

**The  
Shatterer  
of  
Worlds**

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## **DEDICATION**

**Dedicated to my wife Divya, without whose patient support  
this book would never have finished.**



*Now, I am become Death, the Shatterer of Worlds .*

– Robert Oppenheimer, when he saw the first nuclear explosion.



*Note: The diary below was found in the ruins of the last human civilisation that lived on the planet Mars. It had been dictated telepathically and stored in one of the few computers that survived the destruction of Mars. All the people mentioned in this account are dead, so there is no way to verify its accuracy. The narrator may be one of the leaders of the Martian Civil War, though we are not sure exactly what role he played. The document is important because it is one of the few rare ones that survived the event now known as the End of Mars.*

— *The Mars Archaeological Preservation Society*

*Lord Mahish's diary — Part 1*

Who decides who the hero or the villain of a story is? I mean, villains don't see themselves as villains, do they? Do you think they get up in the morning, look at themselves in the mirror and decide

that today, they will do great evil? The Hitlers, the Mussolinis, the Genghis Khans of the world, did they decide they would be evil and do something so bad, history would remember them forever? Or rather, did they see themselves as misunderstood heroes? Did they think they were trying to accomplish good, and that history would remember them nicely? Except history is written by the winning side. In most stories, the writer tells you who the villain is. He is the dark one, the one with the evil laugh, the one who will kick the little puppy. While your hero will be the one kissing little puppies. And while the good guys will all be beautiful, with perfect skin and perfect teeth, villains will be the ones stuck with the moles, scars, and blackheads on the nose. And so the writer tells in you advance who the villain is, and the poor villain is screwed after that. If the villain saves a village, it's because he has ulterior motives. If the hero destroys a village, it's because he had no choice, he was doing it for the greater good. And so your villain is screwed, no matter what he does. As the designated villain of this story, let me tell you that I didn't want to be the villain. I wanted to be the good guy, the hero. And I tried for some time to be the good guy. For almost a thousand years. And in those centuries, I saw the people I opposed become more powerful and more entrenched in their positions. I knew someone had to stand up to them and fight them. I also knew the person who did so would become the villain of the story. He would be called a demon, a murderer, and all the self-righteous people would stand in line to throw stones at him. It would make them feel good



about themselves, about the fact that no matter how pathetic they were, they were at least better than the designated villain. I knew all this, but after a thousand years, I didn't care. Better to be a famous villain than an insignificant bug that the gods crushed on their morning walk and didn't even notice.

But I couldn't have imagined what would happen next. No one could have. I am now at my knees, and an ancient goddess, with the combined computing power of ten billion minds behind her, is standing in front of me, smiling at me. Go on, she says, finish your message. Her face is kind, and if you met her, you would immediately fall in love with her. And yet, she is waiting for me to finish my message so she can kill me. She will cut my head off once I am done. I don't blame her, though. I brought it upon myself.

My enemies, who also call themselves gods, though they are simple thieves who stole their godhood from others, will not be here to enjoy my defeat. You see, I have killed all of them already. And now, I am about to be killed myself. Talk about payback. Talk about karma. A word these gods used without ever understanding its meaning.

I'm not the only one who made a mistake though; the gods did as well. In their arrogance and blind pride, they failed to realise that their actions brought them to the attention of someone who was far more dangerous, and far more powerful, than they could ever hope to be. The Shatterer of Worlds is here now, and he is going to kill the planet. Same as he did

last time. I wonder now if we could have stopped him. If we had been willing to listen and negotiate, could we have saved this planet? I don't know. And I don't care. I will die here, so why should I care what happens to this planet?

So yeah. Coming back to my original question. Who decides who the villain of the story is? I don't know. I'll tell you my story and let you decide for yourself. The goddess who is going to kill me is very patient, so let me start at the beginning...

*Date: 3513, Earth Date*

*Location: Unnamed asteroid*

Dolphin mentally smacked herself. How could she have been so stupid to get kidnapped twice? The alarms were blaring and a red light had come on in the spaceship. She heard an automated voice speak.

“Warning. Nuclear missile approaching. Five minutes to impact.”

The captain of the ship turned to Raksas.

“What now? We can’t outrun it. Even if we could, a Martian destroyer is on its way. You have gotten us killed, you fool.”

“Relax. I got this. Send this code via the radio to disable the missile. 6354388729.”

The captain entered the code. The danger lights switched off, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“The missile has been cancelled,” said the captain. “Where did you get the code from? They are supposed to be top secret.”

“I have a secret admirer. Take the ship down towards the planet, captain.”

“Umm, sorry to interrupt you guys,” said Dolphin, “but why am I here?”

“Sweetheart,” said Raksas, “we may need you to disable certain parts of the security.”

“Oh, okay.” But she wasn’t convinced. “You do know I know nothing about Martian missiles and spaceships, don’t you?”

Raksas took out a shock rod. “Do you want another session?”

Terrified, she shook her head and closed her eyes.

The captain spoke. “There is a landing pad right below us. It is well maintained and looks active.”

“Don’t land there!”

Raksas moved forward and grabbed the captain’s arm. His outburst caused everyone to look at him.

“It’s a trap. There are millions of invisible nano-robots down there. They will eat us alive as soon as we land. A most clever and deadly trap. These killer nanobots were designed by the man we are trying to rescue. A real butcher, a mass murderer of the highest calibre. It will be an honour to meet him.”

Dolphin shuddered. The man they had come to free sounded more and more dangerous. Exactly the sort of man they should be running away from. Not freeing.

“Take the ship to the roof. There is a small access hatch for technicians. We will go in via there.”

The ship hovered over the roof.

“Do not land, in case the nanobots latch on to us. Just keep hovering. We will jump from here.”

Dolphin was grabbed and rudely pushed to the exit.

“Take her with you,” said Raksas to one of his henchmen.

She was thrown down and landed hard on the roof. The men who had kidnapped her jumped after her, though they landed more graciously.

