

ASH MISTRY  
AND THE  
SAVAGE FORTRESS

# Chapter One

“That is *so* not a cobra,” said Ash. It couldn’t be. Weren’t cobras endangered? You couldn’t have them as pets, not even here in India.

“That *so* totally *is* a cobra. Look,” said his sister, Lucky.

Ash leaned closer to the snake. It swayed in front of him, gently gliding back and forth in tempo with the snake charmer’s flute music. The scales, oily green and black, shone in the intense sunlight. It blinked slowly, watching Ash with its bright emerald eyes.

“Trust me, Lucks,” said Ash. “That is not a cobra.”

The snake revealed its hood.

It was, totally, a cobra.



“Told you,” she said.

If there was anything worse than a smug sister it was a smug sister three years younger than you.

“What I meant was, of course it’s a cobra, but not a real cobra,” replied Ash, determined his sister wasn’t going to win this argument. “It’s been defanged. They all are. Hardly a cobra at all. More like a worm with scales.”

Almost as though it had been following the conversation, the cobra hissed loudly and revealed a pair of long, needle-sharp ivory fangs.

Lucky waved at it.

“I wouldn’t do that if—”

The cobra darted at Lucky and before Ash knew it he’d jumped between them. The snake’s mouth widened and he stared at the two crystal drops of venom hanging off its fangs.

“Parvati!” snapped the snake charmer. The cobra stopped a few centimetres from Ash’s neck.

*Whoa.*

The snake charmer tapped the basket with his flute and the cobra, after giving Ash one last look, curled itself back into it and the lid went on.

Ash started breathing again. He looked at Lucky. “You OK?”



She nodded.

“See that? I just saved your life,” Ash said. “I practically *hurled* myself between you and that incredibly poisonous snake. Epically brave.” And, now the heart palpitations had subsided, epicly stupid. But protecting his little sister was his duty in the same way hers was to cause as much trouble as possible.

The charmer hopped to his feet. He was ancient and bow-legged, a bundle of bones wrapped in wrinkled ash-coated dark skin and a saffron loincloth. His only possessions, apart from the snake and his flute, were a shoulder bag made from sackcloth and a long bamboo walking stick. Serpentine dreadlocks hung down to his waist.

A *sadhu*, a holy man. There were thousands of them in Varanasi. It was India’s holiest city, built on the banks of the sacred Ganges river. Hindu legend says that if you die here you get instant access to Heaven with no worries about the religious cycles of reincarnation and rebirth. That meant the streets were cluttered with old people, just waiting to live up to the famous saying: *See Varanasi and die*.

The entire city was a living museum with an ancient temple or some dilapidated palace on every street. Ash was mad on history. He loved nothing better than exploring castles, going



to museums and checking out the weapons displays. The first day had been an amazing adventure, exploring the dingy alleys and winding lanes, experiencing the intense, almost overwhelming life of India first-hand.

But now?

Now, two weeks into their trip, Ash felt suffocated by the oppressive heat, the stench, the crowds and the touts and the death.

The narrow streets shimmered in the July heat. Cars, rickshaws, beggars, merchants, pilgrims and holy men jammed the lanes and footpaths. A scooter bounced past, its horn crying out like a distressed duck, swerving violently as it dodged round a malnourished-looking cow that had decided to take an afternoon nap in the middle of the road.

“Where is that car?” swore Ash’s uncle, Vik. Uncle Vik gazed up and down the crowded road, trying to spot the taxi they’d hired to take them to the party. Unfolding a white handkerchief from his breast pocket, he wiped the sweat off his shiny bald head.

“There’s a cow blocking the road,” said Ash. “It’s just sitting there with its tongue up its nose.”

The cow’s skin hung off huge shovel-sized hip bones and shoulder-blades. One horn was missing. It sat serene and



relaxed while all around it scooters, cars and irate motorists yelled and swore.

Uncle Vik huffed loudly. “This is very bad. We will be late.”

“Why can’t I just go back to the house?” Ash asked. “I don’t see why I have to go to some boring party.”

