



Alexander ‘The Great’

As the two friends talked into the night, little did they know that their own lives were soon about to take another dramatic turn, for history was on the march and the world around them was already changing.

From beyond the Himalayas, a vast and invincible horde of Yavanas, Pahlavas, Shakas, and Bahlikas had appeared on the frontiers of Bharatvarsha, bringing death and destruction in its wake. Entire tribes of Kambojas had been slaughtered, cities sacked and burnt to the ground, homes plundered, and cattle captured. With fire and sword, the invaders advanced relentlessly onwards, even as the border tribes of the Asvakayanas now resolved to block the invader.

On the very night that Aditya and Rishabha were drinking, life-and-death struggles were unfolding less than a hundred kos away from Takshashila. Here, in the mountain fortress of Maskavati, a hastily-assembled army of Asvakayanas now congregated, awaiting the coming of the storm.

They did not have to wait for long, for the very next day, they received signs of the enemy's arrival. Towards evening, the sky started glowing a fiery orange colour and soon, dense columns of smoke could be seen rising to the heavens from a number of different points along the horizon. The sky was filled with the screeching of countless birds that flew round and round in alarm. The Greeks were coming!

It was night by the time they arrived. Individual companies of scouts came first, lightly armed cavalry and skirmishers. These were followed by others and those by still others, rows upon rows upon rows of dark, menacing shadows that engulfed the skyline like a dense mass of locusts. In the background, the fires glowed ever brighter as darkness fell, bellowing out reddish black plumes of smoke that threatened to block out the moon and the stars. Every village in the vicinity was burning.

All along the ramparts of the fort, a crush of bodies crowded together, looking out over this deluge of nations that had descended upon their valley. Lost amongst this crowd was the teenager Partha, his heart bursting with excitement as he desperately tried to push his way to the front. Desperate to get a glimpse of the enemy, he wriggled and squeezed through legs and elbows, and had just gotten to the front when a hand reached out through the crowd and grabbed hold of his arm.

“Come on, you must get your sleep, we'll see this tomorrow.”

It was his elder brother Sudeepa. Meekly, Partha followed as Sudeepa led him home. There was no fighting that night, but Partha's eyes still could not find rest for the longest time.

He was woken up early the next morning by his brother.

“What happened? Have they attacked?” he asked groggily. A huge kettledrum was beating steadily in the background.

“Not yet, but its coming. Every able-bodied man has to be at

the walls. How can you sleep through this?" asked Sudeepa with an incredulous face. Then he continued, "A messenger has already come and gone, asking us to surrender, but King Ashvakasena has refused."

Partha staggered about, half in sleep as he searched for his weapons and then followed his brother into the streets. Outside, the scene was chaotic. The lanes were jammed with people. Women and children crowded into the temples and monasteries, where special prayers had been organized, while parties of soldiers pushed through the crowds, rushing to the walls.

"Out of the way, out of the way," shouted a captain as a group of horsemen waded into the crowd, scattering people right and left before them.

Arriving at the outer walls of the fort, they saw the huge mounds of earth that had recently been dug up to shore up the defences at a number of places. Massive pyramids of stones, stacks of lumber, and piles of javelins lay about in haphazard fashion. Men were rushing up and down from the bastions, and the ground underneath, had been churned up by the constant tramping of men and horses.

"You—Sudeepa, where the hell have you been?" boomed a voice from the ramparts. It was their chieftain, Subuddhi.

"I was just bringing my brother along, Shreeman. We got . . ." Sudeepa tried to explain.

Subuddhi wasn't waiting for his answer.

"All right, all right," he said with a dismissive wave of his hands. "Send him to join those men; we need stones up here."

Partha joined a group of men transporting a pile of assorted rocks up to the ramparts. These would be hurled down at the enemy when the inevitable attack came. Grunting and groaning, with his back straining against the weight, the teenager worked at it all morning, making multiple trips up and down the wall, till a halt was called. Then, he ran up to join his brother, who was chatting with a number of soldiers near the massive doors of the fort. Rumours were flying thick and fast. Some said a million foreigners had come

to the valley, while others said that the enemy did not have enough food to support everyone. If they could hold out long enough, the enemy would be forced to raise the siege.