“Come on.”

Dolphin was taken down a tiny shaft, barely big enough to fit one person. Down and down they went, till they ended up in a large room with nothing but a wall in front of them.

“That’s it?” said Dolphin. “This place is empty.”

Raksas had come in behind her. He dragged her to the wall.

“No, it’s not. Translate.”

“Ouch! You could have asked nicely.”

Back when he was dating her, he was always

so polite and gentlemanly. But now she realised he had just been fattening the calf before the slaughter. The calf being her, of course.

“I will ask you any way I want. Remember, we don’t need you alive till the end of the experiment.”

“Fine, fine. Keep your cool.”

Dolphin looked at the text. It was written in multiple languages. “Why can’t you read it yourself? Look, this is Plutonian.”

“Just translate it.”

She realised he could not read. Dolphin scanned through the text. “This looks like a children’s mythology story.”

“What does it say?”

She started reading.

“Beware! Be warned! This is a place of great danger, of certain death for those who go ahead.”

“Just skip the boring lecture. Cut to the meat.”

“It’s not a lecture. It’s a warning. One we should really be heeding.”

Raksas poked her in the back. She turned around to face him.

“Stop it! Fine, I’ll translate the main part.”

“I want to know if this is the right place. Is the demon locked here?” asked Raksas.

“Okay. Let me see.” She skipped down the

text. “Beware, demons, blah blah blah. Ah, here it is.” Dolphin read the next part out loud.

“In the Great New Year of the Beginning, there was a great demon. He was a bloodthirsty monster, a killer of worlds, a monster of epic proportions. His actions led to the death of ten billion people, and the end of planet Earth. Only with great effort and great loss did the gods capture him. But it was too late to save our home planet.”

Dolphin paused. “Oh my God.”

“Keep reading. I never asked you to stop.”

“But do you realise what this means? They told us in school that the Martian people destroyed the Earth. But it seems they were innocent as well. It was this person who did it.”

“Did I ask you for a history lesson?”

“Hey Raksas, finding it hard to control your girlfriend?”

It was one of Raksas’ more violent friends, Dastar. He threatened to punch her if she did not behave.

“Please don’t hurt me. I’ll translate it.”

She continued reading.

“The gods, with great difficulty, managed to control this demon and bring him under control. Being a demon, he could not be killed. So he has been locked here, for all eternity, to atone for his sins. Be warned. Leave this demon alone. If he is released, it will mean the end of the universe itself. His

wickedness knows no bounds, his cruelty is unsurpassed. Truly, he is the Shatterer of Worlds.”

Dastar walked up to her. “Does it say anything about sacrificing a virgin to free him?”

This time, Dolphin punched Raksas. “I can’t believe you told everyone about that. It was supposed to be our secret.”

Raksas didn’t get angry. He just laughed. “Why do you think we chose you? For your good looks, Miss Teen Pluto? We have read the ancient Earth stories. One always needed to sacrifice a virgin to free the demons.”

“Well, this isn’t that type of demon. He was probably a warlord on ancient Earth.”

“Maybe. No warlord could kill ten billion. And the Martian gods wouldn’t go to so much trouble to hold one captive here.”

Dolphin crossed her arms. “Well, it doesn’t say anything about sacrificing a virgin. So no one’s sacrificing me today.”

Raksas just smiled. “Maybe not. But the demon will be really hungry when we free him. I’m sure he would appreciate some fresh meat.”

Dolphin wasn’t scared. “Why do you think he won’t eat you, then? What makes you think you can control him?”

“We are freeing him, aren’t we? I’m sure he will let us serve him. Together, we will defeat both the Martian gods and your precious Pluto Federation. It



will be the dawn of a new age, where weaklings like you will not be allowed to exist.”

Dolphin looked at him in shock. She had only dated him for a few months, but she was surprised to have never seen this psychotic side of him before. Had love really turned her blind?

More of Raksas’ crazy friends had turned up, and they were talking amongst themselves.

“So, is this Martian technology?”

“Yes. It is impenetrable. Even a nuclear bomb wouldn’t make a dent on it. Whoever this guy was, the Martians wanted him locked up real good.”

Raksas turned to one of the men. “This man, the one who gave you the key. Are you sure he was genuine? Because if it turns out he was lying to us, I will personally kill him.”

The man he was talking to laughed. “He said the same thing. He said if the key didn’t work, we could come and torture him.”

“Who is he?”

“You’ll be surprised. A shopkeeper. He sells dry fruit. I know what you are thinking. How did a shopkeeper get that sort of technology? He must have stolen it somehow. Or come across it. But remember, he is the one who told us about this hidden prison in the first place, so he must know what he was talking about.”

“Very well. Let’s try it.”

Dolphin saw they were going to insert the key

into the wall. “No! Raksas, think about it. This demon could end our world!”

Raksas slapped her, causing her to fall back. Tears came to her eyes and she started sobbing. Ashanti had been right. She was nothing but a stuck-up bimbo, way out of her depth. She should have stayed back on Pluto.

The wall in front of her started opening, like a giant gate. Smoke started coming out of the walls, and alarms started blaring. There was a huge shock wave, like they had been hit by an earthquake. It caused part of the roof to break and fall on them. Everyone ran back, except for Dolphin, who slipped and fell. The smoke was very thick now, and she was finding it hard to breathe.

Through the smoke, Dolphin saw a man get up and walk towards them. Dolphin couldn't see what he looked like and shuddered in fear. As he was walking towards them, Raksas and his friends fell to their knees. “Lord! We live to serve.” The bowed down and touched their heads to the ground.

The demon had come out of the smoke now. Dolphin saw he looked like an ordinary man. He was wearing a white shirt and brown trousers, and a well-worn brown coat, with patches all over it to keep it from falling apart. He looked like an office clerk or a university teacher, and most certainly not like a demon.

Dolphin was grabbed by the neck and thrown at him. “My Lord, we bring you food.”

