

# THE MAHABHARATA RETOLD

ORIGINAL CONCEPT NOTES BY GRANT MORRISON FOR 18 DAYS

These are some brief notes on the initial approach to the material.

This new version of the Mahabharata is set in a fantastic, mythic time, at the end of the Dwapara Yuga (Copper Age) and the beginning of the fallen, corrupt Kali Yuga, the Age of Iron.

Although historically, the epic is generally thought to refer to events occurring as recently as 9 BC and as long ago as 15 BC (depending on which account you favour), I'd like to place the action much further back into a more fantastical Indian past so that we can take full advantage of the possibilities for action and spectacle on a scale rarely seen. This is like a psychedelic Lord of the Rings with Star Wars technology.

## BHARAT

In this cosmic, symbolic version of events, Bharat is the primordial landmass – the single continent, also known as Pangaea, said to exist before continental drift created the shapes we're now familiar with. As we'll learn here, it wasn't continental drift that split mighty Pangaea but the descendants of King Bharata.

Bharat is home to the mighty kingdoms of the Kauravas, who come to represent the world of blind, ignorant matter, and the Pandavas, who stand in for the world of spirit and understanding and personify the clash between the impulse to participate in the restless material sphere and the impulse to transcend it.

On the ninth day of the 18 Days War, the geology of Bharat is split apart by the ferocity of the conflict, the Flood occurs, and the dreaded Iron Age we currently live in begins.

This is not a strictly accurate historical portrayal of events but a poetic, fantastic interpretation of the original text.

## STRUCTURE

Given the nature of the medium and the kaleidoscopic possibilities of the original narrative,

my intention is not to tell the story in strict chronological order (beginning with Shantanu and progressing through the various stories towards the war). Instead, I'd like to approach the text not in a linear fashion but as a 3-dimensional structure to which we can continually add new modular episodes and which will eventually build up into an incredible mosaic of the War and the events surrounding it. In this way the story will grow in power and inter-connectivity as we construct it piece by piece, episode by episode.

As I see it, the whole of the Mahabharata, and indeed the whole of Hindu thought and ultimately of all contemplative thought, expands outwards like the Big Bang from one timeless Singularity – the moment when Krishna stops time to deliver the wondrous wisdom of the Gita and reveal to Arjuna his – and our own – place in the cosmos. Here is the 'crack' in time, the crack between Ages and the crack in every human heart through which the light of A New Way To Think can come.

Poised between massive opposing forces, from the Singularity of Krishna's message, we expand outwards into duality and the War that comes to represent all opposing dualities in the cosmos beyond the Singularity. This is a story with a timeless resonance.

Around this Singularity (the Gita), the narrative expands like the universe from the Big Bang, as a vivid demonstration of Krishna's words, showing us in powerful actions and consequences the human truth of the Charioteer's intellectual arguments.

From the undiluted Divine, via conceptual thought, we enter the material world, History and the Epic dimension. Further from the radiant core of the Singularity, the mighty heroes and titanic warrior kings display more human and fewer semi-divine qualities. Their background stories reveal recognizable human dramas, ambitions and follies.

So... I'd like to BEGIN with Arjuna laying down his arms on the battlefield, prior to his experience with Krishna – which we see only glimpses of, allowing us to more fully explore it later in a series of increasingly meaningful future episodes. Here we see only the consequences of the message as the hero Arjuna returns from timelessness and launches his armies against the Kauravas.



Original concept  
art image for 18 Days



This way we can also get a glimpse of the cool stuff up front – crashing vimanas, atomic god weapons, incredible battles where millions die – we get to see the heroes and their adversaries at their most epic, with super-real battle scenes, ‘Saving Private Ryan’-style, that really show the shocking effects of this Epoch-ending struggle.

As the clash of titans gets underway, we can then cut away in our next episode to flash back to the ‘secret origins’ of characters we’ve met on the field of battle – suddenly we’re seeing the human beneath the veneer of glory. With each new character we meet and come to identify with, the War, which at first seemed no more than spectacle, becomes more and more charged with emotion and meaning as we watch them march towards destinies we know must come. By the time we reach the 18th Day and have witnessed all the stories of the players involved, our hearts should be broken and healed and broken again.

