbucks, Saket

New Delhi

Vijay stared at the prism that KS had placed on the table. It was small—barely 4 inches in height—and looked like it was made of white chalk with fine inscriptions on all eight faces. He reached out and touched it. It was hard—some kind of white stone.

‘What is this?’ he enquired, looking at KS.

‘A Sumerian or Assyrian octagonal prism,’ KS replied. ‘Inscribed with cuneiform script. I don’t know what it says. I can’t read cuneiform. But such steles were common among the Sumerians, Assyrians and the Hittites. They were usually made from clay but this one is stone. That means it is important. It needed to be durable. That’s the only reason why people in the ancient world made anything out of stone. To ensure that it lasted.’

Vijay picked up the prism and turned it around in his hands. ‘He found this at Kishangarh?’

KS shrugged. ‘Quite honestly, I don’t know. Kishangarh is, maybe, 150 kilometres from Jaisalmer, near the Indo-Pak border, adjoining Bhawalpur district of Pakistan. Hardly the kind of place one would expect to find an artefact like this, which is more likely to turn up in Iraq. On the other hand, Indus valley seals have been excavated in Mesopotamia, and Mesopotamian artefacts have turned up in Indus valley sites. And Kishangarh did have an IVC strata. So one can’t rule that out. But nothing is conclusive. Of course, there’s always the possibility your father got it from someone’s private collection. But I think that’s extremely unlikely.’

‘By IVC, I presume you are referring to the Indus Valley Civilisation,’ Vijay guessed.

KS nodded.

Vijay continued studying the prism. ‘You didn’t try to get the script deciphered?’

‘Not when it first came into my possession. Your father gave this to me on

the day of the car crash. As I said earlier, he met me for just a couple of minutes. He had to go somewhere. All he said was, “KS, keep this safe. And secret. Trust me.” That was the last time I saw him.’ He fell silent, staring at the prism as he brooded over something.

Vijay’s thoughts went back to that fateful day. He realised he had never really wanted to think about the final moments before his parents had left on that last fatal car trip. It had been a blur and he had let it stay that way. It was too painful to recall.

Now, hearing KS’ words, the blur suddenly became crystal clear. He could see his father, rushing out of the house, calling out something to him. His mother had followed his father to the car and they had driven off.

But he still couldn’t recall why he hadn’t gone with them. What had his father yelled out to him as he left? Had he been calling out to Vijay to join them? Then why hadn’t Vijay responded? Why had he stayed behind? He struggled to recall.

For some reason, his brain had blocked out that specific memory. Try as he might, this was the only part of that scene that he could not bring to mind.

‘I had a very strong disincentive to ensure that I didn’t go near this thing again, until six months ago,’ KS was speaking again, having overcome his own mental struggle. ‘The day after your parents’ accident, I was kidnapped. Tortured. Someone wanted this prism. Badly.’ He pointed to the scar on his face. ‘You see this? They did this over three days. Slow and painful. But I never told them anything. Your father had entrusted this artefact to me, and it was the last thing he did. I was not going to betray him. Eventually, they let me go; convinced I knew nothing. The fact that I had not worked alongside your father for nine years is probably the reason I’m still alive. But it made me realise that this artefact was deadly. I hid it away safely until now.’

‘So why did you bring this out now? Why give it to me?’

KS sighed. ‘Believe me, I would like nothing more than to forget this damn thing even existed. But it won’t let me. I’ve had more time in the last fifteen years than at any other time,’ he said. ‘Time to observe. Time to notice things. Excavations where discoveries were ignored or denounced as worthless. And sites that were destroyed soon after they were reported in the news, which ensured that whatever was discovered there would never come to light.’

Vijay couldn’t help but remember what had happened in Greece the previous year at the site Alice had been excavating. If Alice hadn’t escaped with the ivory cube, the precious evidence of that tomb would have been lost forever to the world. Only the Order would have known about it.

‘There was a pattern,’ KS continued. ‘I noticed that this applied to sites

where the discovery of artefacts threatened to alter our notions of world history, especially of ancient times. And I began to wonder if your father's discovery had some link to all these excavations. Especially since I knew about the prism.' He counted off the points he was making on his fingers. 'Someone seemed to want these discoveries suppressed,' he began. 'Someone is after this prism. Did your father learn too much about either the discoveries or the prism? Was he killed to silence him?'

CHAPTER 2

Saket, New Delhi

'Go on,' Vijay urged. He wanted to know more.