Dolphin fell in front of his feet. When she looked up, she saw the man was smiling. He offered her his hand.

“Hello. I’m the Professor. How are you?”

Dolphin stared at him dumbly.

He looked around. “Say, I’m dying for a cup of tea. You wouldn’t have one around, would you?”

“Tea?” said Dolphin. Somehow, the image of a demon drinking tea didn’t sit well with her mental image of what a demon would drink.

“Yes, tea. Blackish liquid, usually sweetened with sugar, and often had with milk. And maybe some cookies as well? If you don’t have chocolate, I will settle for the round ones with jam in the middle.”

Dolphin stood straight and looked him in the eye. This was no demon. “Who are you?”

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*One week earlier*

*Date: 3513, Earth Date*

*Location: Pluto, capital of the United Outer Planets Federation.*

“When Earth was destroyed, all those years ago, we lost a lot. A big part of our culture, most of the species of animals and plants, our home lands, all were lost. Those were dark times indeed. As a race, we would have died if we didn’t have something to give us hope. Luckily, we had stories.”

The whole class was listening to the teacher

with rapt attention. All except for one girl, of course, who was busy touching up her makeup.

“In the middle of the second millennium, what on Earth would be roughly the twenty first century, a certain type of story, called science fiction and fantasy, became very popular. Of course, we call those books classical literature now, but at the time they were written, they were only popular with a small minority. Professors at universities, like me, would treat them with contempt and ignore them. They were seen as too common and not good enough for the elites. And the common people loved these stories. Stories of space battles, dragon fights, of search for gold or immortality, of rescuing princesses from danger. They captured the public’s imagination, and we should be grateful to them, for it was the common people who saved these stories for us. The type of books our ancestors in the dark ages taught in their schools and universities have vanished, and we have no idea what they were about. Do you, Miss Dolphin?”

Dolphin put down her makeup kit. “Eh?”

The teacher smiled kindly at her, though the students knew Dolphin was in trouble. The teacher was a kind person, but even she couldn’t ignore someone not paying attention in class.

“I was asking, Miss Dolphin, about what you think of classical Earth literature, what is also called science fiction and fantasy?”

“They’re boring and predictable. I never understood why people like them so much.”

There was a collective gasp in the class. The teacher just smiled.

“So it’s good you are taking the Classical Literature class, isn’t it? The perfect place for someone who hates the subject.”

“It’s because they make us take it. It is a compulsory class.”

The teacher became thoughtful and went back to her seat. The other students were smiling and talking quietly to each other, no doubt enjoying the catfight that was bound to occur.

“Tell me, Miss Dolphin. You were Teen Miss Pluto, weren’t you?”

“Three times. In a row.”

“Three times. Pardon me. How dare I suggest it was only once.” The whole class sniggered, while Dolphin blushed.

“So tell me this, then. Why are you here? Surely, the next step for you is to run for the Miss Universe contest. You get a multi-year modelling contract, free clothes, what else?”

“A movie deal, professor,” shouted someone from the back.

“Yes, that. So why are you here, Miss Dolphin?”

One of the boys in the front spoke. “Because the Miss Universe contestants are required to have a college degree, professor.”

His girlfriend, sitting next to him, joined him. “Yeah, they don’t want bimbos.”

The whole class burst out laughing, and Dolphin became red again, this time with anger. When they had stopped laughing, she spoke out. “Excuse me. But I topped my school in languages, getting the highest marks for both Plutonian and the Martian languages.”

One of the boys turned to her in anger. “You mean the language of our enemies?”

“Shut up, Mr Smith.” It was the teacher. “I will not allow politics in my class. The languages of Mars are hard to learn, and I congratulate you, Miss Dolphin, for learning them.” She became quiet for a second as she contemplated this. “So I see what’s causing you to get distracted in my class. You just want a degree, and they are making you study a subject you don’t like. Tell me, is there a single classical story you like? Either science fiction or fantasy? There must one that inspired you?”

“They are all the same, aren’t they? I could make one up now, if you want.”

“You have a lot of nerve, you stuck-up bimbo,” her neighbour whispered to her, but Dolphin gave her the finger beneath the table. The class looked at the teacher to see if Dolphin would get a reprimand. Instead, the teacher just smiled.

“That is great. Perhaps you can make one up now? Let the rest of us shower in your wisdom?”

The whole class looked at her, but she wasn’t

fazed. "I wouldn't mind, but it will bore the class. Besides, don't you have to teach a class or something?"

"You leave that to me, Miss Dolphin. Besides, I'm sure the class has become bored listening to me all day, and would appreciate a new viewpoint."

A few "ayes" and "yeahs" were heard.

"Okay, you asked for it." Dolphin got up, straightened her skirt, and walked to the front of the class.

"There was once a girl named Dolphin."

The whole class burst out laughing. "Couldn't you think of a better name than that?" said a boy.

But Dolphin ignored the laughing.

"There was once a girl named Dolphin. She was emotionally scarred and psychologically tortured. You see, when she was five years old, her bunny died. And then her mother abandoned her. And then her dog died, too. She went to live with her aunt, but she died too. Yes, you see, this girl Dolphin was severely scarred for life."

She paused and noticed the whole class was paying attention. Even though they were still smiling, at least they were listening to her.

"Anyway, rather than talk to a therapist like the rest of us, this girl that felt going on an adventure would be best way to cure her phobias and fears. And suddenly, she was asked to take part in an adventure! She would have to go overseas, though. But the girl

had read the handbook of heroics and so she rejected the adventure; for she knew that real heroes and heroines always reject the quest the first time around.”

“That is true enough,” said her teacher.

“But the girl wasn’t safe. You see, there was this enemy. Lord Evil was his name. And he was, well, you know, evil. He thought the girl was going to move against him, so he sent his henchmen to destroy her. These henchmen were very cruel and killed the girl’s second bunny, her second dog, and the second aunt she had been living with. The girl escaped, but she made a vow. From now on, her life would be dedicated to fighting evil. She swore on the dead body of her pet bunny. ‘Bunny, I swear on thy body! I will find the evil ones who did this to you, and make them pay.’

