

OM

— THE —  
MAHABHARATA  
SECRET



CHRISTOPHER C. DOYLE

CHRISTOPHER C DOYLE graduated from St. Stephens College, Delhi, with a degree in Economics and studied Business Management at IIM Calcutta. Since childhood, his literary mentors have been Jules Verne, HG Wells, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, JRR Tolkein, Robert Jordan and Terry Brooks.

Christopher has written articles on management and business for several publications, and is regularly invited to speak at conferences. He worked with leading multinationals before setting up a strategic consultancy in India in partnership with a US-based firm. He is also a certified Executive Coach and works with senior executives to help them achieve better results in the workplace.

Work aside, Christopher is a musician and lives his passion for music through his band called Mid Life Crisis which plays classic rock.

He lives in Gurgaon with his wife, daughter and two dogs.  
*The Mahabharata Secret* is his debut novel.



# THE MAHABHARATA SECRET

CHRISTOPHER C DOYLE

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Corporate & Editorial Office

A-12, Sector 64, Noida 201 301

Uttar Pradesh, India

Phone: +91 120 477 4100

Email: [editorial@ombooks.com](mailto:editorial@ombooks.com)

Website: [www.ombooksinternational.com](http://www.ombooksinternational.com)

Sales Office

4379/4B, Prakash House, Ansari Road

Darya Ganj, New Delhi 110 002, India

Phone: +91 11 2326 3363, 2326 5303

Fax: +91 11 2327 8091

Email: [sales@ombooks.com](mailto:sales@ombooks.com)

Website: [www.ombooks.com](http://www.ombooks.com)

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*O, Duryodhana! O great Kuru!  
The gods smile upon us once more!  
We will carry a silent death to the Pandavas  
Unseen, unheard,  
they will not know Death when it approaches  
We will lay waste to their cities  
Decimate their armies  
And emerge victorious on the fields of Kurukshetra!  
Rejoice O Kuru, for victory is at hand!*

—Anonymous





## Prologue

244 BC

Emperor Asoka and his courtier Surasen stood before the dark opening in the hillside, deep within the forest. The handful of soldiers accompanying them had been left behind before they approached the hill. The group had left Pataliputra ten days ago, after Surasen's return from his secret mission of inspecting the discovery.

On hearing Surasen's report, Asoka had insisted on seeing the cavern and its contents for himself and had decided to leave Pataliputra immediately. Surasen, realising the import of his discovery, had agreed to lead the Emperor to the cavern.

Asoka and Surasen now entered the passage that was the conduit to the cavern.

The emperor marvelled at the soft, dim light that played around them as they entered the passage. But nothing could match the wonder and awe with which he gazed upon the cavern when they entered it.

For a few moments, emperor Asoka stood still, transfixed by the sight that greeted him; despite having been prepared by Surasen on what to expect.



After overcoming his initial amazement, Asoka walked around the cavern in silence, inspecting every inch of it.

It was then that they made the second discovery. A secret so terrible that Asoka found himself wishing that it had remained buried forever – A secret that could destroy the world.

~

## 242 BC

Surasen stood before the heap of bark texts in the centre of the palace courtyard. He had chosen this place because it was in an older, secluded part of the palace, dating back to the time of Chandragupta, Asoka's grandfather. Few people ventured here, preferring the environs of the newer parts of the palace, built by Asoka.

He turned to the scribe who stood next to him, mournfully surveying the texts. They were all copies of The Mahabharata, collected from all over the empire, over the course of two years. After Asoka had determined his course of action, to hide the cavern's secret, he had turned his attention to its source.

The Mahabharata.

For, within the pages of the great epic lay the true story behind Asoka's discovery; a story which Asoka had decided to bury, with the secret, forever; erasing it from the memories of his subjects.

Royal messengers had been sent to the farthest corners of the kingdom to return with every existing text of the epic.

'Is this it?' Surasen enquired of the scribe. 'Every single text?'

The scribe nodded, his heart heavy. He knew what was to come.

Surasen ordered. 'Torch them.'

The scribe plucked a torch off the walls of the palace and lit the bonfire. The dry bark texts quickly caught fire and within moments the entire heap was engulfed in flames.

A choked sob escaped the scribe. He had obeyed the royal decree, but he hadn't understood it. No one had.

Only Surasen knew; as did eight of his fellow courtiers. All sworn to secrecy by Asoka.

As he stood watching the flames devour the texts, the Emperor's words on that fateful night echoed in his head.

'The myth must disappear from the knowledge of men, just like the secret it mentions. The world will know the Mahabharata but it will never know the dark secret it carries deep within.'

~

AD 500

## Rajvirgarh

Pala handed the boy a coin. 'Now, begone before someone learns what you have been upto.'

The boy scampered away, thrilled with the reward.

Pala turned away thoughtfully. So, the stone book had been found and the connection between its story and the brotherhood had been made.

Someone knew about the brotherhood.

