

PREDATORS *and* PREY

ABHINAV AGARWAL



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PROLOGUE PAST MIDNIGHT MONDAY

At thirteen-and-a-half thousand acres, the Hindan Air Base in Ghaziabad is the largest air force base in Asia. While Mig-29s had been stationed at the base after the terrorist attacks of 26/11, four Sukhoi Su-30MKI jets, stationed at the Bareilly Air Base 200 kilometers away, had flown in, armed with Brahmos cruise missiles. They halted at Hindan very briefly. After their very special passengers had climbed aboard, the jets took off. Wing Commanders ferried a passenger each on two jets. Flight Lieutenants flew as escorts on the other two. Four Garud special forces commandos had left earlier on board a C-17 Globemaster for the same destination.

In less than three minutes after takeoff, the Sukhoi jets reached an altitude of forty-thousand feet, and a speed of Mach 1.5 less than a minute after that. It would be a short flight in what had been a long night. Both passengers were tense — not by the supersonic flight, but at what was transpiring on the ground, three-hundred kilometers away, the result of which would decide the fate of the nation of

a billion people. As the jets screamed to their destination, neither passenger dared to think of what lay ahead, and below.

The man's hair, dress, and mannerisms were of someone in a hurry. Even as his Mercedes Maybach S-class coasted towards its destination, the passenger fiddled with his phone, fidgeted with his fingers, and alternated between looking out of the window and at his phone. Once at the airport, he wasted no time in boarding the private, chartered jet. A passenger manifest and flight-plan would have been submitted in advance to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation. Like everything else, his people would take care of that also. A back-dated entry would be made, cash would change hands, and the matter would be brought to its logical conclusion. The Gulfstream G650ER the passenger climbed aboard was designed to carry nineteen passengers, and usually flies with nine or ten. Tonight, however, it carried only one. The one-way flight would cost him more than fifty lakh rupees. Not that he cared. He carried on his person something worth thousands of times more. Fifty-lakhs would be less than a rounding-off error. He dug his hand into the breast pocket of his jacket, and with a reassuring feel, verified the presence of the asset.

Things had almost gone off as planned, except for a glitch or two. As the Gulfstream taxied for take-off, he kicked off his shoes to settle in and get some sleep. The flight landed nine hours later in the business capital of the western world. A few hours before the Gulfstream landed, another passenger had alighted after an equally uneventful flight. Of the more than two-hundred thousand passengers who alighted every-

day at Heathrow, these two would meet each other for the first and last time.



He ran like his life depended on it. And it did. The footsteps pursuing him were not far behind. Three of the pursuers had been surefooted, swift, and practiced, and kept pace with him as he had dodged, darted, and run into the stone-crushing open quarry.

The scattered clouds were barely visible on the *amaavasya* (new moon night) night. The fields too had been unlit, and if you strained your eyes long enough, a lone hut, a hundred yards or more away, also enveloped in darkness, became visible. Now well inside the quarry, Deva had found it to be a sleeping beast of somnolent machinery, long chutes, conveyer belts, crushers, pitiful tin sheds, and lakhs and lakhs of tonnes of stone all around. Layers of grime, dust, and stone dust covered everything. Naked, low-wattage bulbs hung from fraying, sheathed wires in some places, while tube lights in some other hung lifelessly. Bulbs struggled vainly to illuminate the ground with their feeble, yellow light. The faint monotone of a diesel generator chugging along in a corner was audible in the deathly quiet of the quarry.

For ten-minutes now, the cat-and-mouse game had gone on. Six predators after one prey. Deva knew he was cornered, outnumbered, and more importantly — outgunned. The knife of anger that rose inside him sliced open a wave of fear. He knew anger would lead to mistakes, and for the first time in a very long time, he feared making a mistake. He was injured. Six against one could end only one way. The longer he ran, the

weaker the pain would make him. By the time help arrived, if it did, it would be all over.

Deva choked off the anger and throbbing pain. He knew running was not the answer. The sounds told him they would have him locked firmly in their sights in a minute, or two. Even the darkness would be of no help after that.