“Come,” said Sudeepa, pointing with his fingers, “I’ve been assigned up there.”

Partha followed his brother up to the wall, where an awe-inspiring sight greeted his eyes. The entire valley was dotted with tents. Four huge platforms built of wood and covered in hide, towered over the camp as Greeks, Persians, Bactrians, and Scythians scurried about like so many ants. The sheer scale of the attack they were now facing, finally hit him.

Sudeepa, who was looking out over his brother’s head, felt the breath catch in his throat.

“This is bound to end badly,” he muttered under his breath.

Partha on the other hand, was terribly excited. It was the very first battle of his life.

Up on the ramparts, archers were constantly shooting at the Greeks, who, under the cover of shields had advanced quite close to the walls and were digging ditches. These were to be used as sallying points for the final attack.

Towards late afternoon, there were signs of increased activity all over the Greek lines. The ditches started filling up. Officers on horseback rode up and down, shouting commands.

In the Indian camp, kettledrums started roaring like thunder. Men rushed to the ramparts. Every available gap in the citadel bristled with archers. Cauldrons full of hot oil were brought up. Each party knew that an attack was about to come, and many anxious moments of waiting followed.

Finally, with yells and hurrahs all up and down the line, swarms of Bactrians, Persians, and Greeks poured out of the ditches. Terrifying battlecries, screams, and pleas for mercy filled the air, arrows rained

down, and the field was enveloped in the din and clamour of battle. In the front rows of the attack, were captives from the surrounding villages, who were being made to carry ladders and extra shields for the Greeks. Terrified and defenceless, these wretched people cried out for mercy to the men on the walls. But mercy was not to be had today. Spears cut into them from behind and arrows rained down from above. They screamed, fell, got up, dashed again towards the walls and died in droves.

Every man caught up in that mad frenzy had only one thought on his mind—to get to the safety of the walls. Private Philotas too, was caught up in this mad rush. Shouting and screaming with a throat-burning intensity, blind with terror, he rushed along with his shield held up overhead, hardly able to see anything in front as he ran, pushed, and stumbled towards the walls. Deadly sharp-tipped arrows whizzed about; they thudded into his shield and fell to the earth all around him.

Running against this murderous barrage, Philotas stumbled on a body and fell to his knees. He was immediately knocked flat by the man coming up behind him. People were running into him from behind, pushing him down and trampling over him, but Philotas somehow struggled to his feet and ran on.

Miraculously, he made it to the walls without a scratch. Nearby, a scaling ladder had just been thrown up. A Persian officer stood next to it, and was shouting out commands that got lost in the all-pervading din. Bellowing out curses and orders, the officer took Philotas by the arm and literally pushed him onto the ladder. With no time to think, Philotas clambered up. Only then did he realize that he had lost his shield in the confusion of his fall.

Up on the ramparts, Sudeepa was firing away into the dense crowds rushing onto the walls. Sweat dripped off his body, his jaw was clenched tight and his hands shook compulsively. But it did not matter, for the tightly packed mass of bodies made it almost impossible to miss. He was hitting someone every time he fired. Yet, for every one person he hit, five more soldiers rushed forward

to fill in the gap. They just kept coming and coming, like an army of ants.

Scaling ladders had come up all along the walls and one had come up very close to where he was standing.

“There. There. Get those ones!” he shouted to his brother, pointing towards it.

Then, closing one eye, he pulled back on the bowstring, taking aim at the first man up the ladder. Meanwhile, Partha, who had been standing holding a huge cauldron of hot oil, now sprang into action. He and his partner, another young boy of his age, staggered towards Sudeepa, balancing the enormous pot between them, by means of a sturdy wooden stick.