I think this type of ‘holographic’ structure allows us to plug new stories into the ongoing 18 DAYS War. We can cut away from a monumental Beeshma on the battlefield, for instance, to discover the story of the man behind the myth and watch as his karma leads him inexorably back to the main event.

We open with the War and then begin to answer the question – how did it come to this? And how will it end? With so much material at our disposal I can see a lot of fun to be had answering those questions while widening the scope of the 18 DAYS universe to meet new characters or see old favourites in a new light.

## THE LOOK

The age of our planet is estimated at 6 billion years. The dinosaurs reputedly died out 65 million years ago and the first homo sapiens are believed to have appeared 48,000 years ago. In the last 2000 years of history, human cultures have advanced from blacksmith’s forges to atomic power. My conceit here is that the great kingdoms of Bharat during the Golden, Silver and Copper Ages had plenty of time to flower to their technological peak and then disappear.

I’m setting the date for this version somewhere around 10,000 BC before the various Floods of world tradition and at the beginning of the current Kali Yuga (which, charitably, I will suggest is coming to its own conclusion, hence the particular relevance of the Mahabharata to our own Age). But these events may have occurred before even that antique date, in the previous Dwapara Age, before fallen,

brutish ‘homo sapiens’ rebuilt their world from the ruins.

We needn’t ever specify a date for this. In truth, it takes place in the mythic, poetic realm, in the theatre of the mind.

So, if we can go from flint daggers to Uzis in a few thousand years, what might the smarter, fitter, more magnificent men and women of the Dwapara Yuga achieved in their own time ?

Our world of Bharat is a place of incredible art and technology – a wondrous earthly kingdom of sages, warriors, noble men and women. This remarkable culture has mastered higher forms of yoga, meditation and Ayurvedic practice. They’re stronger, faster, fitter and smarter than we are but still fall prey to so many of the same emotional foibles that lead us all into disaster.

The armour and vehicles they use look like the kind of thing you’d expect from a culture more glorious than anything we in the degraded Kali Yuga could aspire to. They have better armour than we do, they have better ‘computers’, they have battlefield ‘god weapons’ that make our military forces look like children slinging mud, they have war-animals bred for purity of purpose and completely without fear. They are masters of genetics, and count among their number philosophers, supermen, and perfect, unstoppable warriors capable of killing thousands at a time.

They live in immense dream palaces on soaring mountaintops. They fly unbelievable vimana flying machines – like flying saucers designed and built by artisans.

We should use familiar historical styles and fashions that we associate with traditional depictions of the Mahabharata and then mutate those traditional influences into a much more shiny, reflective, decorative look. Like Jack Kirby doing the Hindu gods. I see this as sleek and sexy. The men and women have the lean elegance of Afghan hounds and are poised, erect, proud and almost arrogant.

The weapons and clothing have a cyber-y science fiction edge as if designed by master craftsmen with painstaking attention to detail. Nothing is merely functional – every made thing shows the pride and genius of its maker. Armour is sleek chrome, or electrum alloys of silver and gold, set with flashing jewels and intricate engravings – many of which store energy or relay transmissions. The ladder of lights on the spinal braces of the armour balance and regulate chakra health.

When fully-suited, super-warriors like DRONA are more formidable than the Master Chief and far

more magnificent – their bulky battle armor too is wrought with fantastic inlays and glass panels, fuel pipes and built-in wrist cannons etc.

Animals come similarly equipped – magnificent stallions wear hinged battle carapaces with head-mounted, swivelling laser targeting guns. The elephants are noble giant mastodons with painted, decorated and fully-armoured gun turrets on their backs. They also wear plated armour, with big shoulder cannons, and gas masks too!

Suited up, the heroes of 18 DAYS and their war beasts all look like bejeweled glass and engraved chrome cyborgs – super cool flesh/technology hybrids.

I've taken literally some of the descriptions of vimanas and especially the effects of divine astras, or god-weapons.

... a single projectile

Charged with the power of the universe

An incandescent column of smoke and flame

As bright as a thousand suns

Rose in all its splendour...