Deva had seen the two men who had got out of the Bolero had rifles slung over their shoulders — most likely Enfields and guaranteed to be useless in hitting a moving target in the dark. What about the third? Deva started to assume that he too was unarmed before reminding himself that assumptions were the mother of screw-ups.

He passed a long rectangular shed on his left with a flimsy tin door at one corner. Deva skidded as he slowed down and pushed at the door. Locked. A precious second lost. The nearness of the footsteps jolted him into a sprint again, a muffled exhalation of pain escaping his lips. As he ran, he could make out the footsteps diverge. Two continued behind him, now no more than twenty yards behind. Where had the others gone? To cut him off from the other side of the shed! Which meant as he ran from the first two pursuers, he would run smack into the other, and be sandwiched between the two pairs.

His two pursuers behind him lost sight momentarily of Deva as he raced to the end of the shed and dashed left. Fool, they thought. He was running straight into the other pursuers! Over the sound of their own feet and their heavy breathing, they did not hear Deva's feet stop and reverse.

The first pursuer realized it too late. As he turned the corner, he ran straight into Deva's knife-hand. It caught

him square in his throat, fracturing his cricoid cartilage and crushing his windpipe.

The second pursuer, a step behind the first, should have continued running and crashed into Deva. Instinct trumped intellect. His hands instinctively went up and he braced to defend against a punch he thought he had glimpsed coming. But the punch never came. With his eyes intently focused in the dark on the coming punch, he didn't notice the swift and brutal oblique kick that landed on his right knee. The kneecap displaced, and cartilage and ligaments tore. As he started to crash forward, his scream was cut midstream by a second kick that landed on his temple, cracking his skull and sending him crashing to the ground. A massive haemorrhage erupted, exerting pressure on the brain. Unconsciousness, coma, and then death.

One-two-three seconds later, the third attacker who had hoped to outflank him came running across the corner of the shed, followed by a panting fourth and fifth. The team-lead bent down to find the motionless bodies of the backbencher and the driver. He and the two constables looked around, but Deva — Lt Col Devavrata Jatashankar Singh, aka '*Shaitan*', ex-Special Forces from 31 Rashtriya Rifles — was nowhere to be found. An inexorable sense of foreboding gripped all three.

1100, SUNDAY

“Harassment! Brutal suppression of the freedom of expression that journalists have long enjoyed in this country. The government is crushing dissent, and I am deeply pained. Words fail me,” Neeraj remonstrated with Wasim — quietly, confidently, eloquently, and without a trace of irony. Words were his *daal-roti*, histrionics the *aachaar*.

“Wasim, play by Neeraj’s rules and you will lose before the first ball is bowled.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

“Unsettle him. He will expect the usual tactics, so do something unexpected.”

“You mean...?”

“Yes, poke the bear.”

“I am an honest man. I have never, ever, touched a single paisa of black money in my life. Wasim *ji*, am I paying the price for standing up to this government?”

Even though Wasim was almost twenty years younger than him, Neeraj used the honorific ‘*ji*’ as a matter of routine. In Delhi, where egos were fragile and memories long, these

little things mattered. Neeraj Kumar Mishra, as the long-time head of NRMF – New Raisina Media Foundation, one of the largest television and print media companies in India, knew this only too well.

“Mishra ji,” Wasim fired his opening salvo, his tone curt, a smile on his face. “We are not on a media debate panel here. This is no TV show, and I am not here for your TRPs. If you don’t mind, can we dispense with this *bhaandgiri* (charade)?”

Neeraj stayed expressionless for a moment. A mere OSD – Officer on Special Duty – in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting dared to bark at him in his own office? *Kaliyug*, thought Neeraj.

“Wasim...ji, what does your master want? That I shut down my channel, confess to crimes I have not committed, and hang myself? Pardon me if I am not inclined to oblige,” Neeraj allowed himself a moment of controlled annoyance.

