

PROLOGUE

April 4793

Aarav is late for school and running as fast as his legs can take him. If he runs fast enough, he can make it just in time. If he doesn't make it, he will have to stand in the courtyard, in the morning sun, for which his classmates will tease him about later. Worse, it means that he will miss fifteen minutes of the first lesson that day — his favourite class, mathematics.

The journey from home to school is at least four kilometres. Aarav is angry at himself for having lost track of time while he was in the fields with his father. Being the eldest son, he will inherit his father's rice fields and be expected to work in the village, but he secretly wants to be a mathematician and work in an office. He dreams of carrying a briefcase and wearing a clean shirt every day.

The road between his home and the school passes through rice fields. The land was all forest once, but the villagers claimed it and now they grow rice there. The village is growing each year and more land is always needed for more home and more crops.

While Aarav is running, he notices that the trees at the far end of the fields are shaking, but there is no wind. He slows down to look. The little voice inside his head that usually tells him the good from the bad is telling him that something is not right, but he is late for school. He ignores the voice and decides to keep going.

As he starts off again, he realises that the bushes on the other side of the road are also swaying wildly. In fact, all the leaves in the surrounding woods are vibrating, ever so slightly. Aarav stops running, and a feeling falls on him.

He looks left and right and again. Then, as if in slow motion, he sees dozens of elephants emerging, but they look out of proportion. They are too big. Aarav looks left and right again. The animals are bigger than any that he has ever seen, as tall as the two-storey

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house of the headman of his village. They are all waving their ears ferociously and shaking their gigantic heads in what he knows are signs of anger.

He wonders if he needs to return home to tell his father, who is still working the fields as do most of the men in the village. Even his mother and the women will be there helping the men this morning. It is harvesting season and all hands are needed to cut the rice stalks.

The giant elephants fully emerge from the forest, and he can see how massive their bodies are. Then he knows. Aarav turns and runs back towards his home.

But as he arrives at the entrance to his village, he knows that he is too late. He hears screaming voices amidst the trumpeting and growling. The ground trembles with vibrations almost like an earthquake. He runs straight to his house. But it's no longer a house; it's a pile of broken wood, mud and straw. He calls out for his mother, his little sister and his father. There is no response. People are running everywhere. Mr Gupta, his neighbour, is shouting at him to leave.

But Aarav won't go until he has found his parents and his sister, who is only five. The giant elephants in his village are knocking down the mud houses everywhere they go. As Aarav continues his search, he sees his uncle Krishna, running barefoot towards him, a terrified look on his dark face. Just as quickly, a giant elephant trunk curls itself around his uncle's waist, carries him up screaming and throws him against a tree. There is blood splattered everywhere and Aarav's panic gives way to tears. Bodies are everywhere, and the ground is scarlet with blood. The elephants are indiscriminate in their route of destruction. They appear bent on destroying the whole village.

He somehow makes his way to the edge of the village undetected and hides behind a large rock. He cries as quietly as he can. He knows that his family is gone. He sees people running on the road where he was previously, only to be picked up and flung into the fields.

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The screams are the worst sounds he has ever heard in his young life and Aarav covers his ears with the palms of his hands.

It is dusk when he finally dares to move. It has taken time, but there is silence now, thick and heavy. No more screams, no more trumpeting, no more shaking ground. He can see where his village once stood. The elephants have left. But Aarav does not want to stay there all night; they may return. The closest town, Ajjipura, is four kilometres away.

Finally, he walks warily towards the only road that leads out of the village. There are bodies stretched out all along it, Aarav keeps his head up, not wanting to see who they are, or were. He knows that he will recognise them all. He is afraid that he may see his best friend, Ali or Mr Gupta, or worse, maybe his mother, father or sister. It is one thing to know that they did not survive but it is another to have to see their bodies. He is not prepared for that; he is not strong enough. Tears are again welling in his eyes. He starts running. He does not care if an elephant will see him, he just runs as fast as he can towards the town. It is dark

he reaches the outskirts. The silence tells him that there too, the elephants have attacked. He walks towards the only building he knows, his school. The gates are broken. The school is nothing more than rubble with half a wall still standing. Aarav can see that the classrooms no longer exist. Still, it is the only place he knows. He picks his way through the debris and makes his way further inside. It is still and silent, the only sound coming from his movements. There are bodies underneath stones and broken walls. He sees small legs and arms. His breaths come in short bursts and his heart feels like it is about to explode out of his chest. Despite this, he continues until he finds an area that is relatively clear. Then he goes to a corner and sits.

News of the giant elephant attack isn't reported until the next day. The World Peace Organisation sends in Peacekeepers to search for survivors. They discover a traumatised

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nine-year-old boy hiding among the rubble of a devastated school, in the small town of Ajjipura. He is among the few remaining survivors who are evacuated to the north of Old India in a WPO camp.

In a country with a population close to fifteen billion people, the Peacekeepers find only 90,465 alive. The giant elephants did exactly what they set out to do. They took back the territory that was once theirs.

Immediately after the description on the Indian subcontinent, reports start coming in about other animal attacks worldwide; giant wildebeests destroying Neo-Afrika; monstrous sharks, as large as the ancient megalodons, sinking ships; colossal snakes devouring inhabitants of Brasilia; gargantuan, poisonous spiders invading Neo-Australia.

One by one, cities and countries begin to fall.