His aunt, Anita, sighed. She’d put on her best sari and was struggling to keep it dust free. “Lord Savage is a most important gentleman,” she said. “We have been invited especially.”

Lord Savage was a rich English aristocrat who sponsored archaeological digs all over India, all over the world, in fact. Uncle Vik lectured on ancient Indian history at Varanasi University, so sooner or later their paths were going to cross. Working on one of Savage’s projects could do wonders for Uncle Vik’s career.

“This is your heritage too, nephew.” His uncle’s deep brown eyes shone as he put his hand on Ash’s shoulder. “This is where we come from.”

“I come from West Dulwich, London,” Ash answered.

“Why can’t you just try and enjoy your time here, like Lucky?”

His sister was waving at the cow, trying to get some reaction. It gave her an imperious snort.



“She’s enjoying it because she’s only ten, and she’s stupid.”

“I am not stupid!” Lucky poked her elbow into his ribs.

“Oh, was that meant to hurt?” said Ash. “I didn’t notice.”

“That’s because you’re so fat.”

“I am not fat!” fumed Ash.

“For God’s sake, just stop it, both of you,” said Aunt Anita. “It’s too hot.”

Uncle Vik folded his handkerchief away. “I thought coming to India was your idea, Ash.”

Ash shut up. His uncle was right.

Ash’s love for history and ancient culture had come from his uncle. They’d never met face to face until this year, flights were prohibitively expensive for a man on a teacher’s salary, but ever since Ash could remember there’d been letters, books, photos and emails from Uncle Vik telling him all the grand tales of India’s past. Stories of maharajahs, of tiger hunts and of legendary wars between heroes and terrible demons. Ash’s room back home was full of books on Indian weaponry and myths, most of them presents from his uncle.

So when the summer holidays had come round and his parents, both of whom worked full time, had suggested he and Lucks go over and visit their relatives, Ash had practically packed his bags there and then.



But that had been before the infernal heat, the flies and the cobras.

How was he going to survive another four weeks here?

“There he is. At last.” Vik pointed along the road. Somewhere in the hazy heat Ash spotted an old black and yellow Ambassador taxi.

But the car couldn’t move. The cow had brought the traffic to a complete stand-still. A couple of men pulled at the rope round its neck, but the white beast remained stubbornly immobile.

The old man, the snake charmer, ambled up to them, hands cupped.

Uncle Vik handed him a ten-rupee note. “You can have a hundred if you get that cow moving.”

The sadhu nodded his thanks and strolled off towards the cow.

“What’s he doing?” said Lucky.

The sadhu swished his bamboo stick back and forth in front of the beast. It blinked, then began to sway its head side to side, watching the stick as it swung wider and wider.

Then he smacked the cow’s nose.

The cow bellowed and jumped to its feet. The sadhu smacked it again and the beast stumbled backwards. Seconds





later engines started up, horns honked and the traffic got moving.

The sadhu returned, grinning broadly.

Vik prodded Ash and put a hundred-rupee note in his hand. “Give it to him, quickly.”

Ash frowned, but passed the note over. Their eyes met and Ash froze. Beneath the thick bushy eyebrows the old man’s eyes were startling blue.

He drew the note from Ash’s stiff fingers.

Ash looked back as they climbed into the taxi and saw the old man staring back at him, staff resting on his shoulder. Then the crowds spilled on to the now open street and the sadhu disappeared.

Ten minutes later they were out of the city and rolling along the dusty country road. Ash closed his eyes, leaned out of the window and let the dry breeze wash over his face. The heat still hung over the arid countryside, but the sun would be gone in an hour and he’d have a little relief from the otherwise inescapable furnace-hot temperatures.

Right now his mates would be out and about in London. If he were there, he, Akbar and Sean would hook up their computers for all-day sessions – all week, in fact. They’d spent



last summer holed up in Sean's basement, which, thanks to his dad who was head of IT at some bank, was a gamer's paradise.