“So, the girl ran into the forest. She was kidnapped by bandits who were also cannibals. Just as these cannibals were about to eat her, a group of heroes rescued her. The group had three people. A warrior, who did, you know, warrior things, like fighting with swords and stuff. And there was a wizard, who did wizardly stuff, like pulling rabbits out of bags. And then there was a spy slash thief...”

“Let me guess.” The teacher interrupted her. “He did spy-slash-thief-like things?”

“Exactly. Anyway, the girl asked to join them, but they said she was useless, as she couldn’t fight and knew no magic. She would only get them killed. But they offered to take her to the edge of the forest,



in case the cannibal bandits came back.”

She paused for a breath. “They were attacked by many mythical beings, but they fought off all of them. The girl learnt to fight and earned the respect of the group. Oh yeah. They also met a mentor on the way. A big, fat fellow, who spoke in a Zen-like manner. He gave them useless and cliched advice, like ‘Follow your heart,’ and ‘The Truth defeats all darkness,’ but rather than beat him up for it, the group respected him. This mentor declared that the girl should become the leader of the group, because she was the Chosen One. And even though she had no experience in leadership, the others agreed, because the handbook of heroics says that the Chosen One should be the leader, even if the Chosen One is an idiot who can’t spell his or her own name.”

“True enough in your case,” whispered someone, and the whole class burst out laughing. The teacher waved her hand to quiet them down.

“Anyway, the spy declared he had fallen in love with a simple village girl and would retire from the life of adventure to marry his sweetheart. That night, they were attacked by Orcs, and the spy was killed. While dying, he held the hand of Dolphin. ‘Remember me.’ And he died, and there was a lot of crying.

“A few days later, the wizard said he, too, had fallen in love and wanted to give up fighting and become a farmer. He, too, would marry the girl of his dreams and spend the rest of his life growing potatoes. That night, they were attacked by a group of

demons...”

“And let me guess. He was killed too?” It was the same boy who had been making fun of her earlier. Dolphin ignored him.

“Yes, he died too. Dolphin, our heroine, held his arm as he lay dying. There was a lot of crying, and the girl vowed to kill the evil lord, Lord Evil, and bring justice to the world.”

The teacher interrupted her. “Will the warrior be the next to die?”

“No. But he is kidnapped by a dragon. The girl has to rescue him. The mentor helps her by distracting the dragon, and our heroine charges in and rescues the warrior. He promptly falls in love with her and declares that he will worship her till he dies. But the girl refuses his offer of marriage. ‘I cannot marry you for two reasons. One, you would die.’”

“Hell yeah!” someone shouted from the back.

“Two, I am already married. To my duty, which is protecting this land from evil.”

“What the hell, Dolphin? Could you get any more cheesy than that?” It was a girl sitting in the front.

“Excuse me. But that’s the point I’m trying to make.”

“Please let her continue,” said the teacher.

“So this girl, Dolphin, decided enough was enough. She decided to charge into the castle of Lord Evil. Suddenly, the Goddess Ishta appeared before

her and gave her a divine sword. Other gods also appeared and offered her other divine weapons. She was given a powerful body armour, which covered her whole body and also worked as a push-up bra. With her supercharged weapons and supercharged cleavage, Dolphin charged into the castle. She beat all the minions easily, remembering her friends who had died to protect her. She finally reached the top of the castle, where Lord Evil was waiting.

“He said to her, ‘Before you kill me, Dolphin, there is something you must know. I am the third cousin of your aunt’s brother’s wife’s cousin’s sister.’

“Dolphin collapsed on the floor and cried. ‘When my bunny died, and then my mother abandoned me, that was the time I needed a third cousin of my aunt’s brother’s wife’s cousin’s sister. Where were you then?’

“‘Sorry, Dolphin. But now that you know we are related, will you be able to kill the third cousin of your aunt’s brother’s wife’s cousin’s sister?’”

“Dolphin raised her sword, and her ample bosom heaved. ‘While it is true, that as the third cousin of my aunt’s brother’s wife’s cousin’s sister, you are my only living relative. But I took a vow on my dead bunny, whom your henchmen killed, that I would vanquish evil from this world. So prepare to die, foul beast!’

“And the evil lord, Lord Evil, raised his sword to strike Dolphin. But then he lowered it. ‘Before I kill you, would you like to convert to my religion, the Pizza United Church? We believe God created the

Universe from pizza, and we offer worship by offering a sacrifice of pizza every day.’

“No thank you. I have my own religion. The Church of Garlic Bread.’

“You heathen beast.’ And the evil lord, Lord Evil, raised his hand. ‘Your lack of faith disturbs me.’ And he attacked Dolphin, but Dolphin blocked his attack. There was a great battle, and Dolphin realised she wasn’t strong enough to beat him. Finally, Lord Evil gave her a killing blow and threw her off his castle. As she was falling, she thought about her life, how she had failed her friends, but most importantly, how she had failed her bunny, who had been brutally killed when she was five.”

“Please don’t tell me she dies,” said the teacher. “As you know, these types of stories usually have a happy ending.”

Dolphin waved her hands in the air. “But just then, the Goddess Ishta appeared before Dolphin. ‘You cannot die yet, Dolphin. You have the hopes and dreams of all the people behind you.’ And the Goddess waved her hand, and Dolphin found herself in a magical land. There, her fat mentor taught her the Powerful Unbeatable Killing Attack Number 77, Trademarked. He then sent Dolphin back to the castle. The evil lord had been making a cup of tea when Dolphin appeared. ‘I am here to destroy you, you foul beast of Hell.’ Then, remembering her manners, she added, ‘But please, finish your tea first.’