Someone knew about him.

And they would be coming for him.

He quickly put together his possessions. They were meagre. But these were not what he was worried about. He was the

guardian of more treasures that belonged to the brotherhood; treasures that were no longer safe in Rajvirgarh. He had to hide them. And he knew exactly where to go.

In Bamiyan, many miles to the northwest, in a small monastery, lived one of the two members of the brotherhood whom he knew; Santhal, a monk.

He had to get the texts and the metal disk to Santhal. This was what had been agreed upon, when he had joined the brotherhood. Santhal was one of the two members who had revealed his true identity to Pala. If anything were to threaten the secrets either of them was responsible for, they were bound by oath to pass on the secrets to the other.

Pala stole out of the palace, and disappeared into the forest behind the palace. Deep in the forest, in a natural cave, were hidden the texts and the metal disk that he had sworn to protect with his life.

He placed the treasured possessions in a worn leather satchel and slung its strap around his neck.

Taking a deep breath, he left the cave, embarking on the long journey that would take him to Bamiyan.

And to his death.

~

## March 2001

### Breaking news on world television

“The Taliban have destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas!”

The news anchor’s face was replaced by a grainy video as she continued speaking. “This video, released by the Taliban

just hours ago shows the two statues being blown up. Archaeologists, historians and people all over the world have expressed their horror at the destruction of these 1500 year old statues.

‘There is no doubt that the destruction of these ancient statues is very disturbing. But the academic world is excited about what the destruction of these statues has revealed. The tape released by the Taliban clearly shows caves hollowed into the cliffs behind the Buddhas. Concealed by the two figures for 1500 years, what do these caves conceal? This is the question that is on the mind of archaeologists and historians today.

‘We also have unconfirmed reports from our correspondent in Bamiyan, of the discovery of a skeleton in one of the caves. The skeleton appears to be around 1500 years old. No further information is forthcoming at this moment.’



## Day 1

### Present Day

#### Jaungarh Fort, 130 km from New Delhi, India

Vikram Singh sat in the study of his ancestral fort and sipped his tea thoughtfully. He had just spoken to his nephew, Vijay, who lived halfway across the world in San Jose, California.

Tall and well-built, with a youthful face, Vikram was fit for his 65 years and looked 20 years younger. The only sign that betrayed his age was his unruly mop of white hair. His weekly call to Vijay was something he looked forward to, right from the time he had sent him to the US to study, as a 15-year-old, after the unfortunate death of his parents in a car accident.

Even today, Vikram often wondered if the car crash had really been accidental. It had been a head-on collision but they had never been able to trace the driver of the truck. Vijay had escaped only because he hadn't been in the car at the time.

Vikram shook his head. Perhaps he was being paranoid. But then, only he knew the threat that hung over his head today. Who knew if that threat had existed 15 years ago? It was this fear which had driven him to leave his comfortable apartment in New Delhi and live in the fort as a recluse.

His eyes strayed involuntarily to the soft board next to his desk, to the news clippings that he had tacked there. Eight people murdered in mysterious circumstances in the last two years; scientists, doctors, architects, engineers, located all over the world. Like him, they had all been men of knowledge and renown in their fields.

Vikram had been a nuclear scientist with a significant contribution to India's first nuclear explosion at Pokhran in 1974. Ten years ago, when he moved to Jaungarh, he had spent a small fortune fortifying the fort using cutting edge technology, and upgraded it over the years to make the fort as impregnable as it had been 500 years ago, when his ancestors had ruled from the fort.

He pulled his laptop towards him. Quickly keying in his password, he opened his mailbox and ran through the emails there, searching for a particular one. He found it and read it for the hundredth time. It had arrived six months ago, just after the last murder, and his blood ran cold even now as he read its chilling contents.

Since the mail arrived, he had often thought of talking to Vijay, of sharing the secret. But he could never bring himself to do that; it would only endanger Vijay's life as well. He would tell him but only when the time came.

Vikram swivelled around on his chair to gaze out of the large arched windows at the hillside, with the little village nestled at its foot, and sipped his tea. It was cold.

Something far below caught his eye. He stood up to get a better look. There was a sheer drop from the windows to the rocky hillside below. It was a moonless night.

He studied the area intently. Nothing moved. Then, he saw it. Two points of light moving up the road to the fort. Vikram frowned. Who could it be? He had few friends, and none of them would call on him without prior intimation. He screwed up his eyes and focused on the rocky slope below him, but there was no further movement.

For a while, he stood gazing out at the darkness, lost in his thoughts. Then, something struck him and he left the study, making for the entrance of the fort. The light on the hillside had disturbed him. If it was a car, it shouldn't have been there. And why had it disappeared after that brief glimpse? He opened the main door and gazed out at the night. Nothing seemed to be amiss. The garden beyond lay in darkness; silent and undisturbed.

As he turned to go back, he froze.