Wasim exhaled, audibly, exaggeratedly, closing his eyes as he did. “If we had wanted to shut you or your channel down, Mishra ji, it would have happened by now. Between the Enforcement Directorate, Serious Fraud Investigation Office, Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, Income Tax Department’s Directorates of Intelligence and Criminal Investigation, and the Central Bureau of Investigation, your channel’s financial sorcery will keep them and your ten-lakh rupees per-appearance lawyers busy for several years,” Wasim responded.

“And don’t insult my intelligence, Mishra ji,” Wasim raised his index finger to cut off Neeraj’s protestations. “Understand this,” Wasim continued. “I am here because you were the one who approached us. You were the one who

sent feelers through your network of pimps. You were the one who begged and grovelled for a settlement. ‘*Compromise kar lete hain*’ — let’s compromise — were your words, I believe.” Wasim paused here, took a breath, and continued. “I have been asked to assure you — try as you might, Mishra ji, what you have begun is not going to end well for you.”

“*Not going to end well for me?* Wasim, you forget who you are talking to. You forget your place.” Neeraj didn’t notice he had dispensed with the ‘*ji*’.

Wasim may have been no more than a dog for his master, and a foul-mouthed cur who would need to be taught a lesson, but Neeraj also knew that the man who had sent Wasim — Jaswant Singh Rathore — was no dog. Everyone knew Rathore was referred to as JSR. Most people called him “Sir” to his face. A few unfortunate ones had learned the hard way what his nickname — *bathoda* (hammer) — meant. The nation knew JSR as India’s National Security Advisor, the second-most powerful man in the country.

Wasim looked Neeraj in the eyes. “The alternative, Mishra ji, to a settlement — on our terms — is a lengthy and very messy bare-knuckled fight that will bruise all. But, Mishra ji, we will, I assure you, batter and then break you in two. The man who has sent me is quite capable of doing that. I trust you are a wise man, which is why I am here to offer you a way out. The terms of the offer I am about to make are not open to negotiation, nor are they open-ended. My offer will expire the moment I walk out of your office. Am I clear?” Wasim spoke.

Crystal. “If that’s the way your master wants to play it, fine. Threats have never scared me, and never will. I will

humour you, even a rabid mongrel like you, for the sake of your master who holds your leash. Remember, Wasim, your master won't be around forever to protect you. Governments come and go," despite himself, Neeraj found himself uttering a rare threat.

"What you do with your channel and how you do it is not our concern, at least not the concern of who I represent," Wasim felt a drop of sweat trickle down his back even as he maintained a calm façade.

Neeraj's eyes flickered for a moment, reflecting the surprise that Wasim's statement had triggered.

"Neeraj is too smart not to know that we would have found out about AEP."

"If you believe he would know, then why tell him, sir?"

"The Kumble model, Wasim. First a gentle off-break, and then the flipper."

"What became our concern was when your name started to pop up in connection with defence deals that were being negotiated at the time. Those were small deals to begin with – a few crores, but your name was there," Wasim continued.

"We got more than interested when you floated a consultancy firm in Delhi, 'Advanced Engineering Professionals' — AEP. We learned that AEP specialized in opening the right doors for the right people in the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence to foreign arms sellers. Nor was it coincidental that AEP employed several retired senior officers

and bureaucrats as advisors. Secretaries, Principal Secretaries, generals and admirals had a habit of finding their way to your company as advisors after retirement at salary packages often in excess of a crore rupees a year,” Wasim paused.

“My association with AEP is public knowledge. AEP is engaged in completely legitimate activities. You are clutching at straws,” Neeraj smiled.

Wasim ignored Neeraj, again. “You and AEP hired people who knew how the system worked, where its weaknesses were, and how it could be manipulated. Whether at the stage of the Services Qualitative Requirement – SQR, during the field trials, the commercial negotiations, or obtaining clearances from different ministries and departments, you knew where the wheels were and how they could be greased at every turn. Should I continue, Mishra ji?” Wasim took a pause, waiting for Neeraj to respond.