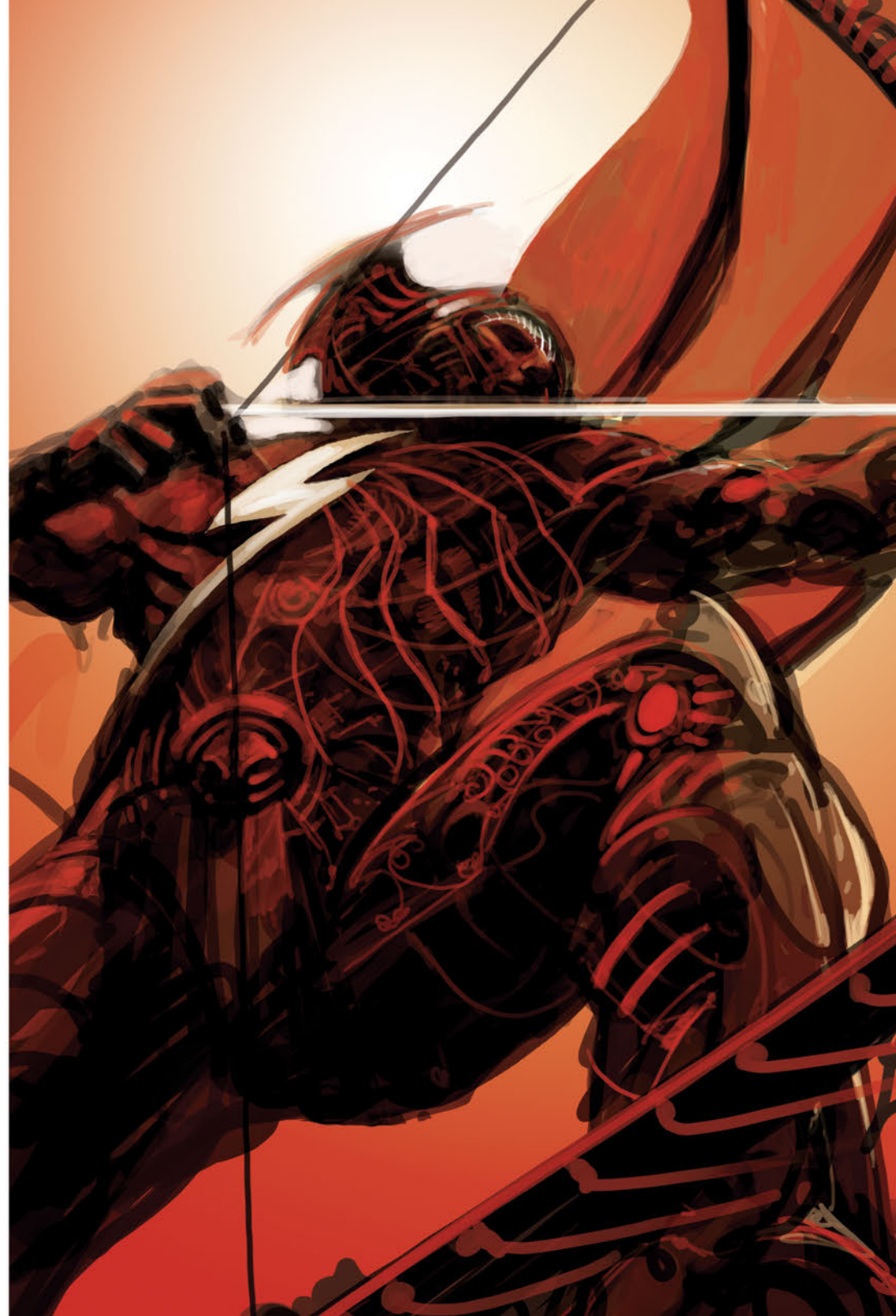
... an unknown weapon,

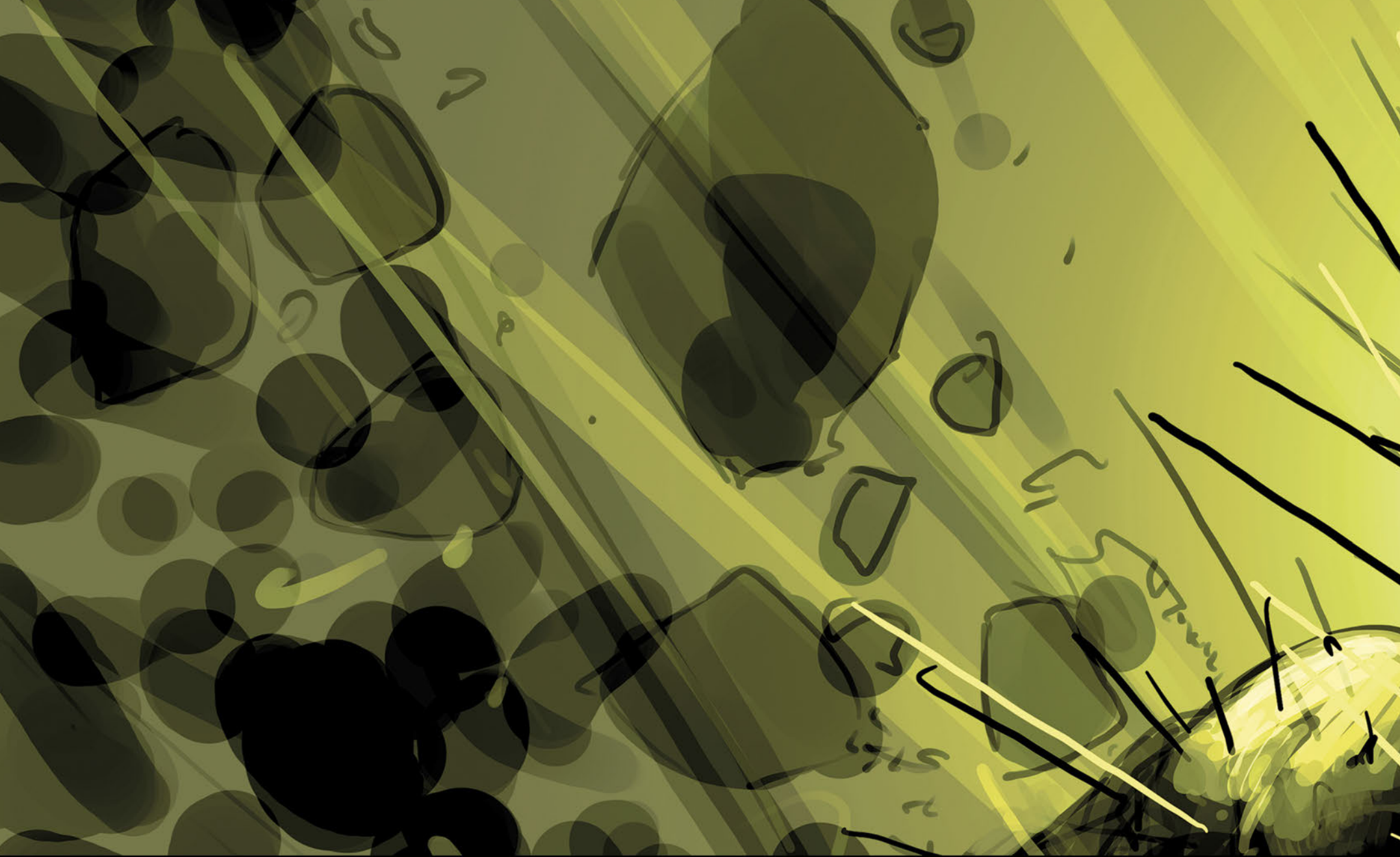
An iron thunderbolt,

A gigantic messenger of death...

Some of these descriptions are so convincingly reminiscent of the precise effects of tactical atomic weapons and laser beams it seems a shame not to take them at face value and imagine a culture with access to its own versions of such weaponry.

Basically, we need to start thinking about the distinctive look of this lost civilization so that we can nail down a really unique, modern and exciting interpretation of a familiar story that will translate into original movie images, game spin-offs and toys.





# 18 DAYS

AN ELECTRONIC MAHABHARATA