'Then, two things happened recently that made me dig this prism up six months ago. I learned from someone that the National Museum in Delhi had been loaned a prism with cuneiform inscriptions by the British Museum as part of a special display of Assyrian artefacts at the National Museum. Apparently, this particular prism was considered fairly worthless in terms of content because the inscriptions didn't make any sense. On top of that, I read a news article about the murder of the curator at the National Museum around the time of the Assyrian exhibition. I wondered if the curator was killed by someone who knew about the second prism at the museum. It made me curious to find out if that prism and the one given to me by your father were connected in some way. This meant that whoever was after this prism, had discovered where it was. Why would they go looking for the second prism at the museum if that were not the case?'

KS spread his hands in front of him. 'I'm a simple man, Vijay. And now, I'm scared. Whatever is happening, it is big. If someone is powerful enough to destroy or suppress historical findings, they are after something big. I don't know what it is but it terrifies me. And I didn't know what to do. And, since your father isn't around, I decided to meet you. If the people hunting for this know about me, they'll reach me sooner or later. I've resigned myself to that. How long can I keep hiding? I'm getting older and am tiring of this kind of a life. But when they catch up with me, I don't want them to get this.'

'How can you be so sure that the killing at the museum was connected with this prism?' Vijay knew better since he had been at the museum when the curator was killed.

KS shook his head again. 'I don't care, frankly. Even if it wasn't, I don't

want to take a chance.’ He looked nervously at the entrance as two well built young men walked in and glanced their way.

Vijay noticed who he was looking at. ‘Don’t worry,’ he assured KS. ‘That’s my security. They were there at Cyberhub too, but we left them behind. They traced me here. We’ll be safer with them around.’ He paused. ‘Why did you wait for six months to meet me?’

The older man sat in contemplation for a few moments, as if weighing his words. ‘Two reasons,’ he said finally. ‘First, I wanted to see if I was right about the two prisms being connected. I made a replica of this prism and sent the inscriptions to an expert in England. Then, there was the call I received six months ago, which prompted me to contact you after more than fifteen years of being given this prism. I needed to prepare before we met, to ensure that I covered my tracks so no one knew I had contacted you. For fifteen years, you weren’t involved in whatever it was your father had got himself into. I didn’t want to pull you into this without ensuring that I ring-fenced our meeting. I knew that would take time. Which is why I asked for six months before we met. If we had met immediately after our call, someone somewhere would have connected the dots and both of us would have been targeted.’ He shook his head. ‘As it turns out, even six months were not enough. They found me and followed me to CyberHub. Now they know we’ve been in contact.’

‘So what did the expert tell you about the inscriptions on this prism?’ Vijay asked, curious.

‘Oh, sorry, I didn’t mention that, did I?’ KS shook his head at his own carelessness. He looked at Vijay. ‘He told me that the inscriptions didn’t make sense. They are incomplete; more like phrases than complete sentences. If it wasn’t for the antiquity of the prism, it would be worthless.’

‘Sounds exactly like the description of the other prism,’ Vijay observed. ‘Perhaps you were right about the two being connected.’

KS nodded. ‘I know. But I have no interest in finding out if I am right or not.’

He pushed the prism towards Vijay. ‘Keep it. And leave now. Whoever wants this thing shouldn’t find out that I’ve given this to you.’ He nodded at the security men. ‘Good thing you’ve got those guys. You’ll need them. Now, go. It won’t take much longer to track us down here.’

Reluctantly, Vijay pocketed the prism and got up. He walked towards the door without looking back, with deep misgivings. Something within him felt for KS. The man had been deeply loyal to his father’s request. Even today, when he knew that he would probably end up like Pratap Singh, he was still ensuring he discharged the responsibility he had been given.

As he left the outlet, the two men followed him out. There would be a car waiting downstairs to take him back to the fort.

KS watched Vijay go and sipped the last of his coffee. It was cold. But it didn't matter. He had done what he needed to. Vijay had needed to know.

Only one thing troubled him. Should he have told Vijay the whole truth?

CHAPTER 3

Two days later

Intelligence Bureau Headquarters, New Delhi

'We had the same conversation just two months ago,' Patterson thundered, his face dark and foreboding. 'I don't know what part of what I said was unclear to you.'

Vijay stared back at the screen despondently. 'I didn't do anything,' he remonstrated feebly. 'I mean, how is this my fault?'