“What you have just said is nothing more than a sensational headline that creates ripples one day and dies the next. I would know; I run such headlines every day,” Neeraj smirked.

“AEP engages in no illegal activity,” Neeraj continued, “It files its tax-returns honestly. That two-hundred crore figure is hot-air. Go ahead, open an investigation,” he drawled. “Investigations, charge-sheets, framing of charges, commencement of the trial.... we are talking twenty years or more before you get a verdict from even a lower court. And then what? Even if you browbeat a guilty verdict from some judge, the appeals will take up another twenty years,” Neeraj said, the smirk intact.

“Mishra ji, let us talk about the honey-traps and that list,” began Wasim.

“Sir, you said he is a megalomaniac. Is he also insane?”

“What do you mean?”

“Megalomaniacs are also mentally unstable. Will I leave the office on my two feet or on a stretcher?”

“He is a psychopath, Wasim. Make no mistake; that man is a dangerous psychopath capable of violence and worse. But you will not come to any harm, Wasim.”

“That is good to know, sir.”

“For now, at least.”

“That does not inspire confidence, sir.”

Despite himself, Neeraj’s smirk faded.

Wasim continued, “AEP has more than a hundred names on that list, right? Colonels, brigadiers, commodores, joint secretaries, additional secretaries, the lot. People with excellent service records and ACRs (Annual Confidential Reports), all of them will rise steadily to the top in the coming years, and all of them with weaknesses that you found out. Within five years, you are guaranteed to have at least one service chief who will be your pawn.

You prepared detailed dossiers on each person – their family, schooling and college, friends, wife, wife’s family, children, lifestyle, where they shopped, where they vacationed, what their bank balances were, how much money they owed

on their credit cards, how many loans were outstanding, what websites they visited, who were their friends on Facebook, Snapchat, Tinder, and so on. From that research emerged their vulnerabilities — the jugular where you could sink your teeth into, when required,” Wasim was relentless now and quite enjoying himself.

Rathore had reached deeper and farther than anyone before. Neeraj had underestimated JSR.

“Once AEP identified a weakness, the honeytraps were sprung. It is not as if the Armed Forces did not notice the rise in these honeytraps. However, with fourteen lakh personnel, the Indian Army is first a bureaucracy. Their initial response to the rise in these honeytraps was a predictable mixture of alarm, helpless hand-wringing, and bureaucratic inertia. Things changed two years ago, and we have Brigadier Dheeraj Saxena to thank for it. You remember him, don’t you?”

Neeraj’s expression gave nothing away. Of course, he knew Brigadier Dheeraj. That bastard had proved to be a wasted two-crore rupee investment.

“Brigadier Dheeraj Saxena was found gallivanting outside the Norbis Hotel in Stockholm, standing in the middle of the light-rail tracks, trying to hail a train that wasn’t there, because he *‘wanted to go home, since that’s where the love of his life, Vanja, had gone.’* The Brigadier however was not just trying to flag a train in the middle of the night. He had been doing so with a half-consumed bottle of champagne in one hand and his clothes – all of them – in the other. Dheeraj had been without a stitch of clothing on him. It came as a further shock to the Army when they learned that Vanja was a man, or at least at some point in his life had been.

The Army had to pull many strings to keep the matter out of the newspapers. They hastily transferred Dheeraj to the Institute of National Integration. Shortly thereafter, he took premature retirement.”

With the Indian government expected to spend more than \$100 billion dollars over the next decade in arms imports, Neeraj had calculated correctly, started early, and planned meticulously. He had estimated that fifteen-billion dollars would be spent on commissions by arms-dealers. If Neeraj played his cards right, AEP’s share of that pie could be as high as five billion – more than thirty thousand crore rupees. After paying off politicians, bureaucrats, and the armed forces, his personal take would be at least fifteen thousand crores – all tax-free, and all deposited in multiple offshore tax-havens. But the money was not the end. It was but a means to something far greater and valuable. All of it now stood threatened. Because of one man.



“The third has to be a googly — Bangalore.”

