

## 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 nakb*": 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.