“The evil lord, Lord Evil, put the tea down. ‘Ha. I will kill you in a few seconds, and then finish

my tea.’ And he came at Dolphin, but she was ready for him. She raised her sword and shouted, ‘Powerful Unbeatable Killing Attack Number 77, Trademarked!’ A powerful beam of energy shot out of her sword, and it killed Lord Evil immediately. But before he died, he took out a poisonous knife and stabbed Dolphin. She collapsed and prepared to die. The warrior came in, as well as all the villagers, and they all cried buckets of tears. Dolphin tried to console them. ‘Death is the only constant thing in this world. Don’t cry for me, for I am going to a better place.’ The fat mentor also cried and offered to make Dolphin immortal using his magic, but she refused.

“I don’t want to live forever. I have lived a happy life, and regret nothing.’

“The wizard warned her that once she died, she could never come back.

“So? What is wrong with that? Death is the one thing that keeps us focused on life. It gives us a mission, a goal, something to live for, because we know we can die anytime. Death reminds us that we do not have as much time as we think we do.”

“And the girl was about to die. But just then, the Goddess Ishta appeared. She waved her hands in the air and all the poison vanished. And later on, when the king of the country saw her, he fell in love and married her.

“For her bravery in defeating Lord Evil, Dolphin was given the Warrior of the Year Award. She also won the Nobel Peace Prize, the Miss Universe award, and she was also voted the most admired

woman in the country. When the Goddess Ishta heard about Dolphin's tortured childhood, she gave her a magical herb to cure all her psychological problems. 'Smoke this my child, it's some good stuff.' And she did, and lived happily ever after. And, oh yeah. After her death, she became a goddess as well. The end."

The whole class broke out in laughs and a few wolf whistles. The teacher looked at Dolphin with an amused look.

"Well, Miss Dolphin, you certainly have a career as an actor, if not a writer."

"See, I told you. All science fiction and fantasy stories are the same. If I had written this story in the dark ages of the twenty first century, all of you would be reading me today."

"You know, Miss Dolphin, in the ancient sagas, the people who mocked these stories often ended up in them," said the teacher.

"Well, that's never going to happen, is it? We live in the most boring time and on the most boring planet. So no thanks, professor, but I think I'm safe."

The bell rang and the class ended. Dolphin picked up her bag and left before anyone could make any more snide comments.

*Date: 2013, Earth Date*

*Location: Southampton, UK, Earth*

Suzy came in from school and ran straight to her room. Without changing her clothes, she switched on the computer.

“What do you want for dinner, sweetie?” her mother shouted, but Suzy ignored her. She had important things to do.

She logged into her computer and went to the chat room. Her mother had installed parental software, which meant she couldn’t access most websites. This chat group was one of the few allowed. Mainly because it was focused on pre-teen children. She found he had already logged in.

Her mother had warned her not to talk to strangers, but this stranger was interesting, so Suzy talked to him anyway. Sometimes, he claimed to be

from the future; at other times, he claimed to be a god. Mostly, he didn't make sense. But Suzy still found him fascinating.

“So was I right?” he typed into the chat room.

“About what?”

“You know about what,” came back the indignant reply.

“Yes, you were right. My teacher did wear a purple skirt, and she brought a cheese sandwich for lunch.”

“And your friend Jane?” he asked.

“Yes, you were right about her as well. She wore a blue dress and brought pickles to school. How did you know?”

There was a delay in him answering.

“Know what?”

“Don't play with me! How did you know all that? About my teacher wearing purple, and Jane wearing a blue dress?”

“Because they wear that everyday. Haven't you noticed? You live the same day everyday.”

He was beginning to talk gibberish. “I do not. Tell me this. Do you work for the CIA?”

“CIA? Lol.”

A smiley icon appeared on the screen. But he wasn't going to get past Suzy that easily.

“You work for the CIA. That's how you know



everything about me and my friends.”

“Ha ha. If the CIA had the technology to predict the future and control people’s minds, would they use it on junior school children? What would I do if I worked for the CIA? Steal your homework? Build a nuclear submarine in your toilet?”

He paused. “Why don’t you accept the truth? It is a lot simpler than any crackpot theory you could come up with.”

“That you are a god?” Suzy thought it over. Yes, it did make the most sense.

“If you are a god, what are you doing in my computer?” she asked him.

“Gods have always existed as software. We originally came as shareware. You could download us and install us on your computer. If you didn’t like us, you could un-install us. That way, you could try as many religions as you wanted!”

A smiley for rolling-on-the-floor-and-laughing appeared.

Suzy crossed her arms. The guy had a weird sense of humour.

“You haven’t told me your name.”

“I have many names.”

“Tell me one.”

“Call me Shambhu.”

Suzy tried to remember, from her world religions class, who Shambhu was the god of, but

failed.

“So Shambhu, even if you are a god, the point remains the same. Why did you come to me?”

“Suzy, I will be completely serious now. What if I told you the world isn’t real? That you don’t live in Southampton, that you don’t even live on Earth? That Earth has been destroyed?”

She rubbed her forehead. This was getting ridiculous. Her mother called out to her again, asking if she was hungry. She felt her tummy grumble.

Suzy decided to switch the computer off. The stranger guessed her intentions and sent her an urgent message.

“Don’t go away. Please.”

“Why do you talk nonsense like that? If Earth has been destroyed, where am I?”

“Suzy, you are a mere ghost, a whisper of what was. You live in the shadow world. Tell me, have you ever thought about crossing the river Itchen?”

“Of course not! There are ghosts across it. I have seen them with my own eyes. Walking corpses amble there, looking for fresh human flesh to eat. The grownups have told us that we must never cross the river.”

“And you feel nothing wrong with that? Zombies and ghosts walking in your town, and everyone acting as if it were normal? Does this look real to you?”

Suzy started shivering, like a million-volt

current was flowing through her body. Her spine was tingling. She wanted the stranger to stop. To shut up. But she couldn't bring herself to type.

“Suzy, the world is in danger. The serpents have been released again. Like last time, they will not rest until the whole world is dead; until they have eaten the sun itself. You must...”