“Why reveal that now? Why not wait?”

“Time, Wasim. It is not on our side. That man can outwait us if he thinks it is to his advantage. The political climate is favourable at the moment. If the winds change, our plans will be blown clear out of the water. My only hope is to stir Neeraj into making hasty decisions. Only then will he make a mistake.”



Wasim went for the googly now. “It is only fair, Mishra ji, that I tell you about your medical transcription business in Bangalore, right?”

Neeraj felt his body temperature drop several degrees at Wasim's words. He had taken great care to keep that part of his business secret from everyone. How had JSR found that out? How much did JSR know?

“Your Bangalore outfit is but a front for your technical team that does the back-office work for your honeytraps. They analyze, probe for vulnerabilities on your targets' computers and smartphones, study their social media content and connections, and even modify malware they buy from the dark-web to inject computers and phones with. That is also where you send your whores once they are past their prime. They run fake social media profiles to lure your targets. As of last week, you had thirteen full-time employees there. Correct?”

“Mishra ji, we know about your operations, and we know much more than what I have just told you. Ask yourself – how do you see this ending if you don't cooperate?”



Rage. Neeraj's mind was fogged by a swirl of thoughts, each more violent than the other. He had to but press the black buzzer under his desk and men would appear. Wasim would be gagged and dragged out of the office, and taken to that special, padded, windowless room in the basement where he would be battered to a pulp, every single bone in his body carefully broken, his life snuffed out only after he had been subjected to more pain than humanly possible or imaginable. His body would be sawed into a dozen pieces and disposed of. Even dogs would find it difficult to get to those pieces. Video footage from the office would be erased. Mobile data records would be fixed. No amount of computer

forensics would be able to prove that the CCTV footage had been altered, or that Wasim had ever entered his office.

But Neeraj would do no such thing. Yet.

“What is your offer?” Neeraj’s expression changed to that of a defeated man, anger and ego deflated, leaving in its wake the visage of a man who had admitted defeat.

“First, close AEP in thirty-days. It stays closed. It will not reopen shop under a different name, different location.”

“Second?” Neeraj asked with an air of resignation.

“Second, Supra — Supradeep — who runs your Bangalore ops, is ours. You will not interfere.”

“Hand him on a platter? With some betel leaves?” Neeraj asked.

“Yes, if we ask you to, then you will serve him on a platter, with betel leaves. And when we chew and spit him out, you will spread your hands out to catch the spit before it hits the ground.”

“Third?” *Wasim would need to be taught civility, and soon.*

“Third, you will resign from NRMF. For that, we will give you six months.”

“Fourth?”

“That’s all, for now.”

“You know I am not going to agree to shut down AEP, or spread my hands... not until I speak with your master later this afternoon. Give him this message, will you?” Neeraj spoke, the look of despondency still intact.

“Yes, that was expected.”

“No mic, no recording, I expect.”

“Of course, we will extend this courtesy to you.”

“Anything else I can help you with, Wasim?”

“Some advice, Mishra ji. Remember that neither the offer nor the terms will change. Don’t try to buy time either,” Wasim started to get up. “Oh, and one more thing.”

“Speak.”

“Mishra ji, remember – *akhaare mei utarne ke baad na langot bachegi naa izzat* (once you enter the wrestling pit, neither your loin cloth nor your dignity will remain). Choose wisely. Sir is confident you will make the right decision. Don’t disappoint him.” Wasim got up and left Neeraj’s office with as many bones as he had walked in with, feeling he would have made the late Kader Khan – Bollywood screenplay and dialogue writer – proud of his performance.

Neeraj sat in his chair, thinking. He knew his home-grown remedies of *saam*, *daam*, *bhed*, and *dand* (reasoning, bribing, coercion, violence) wouldn’t work. Minutes passed. Neeraj got up from his chair and paced the room. He had come to the conclusion that he would have to take on Rathore headfirst. If a battle loomed, he would choose shock-and-awe. At stake were thousands of crores and the throne of Delhi.