Beyond the manicured lawns stood the outer wall of the fort, a massive stone structure that rose 20 feet in height and snaked across the hillside, circling around the fort, a protection, in ancient days, against invaders. Set in this wall was an immense wooden door, studded with spikes; the only means of getting past the outer wall.

This gate had been locked, secured by the fort's security system, but it was now opening silently on well-oiled hinges. As it swung open, five shadows stole up the cobbled path. One of them stopped and pointed at Vikram as he stood silhouetted in the entrance.

A cold fear gripped Vikram as he realised that, somehow, the intruders had hacked into his sophisticated security system. There was no time to wonder how; he hastened back and secured the front door, arming the alarm as a single thought flashed through his mind.



*They had come for him.*

His instincts had been right about the car on the hill. Belying his age, he raced through the hallway and up the stone staircase, till he was at the door of his study. His breath now came in gasps.

His mind was a whirl of thoughts. An undefinable sensation washed over him, a peculiar mix of heady anticipation and dread.

He knew what the intruders were after. And he knew that the front door of the fort wouldn't pose a challenge to them if they had been able to open the main gate so easily. His butler had been given the day off. There was no one he could call upon immediately for help. But he wasn't worried about himself.

*He could not allow the intruders to get their hands on the secret.*

Neither could he allow it to die with him. He had no doubt about his own fate. It had been sealed 10 years ago.

Vikram gained the study and double-locked the door. He was aware that he couldn't stop the intruders, but the security system would buy him precious time; something which he had to put to good use.

*He had to pass the secret on.*

There was only one person he could trust with it. He sat down at his desk, breathing heavily from his exertions, and mentally rehearsed the words he had carefully chosen six months ago. There could be no mistakes if the message was to serve its purpose.

The minutes ticked away as he furiously typed away at his laptop and he heard footsteps ascending the stairs. The intruders were making no effort to conceal their presence. Perspiration beaded Vikram's forehead as he read and reread the words he had typed.

Abruptly, the door to the study swung open and a man with a pleasant, clean-shaven face and sharp eyes walked in, followed by three burly, bearded men and a shorter, slender, sallow-faced man bearing a black duffel bag.

‘Good to see you again, Vikram,’ the leader of the group greeted him affably. ‘Though I don’t suppose you will reciprocate.’

Without waiting for a response, the stranger settled into a chair across the desk. ‘I was expecting you, Farooq,’ Vikram forced his voice to stay calm.

‘Where is it then? Perhaps you have it ready to hand over to me?’

Vikram said nothing but gazed defiantly at the stranger. His right hand quietly slipped over the mouse and he clicked on it.

The movement didn’t go unnoticed by Farooq, whose eyes flicked to the mouse and back to the scientist’s face.

‘Where have you hidden the key?’ Farooq persisted. ‘Surely the secret isn’t worth dying for!’

Vikram took a deep breath and exhaled, as if to steel himself. ‘The key doesn’t belong to you, Farooq. And you won’t find it by killing me anyway. Your options are limited. You need me alive.’

A soft ping sounded from the laptop. Farooq pulled it towards himself and Vikram made as if to stop him, but the three henchmen immediately pinned Vikram to his chair. Farooq studied the laptop screen for a moment then reached for the mouse.

For a few minutes, silence hung heavy in the room, unbroken except by the click of the mouse.

‘No options?’ Farooq finally looked up from the laptop. ‘I think you’ve just delivered the key to us.’ He smiled. ‘And this makes you dispensable, after all.’

A hollow feeling took hold of Vikram.

*They had discovered his ruse! Would they succeed in finding the key as well?*

But he put on a brave front. 'You're never going to find it. You need all the parts of the puzzle. It is why the secret has remained undisturbed for over 2,000 years.'

A flicker of doubt crossed Farooq's face, but was almost immediately replaced by a smug look.

'You'll be surprised at what we've managed to achieve with less than that.' He gestured and the sallow-faced man reached into his duffel bag and pulled out something metallic and black, which he handed to Farooq.

Vikram gasped when he saw what was in Farooq's hand. 'That is not possible!' There was panic in his voice as he gripped the side of the desk for support.

Farooq smiled unpleasantly and glanced from the metallic object to Vikram, 'I see you know what this is. I hope you are a religious man. It isn't everyone who gets to die with an ancient weapon used by a God.'

Vikram fervently hoped that he had planned well enough to thwart them. It was too late for him now to do anything more.

# 244 BC

Asoka the Great discovers an ancient and terrible secret—a secret buried deep in the Mahabharata; a secret that could destroy the world; a secret hidden away for over 2300 years...

# Present Day

A retired nuclear scientist is murdered. He leaves only e-mails with clues for his nephew. He and his friends follow a trail through ciphers and 2000-year-old ruins. Pursued by powerful dark forces, caught between the secrets of the past and the intrigues of the present, can they unravel the mystery before an unspeakable horror is unleashed on the world...



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Ritu Rathour and Anand Prakash