

ASH MISTRY
AND THE
WORLD OF DARKNESS

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ASH MISTRY AND THE WORLD OF DARKNESS

Sarwat Chadda



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For my family

*Be not entangled in this
world of days and nights;
Thou hast another time
and space as well.*

Muhammad Iqbal
poet

Chapter One

Ashoka Mistry tripped over the tree root. A second later he crashed flat on his face, eating leaves as he slid down the muddy slope and landed in a grey, stagnant puddle.

He lay there, in the foul water, groaning.

And this was exactly why he hated cross-country running.

“For heaven’s sake, Mistry,” said Mr Leach, the PE teacher. “Are you auditioning for the circus or what?” He scampered down the slope, moving with what could only be described as cat-like grace. He finished with a controlled skid that brought him to a perfect stop in front of Ashoka. A few boys clapped.

“Sorry, sir,” said Ashoka, slowly sitting up and spitting out leaves.

“Well, get up. Get up.”

Ashoka tried to stand, but his shorts were caught on something. “Sir...”



Mr Leach took hold of his arm and pulled.

“Sir!”

The loud, sickening tearing sound made the whole class erupt in laughter.

“Nice underpants,” said one of the boys.

“Your mum buy you those, Mistry?” said another.

Ashoka stood ankle-deep in the water, smeared with mud and plastered with leaves, his running shorts bearing a long gash down the back, exposing his limited-edition *Doctor Who* underpants.

Mr Leach sighed then tucked his clipboard under his arm and scabbled up the slope to where the rest of the class stood waiting. He turned back to Ashoka. “Come on, lad.”

Ashoka stared at the steep incline and the long, brown trench he’d left in it. The entire wood was just a sea of mud and here he was, at the bottom. He tried to adjust his shorts but all he got was a longer tear. He clambered up the slope. Or tried to.

The laughter and the snickering and the catcalls he blanked out. They were the same taunts no matter which sport he did. Football, rugby, basketball, gymnastics. If there was a piece of equipment that he could stumble over, he would. But cross-country was a special type of hell. It was bad enough doing laps around the school grounds, but this, out in Dulwich Woods, brought a whole new meaning to the word ‘humiliating’. This first run of the year was the worst. The snow had barely melted and the earth was a mixture of freezing puddles, slush and deep, thick mud. Ashoka was not a January sort of person. Now he was going to have to jog



all the way back with his backside hanging out. And that included going past two girls' schools.

"Come on, Ash," urged Josh.

"Ashoka, my name's Ashoka," he muttered under his breath. How many times had he told Josh? He wasn't Ash, not any more.

Gritting his teeth, Ashoka grabbed hold of a fistful of weeds and began hauling himself up. He was going to get to the top, no matter what.

His boots, totally sodden and slick with mud, couldn't get any sort of grip. He slipped to his knees, panting, but still hanging on.

Mr Leach drummed his fingers on his board.

Don't rush. Just get to the top.

His arms ached. His grip weakened. The root was damp with dew. With awful slowness, Ashoka began to slide backwards.

He dug his fingers into the ground, but he was too heavy. Sharp stones scraped his shins and knees, but Ashoka didn't care – he would not fall back. Vainly he tried to find another handhold, but before he knew it he was back at the bottom.

Mr Leach rolled his eyes. "I should have known." He turned to the rest of the class. "What are you lot waiting for? Get back to the school right now." The group of boys began to move off, but not before a few of the wits waved goodbye to Ashoka.

"Don't worry, we'll send a crane for you!"

Mr Leach, hands on hips, gazed down. "Look, Mistry.



Follow the path that way and you'll come to another gate. Go through that and you're back on to Lordship Lane. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then off you go."

Ashoka stood up and wiped the worst of the mud and leaves and blood off his knees. Jeez, when would this ever end? He was hopeless.

He plodded along towards the gate. The clouds had that fat, grey, swollen look about them and he hoped he'd get back before they finally opened up.

Last. As usual. He was just not built for exercise. Or any sort of physical activity beyond handling a games console.