'Going off on your own and meeting a stranger without telling anyone from the taskforce; who else but you can take responsibility for that?' Patterson's voice was calm now and had a ring of steel to it. Vijay didn't know what was worse, Patterson's anger or this cold, deadly calmness that he was now witnessing. Imran wasn't present at this meeting today. Patterson had specifically asked for a one-to-one with Vijay.

'That is my private affair,' Vijay shot back. 'I don't have to report everything I do in my personal life to the task force.'

'Sure you don't have to. And I'm not asking you to. But this wasn't a personal meeting was it? Did it have nothing to do with the Alexander Secret?'

Vijay had already told Patterson about what had transpired between him and KS and revealed the fact that the man was in fact the source of the journal which had led to them discovering the Alexander Secret the previous year. He had, however, held back the part about the prism and his father's connection with the entire episode.

'It did,' Vijay admitted. 'But...'

'In that case, it did involve the task force,' Patterson interrupted him. 'And the fracas that broke out after you and this guy, KS, ran off. Who's responsible for that? Thanks to you, people now know that you have a security cordon. That's going to set some alarm bells ringing. Until now,

we've been successful in keeping the task force invisible. No one could ever guess that you are anything other than an American of Indian origin, who did well with a startup and came back to India to claim his ancestral property. Now, that façade of normality is gone. People know that you have security. The one advantage we had over the Order was that they didn't know about us. Now they will. I am sure of that. After you barged into Saxena's office and what happened at Cyber Hub they're definitely going to sit up and notice. They aren't fools. They are going to guess that you are a part of something bigger. How long will it be before they learn about the task force?'

Vijay hated it when Patterson was right. Which he seemed to be most of the time. When Vijay had sprinted off with KS, his security men had followed and chanced upon a group of men who were also chasing Vijay and KS. The security team, while conscious of their instructions to remain low profile and concealed, had no choice but to engage with Vijay's pursuers. A fight had broken out and there had been some shooting as well, though Vijay's guards had driven off the pursuers. It was their action that had enabled Vijay and KS to make a getaway without being pursued. But it also meant that, whoever was after KS, now not only knew about Vijay's association with him but also knew that Vijay was protected by a security cordon.

They would put two and two together and realise that there was a reason why Vijay was so tightly guarded. Knowing the Order's extensive information network, it was impossible that this would not have come to their attention. They would investigate. And it wouldn't take long for them to discover the existence of the task force. The one advantage they had held over the Order until now would be lost.

And he would be responsible.

'This is your final warning,' Patterson continued, his voice low and menacing. 'I don't care how useful you are, I don't care what you've achieved in the last two years. I don't want anyone who doesn't follow instructions and puts the rest of the team in jeopardy. You do something like this once more and you're off the task force. Even if the President of the US wants me to, I won't have you on my team. Is that clear?'

Vijay nodded. He didn't know what to say. For the first time in his life, he was not going by his instinct, but was being driven by his emotions. The loss of Radha had devastated him and robbed him of the ability to be rational. That had been compounded by the sudden appearance on the scene of KS, six months ago, which had stirred emotions of grief, guilt and almost refreshed the loss of his parents. For the first time in his life, he had felt truly alone.

The screen went blank and Imran entered the room.

'He's trying to build an organisation,' Imran explained to Vijay after a few

moments of silence. He could see that Vijay was disturbed, and not just by his meeting with Patterson. ‘He’s got approval from both the US and Indian governments to convert the task force into a complete organisation parallel to the CIA and the IB in our respective countries. We’ll have resources, our own special forces to back us up, which will enable us to respond faster to intel. You know what that means, right? We can get to the Order faster,’ Imran paused. ‘I can understand the reason behind your actions. Both, when you met Saxena and now when you met this man—KS. But you have to understand where Patterson is coming from. He can’t allow this new organisation to be compromised even before it is born. If the Order learns about us, they will do everything in their power to crush us. And Patterson will never allow that to happen.’

‘I know,’ Vijay sighed. ‘I know he’s right. But I’m... I just haven’t been thinking straight.’

Imran put a hand on his shoulder. ‘Take a break, Vijay,’ he said kindly. ‘You’ve been thinking too much about the Order, about finding Radha. Go for a holiday somewhere. Go overseas.’

‘Maybe I will,’ Vijay resolved. ‘I’ll go to London. Maybe see the English countryside. It’s springtime there and the weather will be nice.’ He looked at Imran. ‘You’ll keep me posted on the search for Radha?’

Imran nodded. ‘Of course I will.’