All day gaming sessions. McDonald's. Going down to the multiplex on Friday. These were the best things in life.

Oh, and Gemma. Gemma was a new addition to the list.

Ash had to face it, India wasn't for him. The sooner this trip was over, the better. It wasn't worth all the sweat and heat and flies.

No, that wasn't entirely true. He did think the castles were cool. England did castles, but not like India did castles. India's castles could have come straight out of *The Lord of the Rings*. They were vast and intricate. Halls filled with statues and fountains and gardens of wandering peacocks. The fortresses weren't built for horses, but elephants. India didn't do small, intimate and quiet. From the castles through to the palaces, and the Himalayas to the north and the Thar Desert to the west, India was all big-screen cinema, trumpets and deafening noise.

"You OK?" Ash asked Lucky. She looked pale. "Sit here," he said, and swapped places with her so she could sit next to the window and get some fresh air. She hadn't adjusted to the food the way he had and all this jumping up and down surely wasn't helping her digestion.



The sun left a bloody smear across the sky as it sank below the horizon. Their driver, Eddie Singh, took them off the main road and they bounced down a winding track. The car seemed to have a supernatural knack for finding the largest rocks and deepest pot-holes. The old Ambassador wasn't designed for off-road. It barely managed on-road.

"Taxi service and full body massage, no extra charge," laughed Eddie as he wrestled with the steering wheel.

"Is this really necessary?" asked Auntie Anita, struggling to keep her sari in place. "I thought the main road led to the bridge."

"The bridge is down. Loose foundations or something," said Vik. "Lord Savage has made arrangements."

"What arrangements?" asked Ash.

"There." Lucky pointed ahead.

Cars lined the river's edge, their drivers chatting and smoking. A woman in a white cotton suit directed guests into a flotilla of rowing boats, tied up along a rickety wooden platform on the bank. A steady stream of guests were being rowed to the opposite bank while boys ran back and forth with lanterns. Eddie parked up beside the other cars.

*Dammit, that hurts.* Ash stretched as he got out, uncurling his spine and hoping no permanent damage had been done.



His bum felt as if the seat springs had left deep impressions in both buttocks.

Brittle leaves rustled in a nearby bush and something moved within it. Lucky grabbed Ash's sleeve as a scrawny vulture, stringy red intestine trailing out of its beak, raised its head out of the bush to watch them. It twisted its neck back and forth and the guts tore free.

Ash stepped closer to inspect the feast. A dead water buffalo lay on the muddy bank, its hind legs gone. Its eyes were open and big, shiny and black. The vulture dipped its beak into the socket and drew out the plump ball. Ash thought he heard it pop as the vulture swallowed.

"That is totally pukey," Lucky said, her nose wrinkling.

"Professor Mistry?"

The woman in white approached them, smiling in greeting. She was Caucasian and very tanned, and despite the oncoming darkness, she still wore a pair of sleek sunglasses. Her thick unkempt blonde-streaked hair was loosely held in place with ivory pins. She pressed her palms together. "*Namaste*. I'm Jackie, Lord Savage's personal assistant." Her accent was English, and posh.

"Vikram Mistry, at your service." He took Aunt Anita's hand. "And this is my wife."



“*Namaste*, Mrs Mistry,” said Jackie.

“Call me Anita,” she replied, smoothing out the creases in her silk sari. The cloth was a shimmering pearly silver embroidered with gold. She only wore it for special occasions, like visiting rich aristocrats.

“What a perfectly beautiful child,” said Jackie, catching a glimpse of Lucky. She knelt down and stroked Lucky’s cheek with a long nail, her smile widening. “Why, you look good enough to eat.”

Lucky cringed and took a step behind Ash. Jackie’s smile thinned, then she slowly straightened up and faced Uncle Vik.

“Lord Savage is very keen to meet you,” Jackie said. “He’s a great admirer of your work.”

“I am flattered.”