No, not totally true. He was one of the school's best archers, but then shooting an arrow didn't require much running and jumping. Still, technically it was a sport and he was pretty good at it. So why did they have to torture them with cross-country runs in the middle of winter? There should be a law against it.

He reached the gates and found them locked. Of course. The gods had it *especially* in for him. A heavy chain went around the bars a dozen times and the padlock was about the size of his fist. The gates and fence were almost three metres high and topped with spikes.

Ashoka searched for some convenient gap and found one. Unfortunately it was only wide enough for half of him.

He sat down on a bench. He could only think of one other way out, but that was three miles uphill towards Crystal



Palace, in totally the wrong direction. He'd be lucky to get back before dark.

Could this day get any worse?

Then he saw the boy. In the hoodie.

Magnificent. Now I'm going to be mugged.

The boy didn't move. He sat opposite Ashoka on a tree stump, elbows resting on his knees. He could be looking at him, he could be asleep; the hood hid his face. All Ashoka could tell was that the guy was lean and tough-looking. His stillness was like that of a viper or mantis, about to pounce.

Ashoka gazed through the bars, hoping someone might be passing by, walking their dog or something.

I don't have a mobile, or any money, thought Ashoka. He can see that. Maybe he'll just let me go.

The boy got up. He moved with sure, athletic confidence. Black hoodie, pair of dark jeans, and all Ashoka could make out was a pair of glistening dark eyes. Trouble with a capital 'Extreme Bodily Harm'.

"You need some help?" said the boy.

"No. I'm fine. Just resting."

"The gate's locked, in case you hadn't realised."

"Thanks." *Which is exactly why you're here, waiting to trap someone and steal everything they've got.*

"I haven't got anything," said Ashoka.

"Nice underpants."

Oh, Jeez. He wants my underwear.

"They so won't fit you," said Ashoka.

"True. I've lost some weight recently." The boy pointed at them. "Though I do, did, have a pair just like those."



“You a *Doctor Who* fan?”

“David Tennant or nobody.”

Ashoka smiled. “Me too. The new guy just doesn’t count.”

There was a nod. “We have a lot in common.”

Ashoka peered at him, not sure whether or not the boy was being funny. He couldn’t tell.

The boy went to the padlock and lifted it up. He shook it, head tilted as if he was listening to it.

“You can’t open it,” said Ashoka.

The boy felt along the lock, probing with his fingertips. “Everything has a weakness. You just need to find it.”

He shook the padlock again, then squeezed it between his forefinger and thumb. He jerked it, hard.

The padlock held.

Ashoka tried not to laugh. “Er, well done.”

“I used to be better at this,” the boy muttered. He punched the padlock.

It snapped apart.

“Wow,” said Ashoka. “How d’you do that?”

“Just a trick, nothing special.” The boy drew the rattling chain out and pushed the gate open.

“Thanks.” Ashoka gazed down the path out of the woods. If he was quick he could be back before dinnertime. “Thanks a lot.”

“Anytime, Ash.”

Ashoka half opened the gate. “My name’s Ashoka. Not Ash. Not any more.”

“Since when?”

“Since—” He turned around. No one. He looked towards



the trees. Just trees. The boy had been standing right there. Ashoka glanced up at the branches overhead. The boy must have flown away to vanish like that. Weird. Ah well. At least he was safe.

Ashoka set off, not fast, but steady. This last bit was downhill, thank goodness. He got to the Lordship Lane exit and stopped. Hold on.

“Anytime, Ash.”

How did he know my name?

“You heard that the next Doctor Who’s going to be a woman?” said Akbar. “Seriously, it’s all over the blogs.”

Ashoka bounced his dice in his hand. “Never going to happen.”

“Oh, and why not?” said Gemma. “I think a female doctor would be great. And about time too.”

“Yeah, Ash,” said Josh. “Why not a girl Who? You’d still watch it if they had Kermit as the Doctor.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, Josh? It’s Ashoka. Three syllables. Not complicated.”

“Joshua,” said Josh.

“What?” said Ashoka.

“If I have to call you Ashoka, you need to call me Joshua.”

“Fine. Joshua. Whatever. Can we get back to the game? My paladin aims his magic arrow at the necromancer.”