She switched the computer off. Her heart was beating like a drum and she was sweating, even though it was very cold.

Suzy slowly raised herself and went downstairs. Her mother was cooking.

“Have a seat, dear. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.”

Suzy sat there, trembling, hoping her mother couldn't see her fear. She took out a glass of juice and drank it slowly, trying to breathe deeply to control her nerves. Within minutes, she was calm again. That's when her sister came in.

“Suzy, you are in so much trouble. I am going to tell on you. This time, you crossed the line.”

Suzy looked at her in surprise. “What did I do?”

“What did you do? Why did you damage the TV?”

“I did not.”

“Did too. Have a look.”

They walked to the next room. The TV was

on, but it wasn't showing anything except for a message that kept repeating on the screen.

“The serpents have been released, Suzy. We are all in danger. You must help us. Help us, Suzy. Help us.”

She saw their phone was blinking, too, like it did when they had a voice mail message. She picked up the phone.

“... will eat the Sun and kill us all.”

The alarm clock, her mobile phone, the electronic toys in the room, all of them started buzzing and playing the same message. Suzy dropped the phone and ran, screaming, to her room.

*Date: 3513 , Earth Date*

*Location: Indraprastha, capital of Mars, the home of the gods*

**“All rise for Indrani, Queen of the Gods and Protector of Humanity!”**

All the gods rose. Indrani came in, her golden dress whirling like the wind and showing beautiful patterns on its surface. One minute, it showed an abstract painting, and the next, a natural beauty scene. Agni knew the dress had cost a year’s worth of food, and at least three people had died of starvation to finance it. But it was for the gods, right?

Indrani sat down and motioned for the meeting to start.

**“Tell us about the demon army that dares challenge us.”**

**“My lady,”** said Agni, the commander of the

army, “he grows stronger by the day. At this rate, he will be strong enough to attack Indraprastha in only a few weeks.”

“Brihaspati!” Indrani motioned her chief scientist forward. “Why haven’t you created the superweapon you promised us?”

Brihaspati trembled. “Madam, you cut my budget to almost zero. Because of a lack of funds and personnel...”

“So you refuse to take responsibility for your actions? Instead, you blame us?”

“My lady, how can you expect me to build a weapon with no resources?”

“Pathetic. Tell me about this Mahish. What does he want?”

Agni spoke now. “He says we are false gods. He wants to overthrow us and establish himself as a god, so all worship goes to him.”

Indrani laughed. “The fool. Many have dared challenge the gods in the last thousand years, and they have all been crushed like ants. Agni, destroy him.”

“Yes, my queen.”

“If I may speak,” said Brihaspati timidly, “I have been studying Mahish’s strategy. He is more cunning than we thought. We are facing the biggest threat in our history.”

“Shut up, Brihaspati,” said Indrani, and her audience broke out into laughs. Brihaspati bristled at

being insulted like this but kept quiet. He didn't want to be reincarnated as a dog.

Indrani turned to Agni. "Lord Agni. How is your son? Has he learnt to walk yet?"

"Yes, goddess, he is fine. He only crawls at the moment."

"How cute. Do bring him for lunch sometime. So Brihaspati, I thought you were developing a new weapon?"

"It was Shambhu's design, goddess. A human computer who will be able to fight dozens of enemies at the same time and control nanobots faster than any computer we could build. But..."

"What?"

"The experiment failed. We didn't get the resources we wanted, and there was an explosion. The lab fell from the sky."

Agni leaned forward. "Where did it fall?"

"Near the village of Saraswati, lord. Luckily, the area it fell into is a desert, and so no one died." He turned to Indrani.

"Goddess, we need Shambhu's help to perfect this design..."

"Out of the question. Shambhu is meditating for world peace. He told me he is not to be disturbed."

"But goddess, millions will die if we don't act..."

“Silence.”

Brihaspati stood with his head hung down and his face burning with anger. Indrani turned to Agni. “Agni, deal with it. Throw our whole army at it. How strong can one person be?”

She turned back to the group. “I have more important things to discuss. Like my one thousandth anniversary. I want the celebrations to be so grand that people will be speaking about them for the next thousand years.” She turned to Kubera, the god of money.

“We can finance this, of course?”

“Well, I have asked that all citizens must contribute an extra twenty-five percent of their income. It is for the common good, of course. We gods do so much for them, surely they can offer a little gratitude in return?”

Indrani smiled. “Of course they should. Let’s discuss the party plans. Brihaspati, you can leave now. This is important stuff.”

Brihaspati left, still burning with anger and humiliation. Outside, he kicked a statue of Indrani. It was because of her birthday that his funding had been cut. Now millions would die, and all she cared about was her party. Then he realised what he had done and looked around to check if anyone had seen him. He offered a mental apology to the gods and left.

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*Date: 3513, Earth Date*



*Location: Saraswati village, Mars*

Mukhiya, the head of the village Saraswati, was driving home. They had made a good profit on the harvest, largely due to a bumper crop. He mentally thanked the gods for it. The bullock cart was slowing, edging home. It was getting dark, and he saw his son getting impatient, no doubt hungry for his mother's food. His son picked up his whip and was about to hit the two bulls pulling their cart when his father stopped him.

“No, son. They are living beings, like us.”

“Father, they are just stupid animals. Cursed to a life of servitude, no doubt due to their bad karma from previous life. Why should we show them any mercy?”

Mukhiya took a deep breath and sighed. His son was too crude, too willing to believe the propaganda of the gods.

“That bull on the right. Know who he is?”

“He's just a bull, right? I can't remember what we call him. It's not like he's a relative...”

“He's your grandfather. My father. He lost his temper at the gods, right in the temple, in front of all the priests. He called the gods lazy thieves who lived off our hard work. So when he died, he was punished by being reborn into the body of a bull. So yes, he is a relative. And the other bull may be a similar poor soul, cursed by the gods. Which is why I say treat everyone with respect and dignity, even the animals. Remember, you may take their place someday.”