Jackie gestured at the boats. “I’m so sorry about this, but I hope you’ll be OK. There’ve been a lot of heavy trucks crossing back and forth because of the excavations. This morning one of them went over the side. A bad business.” She snapped her fingers and a local boy ran up bearing a kerosene lantern. “The bridge will be out a while for repairs.”

“Excavations?” asked Vik. “I didn’t realise there were any digs in Varanasi.”



“In Varanasi and elsewhere,” said Jackie. “The Savage family have been staunch supporters of Indian archaeology for many centuries. Lord Savage’s weapons collection is one of the finest in the world.”

*Weapons collection?* thought Ash. Maybe tonight wouldn’t be a total loss.

“Is this why Lord Savage wants to meet me?” his uncle asked.

“All in good time, Professor.”

“What happened there?” said Ash, pointing at the half-devoured buffalo.

“Marsh crocodile. The river has a few,” said Jackie. “Not the place for a dip.”

Ash couldn’t help but notice how her gaze lingered on the dead buffalo. And was she licking her lips? The woman was pure freak show. That’s probably what happened to Brits if you stayed out here too long.

Jackie led them to the pier, a rickety row of mouldering planks held together by near-rotten rope. The only thing solid about it was the pair of stone pillars that stood at the end, each carved in the shape of an elephant. A boat and boatman waited for them.

The boat looked like one of the punts Ash had been in



during a day trip to Cambridge; shallow and low in the water. Not very crocodile-proof.

“This does not look entirely safe,” said Ash. “Where are the life-jackets?”

Aunt Anita shook her head. “Just get in the boat.” It wobbled as she stepped in. “And keep your fingers out of the water.”

The boatman pushed them off with his oar and they drifted away from the bank. Ash peered back at the scattered vehicles until their shining headlamps dwindled to mere spots in the darkness.

“Look!” Lucky jumped to her feet and the boat rocked perilously.

“Sit down!” snapped Aunt Anita.

A path of lanterns shone along the wide stone steps that lined the opposite bank. A cliff-like mass stood on the riverside, rising high straight out of the water. Torches flared, one by one, along its battlement walls. Polished marble and the soft egg-curve shape of a roof glistened in the torchlight. Vines and climbers were as much part of the immense walls as the marble and sandstone. Black glass sparkled like ebony diamonds from the balcony windows.

Uncle Vik had told them the building had once belonged



to the maharajah of Varanasi, but had been abandoned and left to rot for decades. Now the monolithic palace would be grander than ever. It had a new owner and a new name.

The Savage Fortress.

The torch-lit battlements loomed over their boat as it drifted towards the bank. Apart from the fortress, the land was empty of any other buildings or life. It was as if the Savage Fortress had devoured everything, leaving only dried-out streams, a few stunted trees and, in the distance, what looked like a small shanty town of tents and crude hovels. Lorries lined the road and Ash could see a few big bulldozers, presumably from the excavations Jackie had mentioned.

“Wonder what’s out there,” said Vik. He wiped his glasses and cast a critical eye over the wide field. “Whatever he’s doing, he’s serious about it.”

The boat touched the broad steps that led to the water gate. As they ascended the steps Ash spotted a large stone shield over the main entrance. It was carved with three bulbous flowers and a pair of crossed swords.

“What’s that?” he asked. “Are they thistles?”

Uncle Vik adjusted his glasses. “No, poppies. The Savage family made its first fortune in the Opium Wars with China.”





“And the motto?” Ash read the scroll under the shield.  
“*Ex dolor adveho opulentia?*”

“Through misery comes profit.”

*Nice.*

They clambered up the steep, damp passageway and soon emerged into a crowded courtyard, decorated for a party. Servants, dressed in white and wearing golden turbans and sashes, carried silver trays of drinks and food among a field of colour. Silken pavilions dotted the large grass-covered square.

There were maybe a hundred guests, and soon Ash’s uncle and aunt lost themselves in the crowd. Lucky spotted a gang of younger kids and ran off to play.

Ash decided to explore.