Vijay nodded his thanks and left the room.

Imran stared after Vijay for a while. He knew what his friend was going through. And he was worried that this was impairing his judgement. All Vijay could think of was Radha. He wasn’t concerned about where the *amrita* had gone. Not once had he asked if the task force had managed to track Van Klueck’s helicopter. Or if there had been any progress in getting information about the Order.

He sighed. Patterson was dead serious about the warning he had given Vijay. And he knew it was just a matter of time before Vijay used up his last chance. This was why he had urged Vijay to leave the country and take a holiday. It was the only way to keep Vijay out of harm’s way for at least a while.

CHAPTER 4

Jaungarh Fort

Vijay sat in his study and examined the stone prism. Such a small object, yet capable of inspiring so much evil!

His thoughts flitted back to his meeting with KS. He had learned so much about his father in that conversation. And, yet, so many more questions had now arisen. Why had his father hidden something from KS at Kishangarh? Where had he obtained the prism? He seemed to have known the importance, and danger, associated with the prism since he had asked KS to keep it secret.

One thing he was sure of now. The car crash was no accident. Both his parents had been murdered. And he had no idea why. Except for the speculation that his father had stumbled onto something big. His mother had also worked for the ASI, though she hadn't been a field archaeologist. Had his father shared his discovery with his mother? Is that why she was killed as well?

He got up and poured himself a whisky and stood gazing out of the bay windows that lined the study, overlooking the hillside on which the fort was built.

Another thing bothered Vijay. He had been so caught up with the prism and KS' revelations about the links between the archaeological excavations that it had slipped his mind completely to ask KS a vital question.

What was in the second journal that Mike Ashford had sent KS?

NINE MONTHS AGO

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CHAPTER 1

The British Museum, London

Vijay strolled through the spacious, covered Great Court of the British Museum. When Imran had suggested going on a vacation, the choice of London as a destination hadn't been random; Vijay had a purpose in coming here.

His meeting with KS had been at the back of his mind during his conversation with Imran. The significance of the fact that a prism with inscriptions that didn't make sense was in the possession of the British Museum had not been lost on him. Especially since it sounded like a twin of the prism KS had given him.

Vijay had come to London to find the prism KS had spoken of. It was one more clue to the mystery that surrounded the death of his parents. And Vijay was determined to leave no stone unturned to get to the bottom of that mystery.

'Are you quite sure you won't have something to eat?' The voice at his elbow broke into his thoughts.

Vijay smiled at the tall and well-built man who had quietly walked up to him, carrying a muffin and a cup of coffee. Harry Briggs, a former SAS Mobile Trooper, part of Britain's finest special forces unit, had been assigned to Vijay during his visit to Britain.

Though Vijay had insisted that he didn't need protection, especially since this was a private visit and not related to the task force, Imran had refused to relent. He had only conceded that a full security team would not accompany Vijay on his vacation. However, he had refused to give in completely, insisting that the task force would assign a former Special Forces man to accompany Vijay.

'Just because you're not going to be in India doesn't mean you'll be any safer,' Imran had pointed out. 'In fact, you may be even more vulnerable outside the fort. And don't forget, there's someone out there who was following KS and now knows that you are connected to him in some way. Whoever they are, they may also be watching you. You're not going there alone,' Imran had concluded firmly.

'But I won't be alone,' Vijay had protested. 'Colin is going to be there as well.'

‘That’s not what I meant and you know it,’ Imran had smiled at Vijay. ‘No more arguments. You’re getting a bodyguard and that’s it.’

Vijay had conceded defeat, knowing that Imran would not back down. Harry had met Vijay at the airport and had been his constant shadow for the last two days. Last night, Colin had joined them at the little farm they were staying at in Surrey, a short train ride away from London.

Harry had turned out to be good company. Around the same age as Vijay and Colin, he had a striking sense of humour and was immensely affable. A wound suffered in Iraq had led to his early discharge from the services on health grounds though he looked so incredibly fit that it was hard to tell. Six months ago, he had joined the task force as part of the small team in the UK. Over the last two days, Vijay had told him all about their adventures the previous year in Afghanistan, which had brought back memories for the special forces soldier, who had also spent a year in that country, battling the Taliban.

‘Finally,’ Harry grinned and gestured towards the alcove that led to the stairway descending to the washrooms one level below, as Colin sauntered out.

‘That was a relief,’ Colin said. ‘Now I’m ready to take on the museum.’