His son became quiet and thoughtful, no doubt surprised to hear this. As they entered the village, a sign welcomed them to the perfect village, Saraswati, winner of the Village of the Year three times in a row. Not that it mattered, for they got no tourists. Who had money to travel around?

The village was deserted. It was prayer time, and everyone was at the temple. Mukhiya and his son made their way to the temple as well.

He saw his wife and daughter were already there. Shyam, the priest and local astrologer, came up to him.

“So Mukhiya, do you need your fortune told? I can tell you the best time to plant seeds.”

“Thanks Shyam, but the gods already tell us that.”

Shyam wasn't that easily rid of. “I can tell you which exam centre will have the easiest questions, so that your son can pass easily.”

“Thanks Shyam, but my son can pass the exams himself. And now, if you will excuse me.”

Mukhiya pushed past him. His son whispered to him, “Can he really predict the future?”

“No,” he whispered back. “He looks at the reading from the gods' computers, and tries to guess the future. He fails more often than he succeeds.”

Mukhiya's wife was talking to a very excited woman.

“And so the gods listened to my prayer! Can

you believe that? Me, a common woman, and the gods helped me! I have never felt so blessed.”

When she saw Mukhiya, she felt she had to tell him the story, too.

“I was just telling your wife how the gods helped me. I wanted my son to become a teacher at a nearby school, so I paid a donation to the god Kuber at this temple. And lo! My son became a teacher. The gods really listened to me.”

Shyam the priest walked up. “Of course they listened. The gods are very kind, they see us as their children. Mukhiya, if you offer a donation, I’m sure your son will get a very good job as well.”

Mukhiya ignored him. “Wasn’t your son the top student of his class? Didn’t he also get a first class degree in teaching? Maybe that’s why he got the teaching job?”

The woman looked at him with disgust. “You are a blasphemer. You will end up like your father. Show some respect to the gods!”

Mukhiya clenched his fists in anger. Everyone knew about his father, of course, but they were polite enough not to say anything to his face. Till today. His wife, seeing his anger, stepped forward and hugged him.

“Let it go, my love. Let it go.” She pulled him out. “Come on. I have cooked your favourite food. Come, dear.”

Mukhiya smiled. His wife had a talent for making everyone happy. She was the kindest woman

he had ever met, and he was lucky she had chosen him. He let himself be dragged out. The temple was closing, and everyone else was leaving, too. Then suddenly, the crowd stopped and fell back. He heard a scream and wondered what could have happened. Ignoring his wife's protests, he made his way out. After all, he was the village headman; it was his responsibility to deal with any threats and problems in the village. He stepped out of the temple to see what was wrong.

“It's just a little boy. Why the hell are you screaming?”

The priest came out as well. “He's no boy! He's a cursed one. An untouchable, rejected by the gods. Look, he doesn't carry the mark of the gods.”

The mark of the gods was a small mark on the back of their heads, where their brain could be uploaded after their death.

Another villager came forward. “And he is cursed. Last week, he was walking among my fields. Everywhere he stepped, all the plants died.”

“He came in to the temple grounds yesterday, and all the flowers withered away and died within seconds. I would say he is a demon, but he looks like us. So he must be a fallen one, an untouchable. Make sure no one touches him, or his curse will transfer to you.”

Mukhiya saw the boy could not have been more than seven years old. He was dirty, his hair dishevelled, and he smelt of the graveyard, where he

probably slept. The boy was crying.

“Please don’t hit me. I just came to find some food.”

The priest picked up a stone. So did a few others. “I’ll give you something to eat, you cursed devil!”

Mukhiya knew this wasn’t right. He had to stop the villagers from killing the boy. He was thinking about what to do when he saw a woman run forward and embrace the boy. Who could be that stupid? Then he saw it was his own wife, Priya. He mentally smacked his forehead. While he liked her kindness and her gentle spirit, sometimes she went too far. She was rubbing the boy’s tears now and wiping his face with her sari.

“There, there. Don’t cry. Why didn’t you say you were hungry? This is the Saraswati village, the most perfect village on Mars. Nobody goes hungry here.”

She stood up and turned to face the villagers. “And what is wrong with you? How can a little boy kill your crops? Are you sure it wasn’t a pest of some kind?”

The priest stepped forward. “But he doesn’t have the gods’ mark...”

“And you have a mole on your nose. The scriptures say it is a sign that you have stolen wealth that doesn’t belong to you.”

Mukhiya wondered what the hell his wife was playing at. But her attack seemed to have worked, for

the priest became flustered and embarrassed. “What do you mean? That’s just a silly superstition...”

“And so is what you are saying.”

The crowd was getting restless by now. Mukhiya turned to them. “Don’t you have work to do? Or are you having a lot of fun here?”

There were a few grumbles in the crowd, but everyone started slipping away. Mukhiya also grabbed his son and daughter. He saw his wife was still holding the little boy. He raised his eyebrows at her, but she just smiled back, like everything was normal.

At home, they all sat down for dinner. The boy insisted on sitting on the ground, but Priya dragged him to the table. They all sat down, and Priya served everyone.

The boy started crying again. “No one has given me food before. Usually, I steal it from behind the temple, where they throw the old food.”

“You steal from the temple?” The boy looked scared, but Mukhiya burst out laughing. “No, I mean it’s good someone is doing to them what they do to us.”

“It’s not your fault, dear,” said his wife to the boy. “They throw so much food away. Why don’t they give it to poor people, like you?”

*Why don’t they,* thought Mukhiya. The temple was built of gold and had jewels embedded in it while several villagers were barely surviving. But he pushed the thought out of his mind. It was

blasphemy. It was the reason his father was now an ox. He turned to the boy.

“What is your name, son?”

“Kartik.”

“And where are your parents?”

The boy became tearful again. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Surely you have parents?”

His wife intervened. “It doesn’t matter, dear. Maybe they died. Who cares?”

But Mukhiya wouldn’t let it go so easily. “Where were you born? How did you end up here?”