Classical Indian music played from one of the hidden galleries. The dream-like sound suited the palace. Marble statues dotted the corners of the courtyard and the walls bore vast carvings of heroes and monsters, which Ash recognised as images from Indian mythology. One wall was filled with a battle scene taken from the epic tale of the Ramayana, probably the most famous of Indian legends and Ash’s favourite.

A giant golden warrior dominated the picture, his eyes



blazing with fury, his mouth open in a silent roar of rage. He swung a pair of massive swords, reaping men left and right.

All around him lay corpses, and behind him stood his army of demons: hideous human-animal hybrids with scales or fur-covered bodies, tails or wings.

It was Ravana, the demon king.

To the far left of the wall, almost off it, was a warrior with his bow raised and an arrow pointed at Ravana. The artist had painted the arrow with obvious care, surrounding it with flames and inlaying its centre with gold leaf. This wasn't just any arrow. It was an *aastra*, a weapon charged with the power of a god.

The scene caught the demon king's last moment. Any second now the arrow, the *aastra*, would be launched and penetrate his heart, shattering him. And only one hero could shoot it: the hero Rama.

"What do you think?" said a voice from behind him.

A figure stepped out of the shadows and approached Ash.

"*Namaste*," he said.

English for sure, the man wore a fine white linen suit with a pale silk shirt, so the only points of colour were his blue eyes, two brilliant chips of the coldest ice. Ash caught his



breath as the man came into the glow of a nearby forest of candles.

It was as though his face had been shattered, then crudely recast. Deep irregular grooves covered his skin, which shone with waxy transparency, revealing a fine network of veins beneath. Limp clumps of brittle white hair hung from his liver-spotted scalp.

His gloved hand tightened round the silver tiger-headed handle of his cane. The ruby eyes of the beast sparkled as they watched Ash. The man inclined his head.

“I am Alexander Savage.”



## Chapter Two

“Ash Mistry,” Ash said.

“Beautiful, isn’t he?” said Savage. He drew his fingers over the outline of the demon king’s face. “Even with his destruction at hand, defiant to the last.”

“He’s horrific.” Ash wasn’t sure if he was talking about the gruesome frieze or Savage himself.

“You think so? Why?”

“He was the demon king. He threatened the entire world.”

“And the world is such a pleasant place now, is it?”

Ash looked again at the glaring eyes of Ravana. The face seemed alive, a mask of arrogant fury and pure hate. “At



least it's not a hell. That's what Ravana wanted, a world fit for demons."

Savage looked at him inquisitively, tapping his walking stick against the flagstone. "Well said, lad, well said."

A woman broke from the crowd and joined them. Dressed in a white silk sari embroidered with spider webs she towered above Ash like a willowy goddess, but close up he saw that the make-up had been laid on heavy; her face was smooth and rigid from a layer of powder, as lifeless as a mannequin's, her jet-black hair arranged in eight, curving tresses. The woman's gaze paused on him and there was a flicker of a condescending smile. Ash saw himself reflected in her big, wrap-around sunglasses. He looked small and insignificant.

"Sir, the board of directors are here," she said.

"It's been interesting talking with you," he said to Ash. "Enjoy the party." He took the woman's hand and entered the gathering. But even as the sea of people began to swirl and circle around him, Savage briefly looked back at Ash, his smile locked rigidly in place.

"Where's your sister?" Anita appeared beside him.

"She's probably just gone off to the loo."

Everyone got some stomach problems when they hit India, the "Delhi Belly" – it was inevitable. Well, everyone but Ash.



Vik had joked that Ash could do with a dose as he could afford to lose a few kilos. But Ash wasn't fat. He was just... well-covered.

Anita glanced at Vik, who was gesturing at her. He was talking to Savage, and clearly needed her.

Ash sighed. "I'll find Lucky."

It was weird, half the time they were winding one another up, but when it came down to it, he and his sister were close. True, they didn't play much together any more – he was thirteen, after all – but he had read her all the Harry Potters when she'd been younger. He was the eldest and it was his job to look after his little sister. It was the Indian way.

Anita's wrinkled brow flattened and smoothed. She smiled at him and ruffled his hair. "You are a good boy."