‘It was the beer you had for lunch,’ Harry observed, then changed the subject. ‘Where do we start from?’

Vijay had not briefed Harry on the reason for their visit. The former SAS man thought they were on a regular tour of the museum. ‘Half a day is too short for all the stuff in there,’ he had remarked when Vijay had first disclosed the schedule for today. But Vijay wanted it that way. Part of the task force or not, Harry was still a stranger, and Vijay was not comfortable sharing his personal motives with him yet. Colin, of course, was in on the secret.

‘The Assyrian section,’ Vijay said as he indicated the gallery he needed to visit on the map of the museum. ‘Rooms 6 to 10. Ground floor.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Colin was poring over another map. ‘There are Mesopotamian galleries on the third floor as well. Rooms 52 to 56.’

‘So, you’re interested in the ancient Middle East?’ Harry sounded intrigued. ‘Never developed an interest for the history of that region myself. Come to think of it, never developed an interest for history. Period.’ He shrugged. ‘I guess that’s why I never came here before.’

Vijay smiled at this admission and turned to lead the way forward. ‘Let’s start with the ground floor and then hit the third, shall we?’

He started towards the Assyrian galleries with trepidation. The last time Colin and he were in a museum, it hadn’t been a pleasant experience. A curator had been murdered and they had narrowly escaped being killed

themselves.

Vijay hoped this museum visit would be more memorable.

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CHAPTER 2

Three hours later

The British Museum, London

As they exited Room 56 on the third floor, Vijay sighed with frustration. The galleries on both levels had been awe-inspiring. The collections of monuments, gates, palace inscriptions and friezes on the ground floor had been breath taking. On the third floor, the collection of inscriptions, clay tablets and inscribed octagonal prisms like the one Vijay had been given, was as dazzling.

Colin and Vijay had inspected each clay tablet, every inscription and subjected the octagonal prisms to careful scrutiny to see if it could be the one they were searching for.

But it wasn't.

There were steles and prisms with inscriptions of battles won and descriptions of kings. But none of the prisms was described as being incomplete or with incomprehensible inscriptions.

'Say, do you guys want to look at the mummies?' Harry wanted to know. The galleries housing ancient Egyptian artefacts ran parallel to the Mesopotamian galleries. There was a gleam in his eye.

'I thought you weren't interested in history, Harry?' Colin asked.

'I wasn't, really, but I hadn't seen this kind of stuff before,' Harry admitted, a trifle sheepishly. 'I mean, I always thought history was about Europe and Britain in the medieval times. I never thought that there was interesting stuff like this from thousands of years ago.'

'Why don't you go on?' Vijay gestured towards the Egyptian galleries. 'We'll wait here for you.'

'Are you crazy? Patterson will have my arse if I leave you guys for even a minute!' Harry looked shocked at Vijay's suggestion.

'Come on, then,' Vijay said, 'let's go to the Egyptian section.'

A visibly delighted Harry Briggs accompanied the two friends into the adjacent gallery.

But Vijay and Colin had no interest in the Egyptian artefacts. As Harry went around the room, his nose pressed to the glass enclosures within which the artefacts were housed, the two friends quickly used the time to discuss the

whereabouts of the prism.

‘It must be here somewhere,’ Colin remarked. ‘It has to be in the museum. They couldn’t possibly have left it in India.’

‘They would have brought it back,’ Vijay agreed. ‘But then why can’t we find it on display?’

‘Let’s ask someone,’ Colin suggested. ‘Perhaps the information desk on the ground floor will know.’

Vijay called out to Harry and indicated they were leaving.

‘Blimey, did you see that skeleton?’ Harry enthused. He was referring to an exhibit of a naturally mummified man, displayed in the exact posture in which he had been buried thousands of years ago. All such exhibits had temperature and humidity controls to ensure their preservation.

They took the stairs to the ground floor. At the information desk, they waited in queue for their turn.

‘I wanted to ask about artefacts that aren’t displayed in the galleries,’ Vijay began when their turn came. He wasn’t quite sure how to broach the subject with the lady at the desk. ‘I’m looking for a specific one in fact, that I saw at an exhibition in New Delhi. I was told that it had been loaned to the museum there by the British Museum. Would you be able to help me locate it, Rachel?’ He had noted the name on the brass nametag pinned to her blouse.

‘Oh, right. You’re looking for something that’s probably in one of the exhibitions for members,’ Rachel replied. ‘Are you a member?’