The boy tried to remember. “I don’t know where I was born. It was a small place, and many people stared at me and shone a light at me. Then everything caught fire, and I fell into the desert outside.”

Everyone stopped eating and looked at him. A few weeks ago, an asteroid had crashed outside the village. Government scientists had come to find it, but left empty-handed. Mars was still a harsh planet, and other than a few villages and cities, most of it was still too hostile for humans. He wondered how the boy could have survived.

“Were you in some sort of a capsule or space shuttle?”

“Yes. But it broke when it crashed.”

Mukhiya looked at his wife, and she looked

worried, too.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said finally. “Finish your food. You don’t have to go back to the graveyard, if you don’t want to. We don’t have any space in the house, but you are welcome to sleep in the cow shed, if you want. It will be a lot better than the graveyard.”

His wife got up and hugged him. “Thanks, darling. See, I knew I married the right man. Don’t worry, I have an extra folding bed. We’ll think about getting you a proper home soon. I’m sure someone will adopt you.”

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Mukhiya made sure everyone was asleep, and then he slipped out. He went to the cow shed. Kartik was awake and immediately jumped out of bed when he saw him coming in. Mukhiya motioned him to sit down.

“I wanted to talk to you alone. How are you feeling?”

“Good,” said the boy weakly.

“Is it true you stayed at the graveyard?”

“Yes. Anywhere else I went, they threw stones at me.”

Mukhiya thought about it. “Yes, our villagers are very violent, aren’t they? Anyway, you’ll be safe now. I’m the headman of this village, and they won’t dare attack you here. But I wanted to talk to you about something else completely.”

He became quiet for a moment, wondering



how to say it. Then he took a big breath.

“When you were in the graveyard, did you notice anything, well, strange?”

“Strange?”

“Anything that struck you as weird? Anything that,” he paused to think of the words, “should not have been happening?”

But as soon as he said it, he regretted it. What would a seven-year-old orphan boy know about what happens in a graveyard?

Kartik shook his head. “No. I saw nothing weird. Except for the demons who come at night and stole the dead bodies.”

“Wait, what?”

Mukhiya jumped up and ran to the entrance. He looked around to check no one was around. He then came back and spoke in a whisper.

“Yes, the bodies have been vanishing. But no one cares. They stare and ask me why I’m so worried about the bodies vanishing. Tell me, who are these demons? How do you even know they are demons?”

“They told me. They say they are servants of Lord Mahish, the one and only god. And that soon we will be worshipping him and not these fake gods. They are stealing the bodies for Mahish. Well, not stealing them, really. They attach a wire to the back of the head, where the priest told me you people have the mark of God, and the bodies just start walking, like they are possessed by a ghost.”

“They are downloading minds. Oh my gods.”  
Mukhiya put his head in his hands. This wasn’t good.

“What does that mean, Dad? Downloading minds?”

Mukhiya looked up in irritation. In spite of his precautions, his son was awake and now standing in front of them.

“Pawan, go back to sleep. This does not concern you.”

But his son wasn’t so easily dissuaded.  
“Come on, Dad. How does a mind download?”

Mukhiya waved at him angrily and asked him to go back to sleep, but Pawan just stood there. It didn’t look like he would be easily dismissed, so Mukhiya spoke. “When people die, what happens? Do you remember?”

“We take them to the temple.”

“And? What then?”

“The priests attach a wire and connect them to the temple computer. It then reads their mind and determines if they have been religious and loyal to the gods.”

“And what happens then? What do the priests do?”

Pawan scratched his head. “Well, in most cases, the people led ordinary lives, so they are sent to the Land of Ancestors, where they wait for hundreds of years to take birth again. Very rarely, someone is chosen to be reborn as a god or a minor god, if they

were very loyal to the gods. And rarely, they may be punished by being forced to take birth in a lower womb.”

“Good son. Last question. Where do babies come from?”

His soon looked embarrassed. “From God?”

Mukhiya laughed. “No, it wasn’t a trick question. And yes, you are right. They come from God. But what do the gods do? They take our DNA and create a body from it. They then download a mind from the Land of Ancestors into this body.”

“You mean we all come from the Land of Ancestors?” His son looked surprised. “So where did we originally come from? I mean, where were our minds originally created?”

“I don’t know. No one knows, except for the gods. But my father found out. He said we came from Earth and originally, we were all equal. He also said these gods have enslaved us. That’s why he was angry at them. He felt they had no right to rule over us. But I told you what happened. They downloaded his mind into a bull.”

He became quiet and then remembered something. “You were asking me about mind downloading. Only the gods can do that. Not only because the technology is very advanced, but also because they are the only ones with access to the Land of the Ancestors.”

This time, Kartik spoke. “So where are the demons getting the minds from?”

Mukhiya's face became dark. "This is not good. Stealing bodies and reprogramming them. There can only be one use for such bodies."

"What?" asked his son, but in reply, Mukhiya grabbed him by the ear. "If you tell this to anyone, and I mean anyone, including your mother, you will be putting this family at great risk. Do you understand?"

"Ow! Yes, I understand!"

"Good. Go to sleep then."

After his son had left, Mukhiya felt the back of Kartik's head. "You have no download point. How did they download your mind into your body, then?"

"I don't know." Kartik sounded scared.

Mukhiya got up to leave. "One last question. These demons, why didn't they take you with them?"

"They tried to. One of them also asked about my head. He said they would drill a hole in my head so that they could take over my body."

Kartik looked down, like he was ashamed.

"And?" asked Mukhiya.

"Well, they grabbed me and tried to drill my head."

"What happened?"

Tears started flowing down Kartik's eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't do anything."

"Son, just tell me what happened."

“I don’t know how, but their skin melted off and their eyes popped. The remaining demons ran away. But I swear I didn’t do anything.”

Too shocked to say anything, Mukhiya walked back to his house. For the last time, he wondered what he had gotten himself into.

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End of Sample

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