“Out of the way, out of the way!” they shouted as they heaved their burden through the throngs of soldiers.

Down below on the ladder, Private Philotas cowered behind the body of the man climbing above him, but here too, the fates had other things in store for him. The man on top was struck by a rock and he fell on Philotas, who, in turn was dislodged from the ladder, falling twelve feet down to the ground.

He landed on his side. His shoulder crumpled in and the wind was knocked out of his ribs. For a moment, he lay there stunned, as arrows thudded into the ground all around. Luckily for him, the archers on the battlements were concentrating on the men climbing the ladders. Fortune had saved him once again, for just at that moment, someone threw boiling oil on the soldiers who were still on the ladder. Shrieking in agony, a whole bunch of soldiers dropped like flies and lay writhing in torment on the ground below.

The archers on the walls above, now started aiming at these fallen men. Bloodcurdling screams of pain rent the air, as arrows rained upon them. One of them had gotten up and was flailing about blindly. He let out a non-stop howl of pain that turned men’s hearts to mush and sucked away the courage of everyone around. An arrow thudded into his neck, but instead of killing him, it turned

his wail into a hideous, gurgling plea for mercy. A crimson stream of blood spurting out, even as he continued flopping about like a fish out of water. Finally, he was put out of his agony by another merciful arrow.

Meanwhile, the Indians had toppled the ladder and a number of soldiers were trying to raise it once again. Philotas, taking advantage of this distraction, clambered to his feet and running to the wall, he pressed himself against it. This was the safest spot available. Cowering in terror, he now realized that there was another person taking shelter there—a Bactrian archer.

“Where’s your bow?” he shouted at the Bactrian.

“*Chi?*” said the Bactrian.

“Can you understand Greek?” Philotas shouted back.

The Bactrian let lose a volley of gibberish. Philotas could not understand a single word. He was stuck there, spread-eagled against the walls of the fort, with a terrified Bactrian for company till night eventually fell, allowing them to sneak back to camp.

Meanwhile, up on the ramparts, King Ashvakasena was studying the battlefield. Exposed, dithering, and with piles of bodies building up in front of the walls, the attack was losing momentum. This was the instant that could decide everything. He turned towards the officers surrounding him, and motioned towards the cavalry assembled at one of the small sally gates below.

Within minutes, the gates were thrown open and a force of three hundred horses charged out of the fort. They fell upon the attacking infantry and drove them back. It was the final straw and the attack broke as the Greeks threw down their weapons and ran back to camp. A terrible slaughter ensued, as the Indian cavalry cut them to pieces.

The first attack had been beaten back, and so were the second, the third, and the fourth, as well as all the attacks that came after

them. For nine days and nights, this small fortress held out against the innumerable hordes of Alexander.

The siege was bloody, the defence stubborn, and the attacks relentless. On the third day, Alexander himself was wounded when an arrow struck him in the ankle. On the fifth day, King Ashvakasena was killed, shot through the heart by one of the gigantic arrows issuing from the siege engines. His mother, Kripi, now took up command of the forces and the battle raged on. As more and more of the defenders fell, women took up arms, standing shoulder to shoulder with the men to defend the walls.

Men fell in droves before the walls of the city. Realizing the futility of this bloodletting, Alexander again offered terms to the tribesmen. Dispirited by the loss of their chief and advised by Kripi, they settled for a truce. The Asvakayanas handed over the fort to the Greeks, and started making their way out of the city, for Alexander had sworn to allow them safe passage.

But it was not to be. Having gained possession of the city through his fraudulent oaths, Alexander set out after the tribesmen and pounced upon them, while they were on the road along with their wives and children. Every last one of them was put to the sword, but the great conqueror's thirst for revenge was not quenched. Even the buildings of Maskavati were burnt and razed to the ground and the city was reduced to rubble.

Out of the entire population of Maskavati, it was said that only one person survived, a young boy called Partha. Alexander 'The Great' had arrived in India, and rivers of blood were about to flow.