‘No,’ Vijay replied, his heart sinking. How were they going to examine the prism if they couldn’t get to it?

‘Well, then, why don’t you become a member? It’s only £60. There are lots of other benefits of membership.’

‘I don’t live in the UK,’ Vijay explained. ‘I’m just visiting. And I’m really keen on seeing this artefact. Isn’t there some way I can gain access to it?’

‘Let me check for you,’ Rachel offered. She moved to the side and picked up the intercom on the desk and dialled a number. ‘There’s a gentleman here who is visiting from overseas and would like to take a look at an artefact that he saw in New Delhi. It isn’t on public display.’ She listened for a while to the response. ‘Oh, I see,’ she said. ‘Just hold on, I’ll ask him.’

Rachel held the receiver to her shoulder and looked at Vijay. ‘What exhibition did you see this artefact at?’

‘An Assyrian exhibition,’ Vijay responded, more hopeful now. ‘I don’t remember the name but the object I’m looking for is an inscribed octagonal prism.’

‘Right.’ Rachel put the receiver to her ear again and repeated the details Vijay had offered. ‘I see,’ she said after listening to the response. ‘I’ll let him

know.'

She turned to Vijay as she put the phone down. 'I'm afraid it won't be possible for you to see this prism.'

'I'll become a member.' Desperation got the better of Vijay.

'I'm afraid that won't help. The exhibits from that exhibition aren't accessible to members either.' Rachel eyed Vijay curiously. 'Hang on. Let me call someone. You can talk to them and see if they can help. I really can't do any more than that.'

Vijay nodded and stepped back from the counter. As he briefed Colin on the conversation, Harry kept scanning the crowd around them, his face expressionless.

'Excuse me!' Rachel was calling out to Vijay. He turned around to face the counter and saw three men wearing the distinctive uniforms of the museum security service. 'These gentlemen will escort you. Please go with them.'

Vijay nodded, with some misgivings. Why were three security guards from the museum escorting them to a meeting? And whom were they supposed to meet? He caught Harry's eye and walked over to the three security guards.

'Lead the way,' he told them.

CHAPTER 3

More questions

‘So, why are you so interested in this prism?’ The large man with a florid face pressed Vijay for an answer.

Vijay, Colin and Harry had been shepherded through an exit marked “Strictly for Employees only” and into the museum’s security office where they had been greeted by the tall man who now sat at his desk facing them.

‘Ben Atkins, Head of Security,’ he had introduced himself. Vijay noticed that Atkins’ gaze lingered on Harry a bit longer. He wasn’t surprised. Harry was built like a bull. A full head taller than Vijay, he had a body that was hard as iron and bulging with muscles. Harry’s short-cropped hair and unusual physique must have piqued the interest of the head of security.

On Atkins’ request, Vijay had explained what he was searching for. The security chief had obviously been briefed before this meeting because he seemed to know exactly which artefact and specific exhibition Vijay was alluding to.

‘I’m afraid that particular set of artefacts is not open to viewing,’ Atkins had stated, echoing Rachel’s announcement earlier. He had followed it up with the question that Vijay found himself trying to answer now.

But how could he tell Atkins why he wanted to see that particular prism? He couldn’t possibly inform him about the second prism that was in his possession. It was, after all, an ancient artefact. He didn’t know how his father had come by it, but without proof of legal purchase, it was a crime to be in possession of an antique.

‘It was intriguing,’ Vijay said, finally, searching for words that would help him conceal his true motive without arousing any suspicion. ‘The description of the prism sounded mysterious—an Assyrian prism with inscriptions that were incomplete; that were incomprehensible. I have a keen interest in history and I know that Assyrians recorded their achievements on steles and prisms like the ones you have on display here. I was just very curious and wanted to take a closer look. That’s all.’ He wondered if he had managed to convince the security head.

Atkins stroked his chin for a while as he pondered Vijay’s statement. Then, he leaned forward. ‘You seem innocuous enough,’ he said, ‘but I don’t know what you are doing with a former military man in your company.’ He

looked at Harry. 'I'm from the SAS myself and know another SAS man when I see one.'

He turned his attention back to Vijay. 'I've been told you went through the Assyrian and Mesopotamian galleries. I don't know if you've been to any of the other exhibits, and I don't have the time or inclination to go through the CCTV footage to find out. But I go by my instinct and, fortunately for you, my gut tells me you are clean. But I don't understand you, I have to confess.'