Ash stopped one of the waiters and asked him where the toilets were. The guy, trying to keep a tray of martinis from spilling, just waved over his shoulder, then hurried off.

Ash wandered towards the main building and peered through the half-open doors that led into a dimly lit hallway.

"Lucks?" His voice vanished into the marble-clad hall, bouncing between the walls until it was swallowed by the darkness. Ash proceeded in.



Light shone from within an ancient bronze pendant lantern high above him, its coloured glass walls casting a jigsaw of amber, red and green over the peeling and broken plaster. Mounted on opposite walls were two huge mirrors with elaborate gilt frames. Their backing silver had long since tarnished to black, so the reflections were tainted, dark and faint, like shadowy ghosts.

“Lucks?” Ash’s heart beat rapidly in his chest as he crept among the swaying shadows.

Then he spotted the steps.

Climbing up, Ash soon came to a stout, iron-studded door. He turned the door handle and pushed. “Lucks? You in here?”

Oil lamps flickered, spreading warm orange patches of light along the walls. The room was double height, with row upon row of glass cabinets filling the main floor. The upper floor was a balcony with shelves stuffed with books and scrolls. Ash took a deep breath and went in.

He peered at the nearest shelf – and gasped. Shrunken heads, their eyes and mouths sewn shut, sat serenely dumb, blind and dead within the nearest cabinet. A snake, its skin albino white, floated in a jar beside them, wrapped round and round itself in its yellow liquid. Ash leaned closer.

The snake had a small, utterly human face. A baby’s face.



Its mouth was partially open, revealing a pair of tiny fangs.

*Beyond creepy.* Ash backed away, chilly in spite of the day's lingering heat. A shiver crept across his skin as he felt the creature's eyes upon him.

The cabinets were of dark highly polished wood, with rows of drawers beneath them. Ash hooked his fingers through an iron ring and drew one open.

Knives. Claws. Daggers.

*Very cool.*

He picked out something that looked like a pair of brass knuckles, but had a row of four steel claws jutting out from it. Ash put it over his fingers and admired the deadly spikes. He read the tag. "*Bagh nakh*": Tiger claws. This had to be part of Savage's famous weapons collection.

*EXTREMELY cool.*

He so wanted the claws, but if he stuffed them in his pocket, they'd tear a hole in his thigh. Reluctantly he put them back and slid the drawer shut.

He wandered around the cabinets, then stopped at a desk that sat in front of a half-open window. He hadn't seen it from the door since it was behind all the displays. A set of moth-eaten velvet curtains hung on either side of the window, their loose threads fluttering in the desert breeze.





A scroll was unrolled over the red leather desk top. Its edges were burnt black and much of the writing obscured with soot, but Ash recognised some of the symbols. Didn't Vik have hundreds of scrolls like this littering the house? He was obsessed with translating Harappan, the ancient language of India. Beneath each line of Harappan pictograms there were another two rows of writing. One set comprised rows of vertical dashes and sloping slashes, and the line beneath that was Egyptian hieroglyphs. The scroll was held in place by small bronze statues, one standing on each corner. Ash picked one up.

About ten centimetres tall, the statue was of a long-limbed girl, her arms encased in bracelets. Her chin was up, haughty and proud, with wide almond-shaped eyes. Her hand was on her hip, like she was resting after a dance.

Ash put her down and traced his finger lightly over the thin yellow parchment. It felt like the softest leather, old and wrinkled. Then he noticed that the parchment was marked with dark spots, old blemishes like freckles.

Freckles?

Ash froze. He stared at the scroll and suddenly noticed the minute wrinkles and almost invisible crosshatching. He turned his hand over in the flickering firelight, looking at the pattern of lines over the knuckles and fingers.



The scroll was made of human skin.

Footsteps tapped just outside the door. The handle turned and the hinges creaked. Ash darted behind the curtain.

*I'm so busted.* But only if they found him. Ash forced himself to stand utterly still and breathe in the smallest, quietest sips.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation at such short notice, Professor Mistry.”

