

THE SAVAGE FORTRESS

SARWAT CHADDA



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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 an inch from Ash’s neck.

Whoa.

The snake charmer tapped the basket with his flute. 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 okay?”

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 that the heart palpitations had subsided, epically stupid, he thought. But protecting his little sister was his duty, in the same way hers was to cause as much trouble as possible.

The snake charmer hopped to his feet. He was an old 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. Varanasi, India’s holiest city, was full of them. Legend said that if you died here, you got instant access to heaven, with no worries about the 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*.

Built on the banks of the sacred Ganges River, the city was a living museum with a temple or some dilapidated palace on every street. Ash had loved nothing better than exploring the ancient city. Their first few days here had been an amazing adventure, venturing into the dingy alleys and winding lanes, experiencing the intense, almost overwhelming life of India firsthand.

But now?

Now, two weeks into their trip, Ash felt suffocated by the oppressive temperatures, the stench, the crowds, and the death. It was in your face the moment you woke up. Back home Ash could retreat to his room, to the cool, to the quiet. But India was bedlam.

The narrow, ancient 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 around a malnourished-looking cow snoozing in the middle of the road.

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

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

Loose skin hung off the cow's huge shovel-sized hip bones and shoulder blades, and 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 some 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. Ash had heard often that 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. Uncle Vik was right.

His room back home was stuffed with books on Indian weaponry and mythology, all from Uncle Vik. There had been endless e-mails and tales via the Internet where his uncle had recounted the grand tales of India's past, stories of maharajahs, tiger hunts, and the legendary wars between heroes and terrible demons.

So when the summer holidays had come around 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. Uncle Vik couldn't afford flights to England on his salary, so it was Ash's only chance to meet him and see India for real.

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. Through the hazy heat, Ash spotted an old black and yellow Ambassador taxi. But the car couldn't move. Thanks to the cow, the traffic had come to a complete standstill. A couple of men pulled at the rope around its neck, but the white beast remained stubbornly immobile.

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 old man nodded his thanks and strolled off toward 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. The old man swung it 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 backward. Seconds later engines started up, horns honked, and the traffic got moving.

The holy man came back, grinning broadly.

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

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

The sadhu drew the money from Ash’s stiff fingers.

Ash looked back as they clambered into the taxi and saw the old man staring 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. Eyes closed, Ash leaned out of the window, hoping the rushing wind might offer some escape from the furnace-hot temperatures.

Right now his friends would be out and about in London. If he were there too, he, Akbar, and Josh would be 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. His mates. McDonald's. 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. 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, the Himalayas to the north and the Thar Desert to the west, India was all big-screen cinema, trumpets, and deafening noise.

"You okay?" 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 spicy 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. Eddie Singh, their driver, 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 potholes.

“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 row boats, tied up along a rickety wooden platform on the bank. A steady stream of guests were being rowed across the water to the opposite bank, and boys ran back and forth with lanterns. Eddie parked up beside the other cars.

That hurt. 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.

Ash stepped closer to inspect its feast. A dead water buffalo lay on the muddy bank, its hind legs gone. The vulture dipped its beak into the socket and drew out a plump eyeball. Ash 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. Ivory pins held her thick, unkempt, red-streaked hair loosely in place. She pressed her palms together.

“*Namaste*. I’m Jackie, Lord Savage’s personal assistant,” she said in a posh accent.

“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 pearly white and silver silk sari. 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 okay. 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.

“Excavations?” asked Vik. “I didn’t realize 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 moldering planks held together by near-rotten rope. The only thing solid about it was the pair of stone pillars that stood at the end. 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 looks well dodgy,” said Ash. “Where are the life jackets?”

“Just get in,” said Aunt Anita. “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 the shining headlights dwindled to mere spots in the darkness.

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

“Sit down!” snapped Aunt Anita.

A cliff-like mass stood on the opposite bank, rising high straight out of the water. Torches flared, one by one, along its immense, vine-covered battlement walls. Polished marble and the soft egg-curve shape of a roof glistened in the torchlight. 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 it had ever been. It had a new owner and a new name.

The Savage Fortress.

Apart from the castle, 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 shantytown of tents and crude hovels. Trucks 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 stairs, Ash spotted a stone shield over the arched entrance. The shield was carved with three bulbous flowers and a pair of crossed swords.

“The Savage coat of arms,” said Uncle Vik, wiping his glasses to get a better look.

“Are they thistles?” asked Ash.

“No. Poppies. The Savage family made its first fortune during the Opium Wars with China.”

“And the motto?” asked Ash, looking at the scroll below the coat of arms. “*Ex dolor adveho opulentia?*”

“From misery comes profit.”

Nice.

They clambered up a steep, dank 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 color. Silken pavilions dotted the large grass-covered square.

Candelabras and oil lamps lit the area, and moths danced in the glow of the amber flames. Dream-like classical Indian music drifted down from the raised galleries that surrounded the courtyard. There were over 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.

Marble statues loomed in the corners, and the walls bore

vast carvings of heroes and monsters, many which Ash recognized 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 the Indian legends, and Ash’s favorite.

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, and tails or wings.

It was Ravana, the demon king.

To the far left of the wall, almost off it, stood 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 center 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 Ash.

A figure stepped out of the shadows under one of the gallery walkways.

“Namaste,” he said.

English for sure, the man wore a fine white linen suit with a pale silk shirt, so the only points of color were his blue eyes — two brilliant chips of the coldest ice. He stepped closer and 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 waxy skin, revealing a fine network of veins beneath. Limp clumps of white hair hung from his liver-spotted scalp.

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

“I am Lord Alexander Savage.”