Atkins sat back and stared at Vijay. 'Perhaps I should share with you the reason behind disallowing access to these exhibits. When the entire set of artefacts was being transported back to the museum last year, there was an attempted robbery.' He looked around at the three men who had escorted Vijay to his office. 'We have a great team,' he said, with undisguised pride, 'and we were able to thwart the robbery. Nothing was touched. But I lost two men. Two good men.' He emphasised the point by striking the desk with his index finger. 'The investigation is still open but there are no leads. The buggers vanished in the night leaving no trace. Ever since then, those exhibits have been under lock and key. And then you show up asking to see them.'

Vijay hoped he had been able to hide his surprise at the news he had just been served. KS had been right about the prism even if he had been wrong about the curator's death. Someone had connected the dots and figured that the prism at the National Museum was worth securing.

But who was that someone? And why did they want both the prisms? What secret did the prisms hide? And what did that have to do with the death of his parents?

There were too many questions. Vijay realised they would make no headway here.

'I'm sorry I wasted your time,' his tone was contrite. 'All I can say is that I had no knowledge of the attempted robbery. But, thank you for your time.'

Atkins nodded as Vijay, Colin and Harry trooped out of the room.

When they were gone, he frowned. While his instinct had told him that Vijay was in the clear, it was also flashing a bright warning signal.

Something was amiss. But what was it?

Little did he know how soon he would find out.

MAY

Outside the British museum

Harry scanned the open area outside the British Museum as the trio hurried down the stairs. When they had reached the Great Court after leaving the security office, Harry had broken the news to the other two.

‘We’re under surveillance here,’ he said softly. ‘I’ve been watching them ever since we left the Assyrian galleries and went to the third floor. That’s the reason I asked to visit the Egyptian galleries. I wanted to see if they would follow us there. And they did. I don’t know who they are. Don’t look around. Don’t let them know we’ve twigged that they’re shadowing us. But let’s get out of here fast. We have to shake them off.’

Without a word, Vijay and Colin quickened their steps as they exited the building.

‘Just walk fast,’ Harry advised them. ‘Don’t act like you’re trying to get away from them. Make it look like you have a train to catch.’

‘Just how do you plan to lose them?’ Vijay asked as they strode towards the tall, black gates of the museum.

‘The tube,’ Harry answered and offered no further explanation.

Oxford Street, London

‘Keep your Oyster cards handy,’ Harry urged as the three men walked into Tottenham Court Road Station, the nearest Underground station to the British Museum.

They swiped their cards and passed through the turnstiles, Harry grabbing a copy of the London Underground map along the way.

‘This way,’ Harry pointed to the stairs leading down to the southbound Northern Line. ‘We’re going to Leicester Square.’

The others didn’t question him and quietly trooped down the stairs.

‘Are they still behind us?’ Vijay ventured.

Harry nodded. ‘They were getting their tickets at the machine when we passed through the turnstiles...and weren’t prepared for us taking the tube. They probably had a car waiting to follow us when we took a cab. We’ve managed to buy some time. I knew they wouldn’t try and jump the turnstiles. Not if this is just a surveillance mission for them. After the shooting a few years back, that would be risky and also draw too much attention to them.’

They didn’t have to wait long before a train rumbled into the station. The coaches were all relatively empty at this time of day. The rush hour hadn’t yet started.

As they boarded, the doors of the coach soon slid shut and the train began to move.

Vijay and Colin turned to Harry, a question on their lips. They didn’t have to ask.

‘They’ve boarded the train,’ Harry informed them quietly. ‘Two coaches behind us. They’ll be coming up to our coach soon. We’re getting off at the next station.’

This was the first time Vijay was seeing Harry in action and he was impressed. He wondered when Harry had observed their pursuers because he hadn’t appeared to turn around for a backward glance at any time. Yet, he seemed to know every move they were making. This man was good. His faith in Harry Briggs was reinforced and his respect for the man went up a few notches.

Vijay just hoped they wouldn’t have to test Harry’s mettle and skill in a more dangerous situation.

The train drew up at Leicester Square station. They hopped off quickly, staying close to each other.

‘Westbound Picadilly Line,’ Harry instructed them as they navigated the

passages that connected the platforms.

Vijay had guessed Harry's plan. Rush hour would start soon. If they kept changing train lines, keeping their pursuers guessing, they might be able to gain some distance. And, once rush hour began, it would be easier to lose themselves in the throngs that would be boarding trains and exiting stations. This was their only hope to shake off their tail. Taking a taxi or boarding a bus would be much easier for the men shadowing them.