*I'm beyond busted. Way beyond.*

Ash could picture the rest of his life. Grounded for ever. Before leaving England his dad had warned him to be on his best behaviour, and breaking and entering did not fall under the heading of ‘best behaviour’, no matter how he tried to spin it. But in spite of himself, he wanted to know why his uncle was here. Ash peeked through the gap in the heavy drape.

Uncle Vik entered alongside Savage and someone else. This new guy was a giant, as wide as the doorway. His skin was tough and weathered, deeply grooved like bark, or scales. He was dressed in the same white linen as Savage’s servants, but the suit strained over his hugely muscular body. His arms were thicker than Ash’s waist, and Ash wasn’t slim. A pair of large sunglasses hid his eyes.

“I must admit,” said Uncle Vik, “your invite was a surprise. I wasn’t aware you knew of my work.”



“Few people have your dedication to ancient Indian history.”

The big man went to a cabinet and poured out two big tumblers of whisky.

Savage picked up the dancing girl statue and gave it to Uncle Vik. “What do you think?”

Uncle Vik stared at it like he’d just been given the Holy Grail. “Is this authentic?”

“Found at the new site, out in Rajasthan.” Savage stepped away from his desk and put his hand on Uncle Vik’s shoulder, leading him around the desk. Ash’s uncle fumbled in his breast pocket for his glasses. He leaned over the scroll, his nose just a few centimetres from the writing.

“As you know, no one has succeeded in translating the Harappan language,” said Savage. “The problem is there’s no Rosetta Stone.”

Rosetta Stone? Oh, yes. Ash remembered being dragged around the British Museum for hours and hours during a school trip last year. The Rosetta Stone was a big black slab with the same message on it in three languages: Egyptian hieroglyphs, Demotic and ancient Greek. At the time the Rosetta Stone had been discovered, no one knew what Egyptian hieroglyphs meant, but because Greek and Demotic were



already understood, the historians were able to compare words and translate the hieroglyphs, turning them from a bunch of mysterious symbols into a language. The Stone had been the key to understanding ancient Egypt.

Uncle Vik nodded. “Yes. The only way to translate an unknown language is to have an example of it in another, already-known language. That’s why we know almost nothing about the Harappans. We have so much writing from their culture, but no key to unlock it.”

“Until now,” said Savage. He put his hand down on the scroll. “This is that key. An identical message in Harappan, Sumerian cuneiform, and Old Kingdom Egyptian. And since we know cuneiform and Egyptian...”

“We should be able to translate the Harappan.” Vik stared at the scroll. “My God, you’re right.” He straightened, his face glowing with delight. “Lord Savage, you’ve achieved a miracle.”

“No, Professor Mistry. The miracle will be yours. I would like you to complete the translation.”

Uncle Vik brushed his fingers along the edge of the scroll. “This fire damage is recent. What happened on the dig?”

Ash saw how Savage’s gaze cooled as he and the big guy exchanged a brief look. The Englishman stroked his chin before speaking.



“Trouble at the site,” Savage said. “Are you a superstitious man, Professor?”

“Why?”

“The local villagers believe the site to be home to evil spirits. There have been several attempts to sabotage the excavations.” Savage reached into his jacket and drew out a slip of paper. “Consider my offer.”

Uncle Vik took the slip: a cheque. His eyes widened as he read the figure in the box. Ash squinted – he couldn’t make out the number, but there were a lot of zeroes. A lot.

“You’re joking. I can’t accept this.” Vik shook his head and tried to hand the cheque back. “It’s two million pounds.”

*Oh My God.*

“I am happy to double it.” Savage opened his fountain pen.

“No. No.” Uncle Vik put his hand on the desk to steady himself.

“We will change the world with this knowledge, Professor Mistry. The Harappans were a thousand years ahead of their time. They used technologies that weren’t seen again for many centuries. What other knowledge did they have that we’ve lost? The answers are in this scroll,” said Savage. “And I’m willing to pay any price to find them.”



Savage's eyes shone with desire. A spider of fear crept along Ash's spine and rested its cold legs against his neck as he watched the Englishman lick his lips. He was telling the truth, and it was terrifying. Savage was a man capable of doing anything to achieve his goal.

"Do we have a deal?" Savage carefully peeled off his glove. Wrinkled skin hung loosely round bone and stringy flesh. It was the hand of a dried-out skeleton. Uncle Vik looked at the hand.

Two million. TWO MILLION. What couldn't the family do with that sort of cash?

But why did it feel so wrong?

*No. Don't.* Ash wanted to cry out but couldn't. He was frozen. And the look in Savage's eyes told him that if his uncle refused, Savage would smash his head open with his silver-topped cane.

"A deal." Uncle Vik took Savage's hand.

A feral smile spread over Savage's lips. He put his glove back on. The big man handed out the drinks.

"Thank you, Professor." He tapped his glass against Uncle Vik's. "I will arrange for all the paperwork to be brought here."

Uncle Vik gulped down the whiskey. "You don't want me out in Rajasthan?"



“No, not yet. The translations refer to some important artefacts buried here in Varanasi.” Savage emptied his glass. “Now, if you would return to the party. I have some business to discuss with Mayar.”

Oh no. How long were they going to stay here? Ash wasn't sure he could stand still much longer. If he just ran out to Vik, they couldn't do anything, could they? But before he could act his uncle left, closing the door behind him.

Savage sighed with relief. “The excavations here are going too slowly, Mayar,” he said.

“The men are suspicious. They will not venture near the Seven Queens.”

“I do not pay them to be suspicious. See to it tomorrow.” Savage walked to the window. He rested his hands on the balcony and looked out, standing only a few centimetres from Ash. Ash's heart beat so loudly he was sure Savage would hear it.

“Why not send him to Rajasthan now?” asked Mayar.

“The work there is nearly complete; the Iron Gates have been found. What I want is the key to open them, and the key, my dear Mayar, is buried here in Varanasi. Once the scrolls have been translated, I'll know exactly where.” Savage's



fingers traced the grooves that crisscrossed his face. "I'm running out of time."

"I will encourage the men to greater efforts."

Ash didn't like the way Mayar said 'encourage'. It sounded painful.

"One more thing," said Savage. "What did I tell you about feeding near the fortress?"

Mayar laughed so deeply that the cabinets rocked. It was a laugh full of cruel mockery.

"Forgive me, Master," Mayar said, clearly not meaning any of it. "But the bullock was too tasty to waste. Or would you rather we ate among your guests?"

Savage spun round and smashed his cane into the man's head. Mayar crashed backwards, shattering the nearest cabinet. Ash clamped his hand over his mouth as the shrunken heads and the bottles of monsters tumbled across the floor. As Mayar fell, his sunglasses bounced off, landing at Ash's feet.

*Oh, no.* Ash's feet were visible right at the bottom of the curtain. If they found him now, he was dead. Instinctively he kicked the glasses away.

*Oh, please don't see me. Please.*

Mayar was big and muscular, far larger and stronger than





Savage. But he grovelled on the floor as Savage pressed his foot against the man's throat.

“Do not try my patience, *rakshasa*,” warned Savage.

*Rakshasa?* Why did that word ring a bell? And why did it make Ash cold?

“I... meant no disrespect, Master.”

Savage lifted his foot. “Get up.” He turned and stepped out the door. “And put on your glasses. I don't want you scaring the mortals.”

*Mortals? What's going on?*

Mayar stood up and straightened himself. He muttered something that probably wasn't complimentary about Savage, then picked up his glasses with a grunt.

As he raised them to his face, Ash saw his eyes and gasped. They were yellow, and the pupils were a pair of black, vertical slits.

The eyes of a reptile.

Mayar slipped the glasses back in place and the two of them left. Ash suddenly remembered what a *rakshasa* was. The old Indian legends were full of them, but they had a different name in English.

It was demon.