They boarded the train. Their destination was the next stop. Picadilly Circus. But they wouldn't be exiting the tube at this station. Even though the delights of Picadilly lay above them, they would continue their game of changing trains.

From Picadilly Circus, it was the Bakerloo line to Oxford Circus. Then, onto Bond Street on the Central Line. From there, they took the Jubilee Line, going north to Baker Street. At Baker Street, it was the Hammersmith & City Line to Edgware Road. Vijay recalled the last time he had been to the Lebanese restaurants on Edgware Road, which was a microcosm of the Middle East in London.

All the while, Harry led them on, his face grim. His expression said everything. Despite the constant changing of trains, moving between the lines, they had still not managed to shake off their tail. Clearly, their pursuers had worked out Harry's plan and were doggedly shadowing them.

The only consolation was that their pursuers had not attempted to get closer to them. For now at least, they were content with just following them.

At Edgware Road, the crowds began to thicken and surge. They headed for the District Line. A train was waiting.

They looked at the information display. They were in luck. The train was about to leave.

'Now,' Harry said softly, 'we move faster. Push your way through the crowd.'

Following his example, the other two started elbowing their way past the other commuters, ignoring the dirty looks they got and the occasional shout of 'Hey, watch where you're going'. Whether it was Harry's pit-bull physique or just pure luck, Vijay didn't know, but they made it to the train just as the doors were closing.

As they leaped through the doors, Vijay caught sight of their pursuers for the first time.

Five men, all Caucasian, barrelling their way through the crowd just as the trio had just done.

But they were too late.

The doors were shut and the train gathered speed as it left the station.

Vijay sighed with relief. They had made it.

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Orkley Farm, Surrey

‘You chaps need to come clean with me.’ Harry sat with his arms folded on the sofa in the loft of the little barn where they were staying. Vijay had managed to locate a farmhouse in the Surrey countryside, which had a converted barn available for a short stay rental. It had three bedrooms with attached bathrooms and a little living room in what had been a loft when it served its former purpose.

From Edgware Road, they had gone all the way to Westminster, where they had changed to the Jubilee Line to Waterloo station. At Waterloo, they had boarded a train that would take them to the railway station that was a three-mile hike, through the woods, to the farm.

As soon as they arrived, Harry had announced that he wanted to talk to both of them and they had headed for the loft where they were now sitting.

‘I was told you were on vacation,’ Harry continued, addressing Vijay, ‘when I was assigned to you. So what were we doing in the museum today? You aren’t working on a job—at least that’s not what I was told.’ He looked at both the men in turn. ‘So I need to know what you’re up to. Go ahead. I’m all ears.’

Vijay looked away for a moment, then held Harry’s gaze. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘This is personal. I’m not comfortable sharing it with anyone.’

Harry unfolded his arms. ‘Those men following us today were professionals. They were bloody good at their job. Several times, I lost them even when there were no crowds. They anticipated us beautifully. And that worries me. I don’t know why a bunch of pros are following you around but sooner or later they’re going to catch up with you. I have to know what’s happening here. If you’re in danger, I need to know why. In the forces, we watch each other’s back. We trust each other fully. There’s no other way I know to operate. And that’s the way we’re going to operate here if you want me around.’

There was silence in the room.

Vijay looked at Colin. They both liked Harry. And he would have been thoroughly vetted before being recruited for the task force. Colin shrugged.

Vijay let out a deep sigh. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘You’re right. You do need to know.’

He launched into the background of his visit to London. His parents... their fatal car accident... the call last year from KS and his subsequent meeting... the prism that KS had given him and the information about the

second prism at the British Museum.

When he had finished, Harry nodded gravely. 'I see. I can understand what you're doing and why. But here's the nub of it: you may be stirring a hornet's nest with this. I don't know what a prism has got to do with anything but why were you being followed today? You do know that I need to report this in.'

Vijay sighed again. 'Sure, Harry, I know. It doesn't matter anyway. We've come up against a wall. There's no way we can gain access to that prism at the museum. I'm giving up. I'm going to find out tomorrow about the earliest flight back to India.' He looked at Colin. 'And you'd better do the same. The game's over. There's nothing more we can do.'

His words belied his true feelings. There was more that they could do. He had one last option that he could exercise. But it was impossible at this point. He didn't even know where to start. What he did know was that there would be a time in the coming months when he would be in a position to exercise that option. And he would.

He was giving up for now. Not forever.