Tuesday night was Dungeons & Dragons night. Ashoka, Josh (sorry, *Joshua*), Akbar and Gemma were in the middle of exploring the ‘Caverns of Chaos’ and right now they were trying to stop an evil sorcerer from turning the entire



population of the Greyfalcon into zombies. Or vampires. Or miscellaneous undead types.

Gemma picked up her dice. “My thief sneaks around the back of the columns. She’ll try and get closer to the Big Bad.”

Gemma had only joined a few months ago, right after Guy Fawkes Night. He’d thought she’d play once or twice, then stop and go off and do something cool with the other cool kids like Jack, but, proving that there was a God, she’d turned out to be a closet geek. So Tuesday night, as well as being Dungeons & Dragons, was Gemma night.

They reached over the table and repositioned their miniature figures. Akbar started describing how the evil necromancer was raising a horde of skeletal warriors from the ground, and Josh – Joshua – retaliated with his elvish sorcerer casting a fireball spell.

“Ignore Josh,” said Gemma as the battle progressed. “I like ‘Ashoka’.”

“Thanks.” It still took people a bit of getting used to. Most of the teachers remembered and his parents too, but half his mates still slipped up and he reckoned Josh – Joshua – was doing it on purpose. But Ashoka’s trip to India last year had changed his outlook on a lot of things. It had been the *best holiday ever*, and after coming home he’d decided to use his proper ‘Indian’ name from now on.

The battle wrapped, the bad guy dead and the city saved, they began to tidy up. Ten minutes later and Ashoka and Gemma were strolling down South Croxted Road. The wind blew along the path, carrying a vortex of leaves that



swirled in the amber light of the streetlamps. Ashoka adjusted his coat, zipping it up to his chin. The cold went into the bones. Gemma had her hands stuffed in her jacket. They walked in silence.

I should try and hold hands, or something, he thought. How hard can that be?

Yeah, Ashoka, and while you're at it you can try leaping that building in a single bound.

"Saw you coming back from cross-country," Gemma said. "I assume it was you: covered in leaves and mud and your shorts all ripped at the back?"

Oh, no. Ashoka pulled his cap down, hoping she couldn't see him blushing.

"Nice underpants, by the way."

"Shut up, Gemma."

She laughed and they got to the corner of Tesco. "This is me," she said, gesturing over her shoulder. "See you tomorrow, Ashoka."

Wow. Ashoka sounded so much better the way she said it.

They waited at the traffic lights. Cars went by.

Go on. Do something. Kiss her. You know you want to.

Ashoka shuffled. "Yeah, tomorrow. G'night."

The traffic lights changed from green to red and Gemma crossed.

You are a total coward.

That was a golden opportunity and he'd blown it. Why didn't he just go for it? What was the absolute worst that could happen?



She'd say no. Face it, that's what she'd say, isn't it? Better not even try than suffer the rejection. Girls like that don't go out with guys like you. Especially once they know you wear Doctor Who underpants.

Ashoka adjusted his backpack and took the gap between the shops, his shortcut home. The alleyway wasn't wide and they still hadn't fixed the lights, but he'd done this route a million times and his feet went on autopilot. It was along the estate and the rubbish wasn't collected till the morning so he had to watch his step around the black refuse sacks. Two red-eyed rats watched him pass.

"Gross." He kept away. The things looked evil.

A dog barked nearby, then whimpered and shut up.

Someone chuckled ahead of him.

"Who's there?" said Ashoka.

The chuckle turned into a grotesque howling laugh and a figure appeared at the end of the alleyway. The light from the courtyard behind cast an eerie light over everything.

A woman, dressed in a white suit, stood waiting for him. She leaned against the wall, arms folded, her thick, tawny hair framing her face like a mane. She wore a pair of dark glasses and a hungry grin.

"Ash Mistry?" she asked. Her accent was posh, clipped, with each syllable bitten off.

"Do I know you?" He was tempted to correct her, tell her it was Ashoka, but a large part of his brain was sending signals to his mouth warning him that this was not the sort of woman who liked being corrected or made upset or angry on any level.

"My name's Jackie." She stepped forward and her fingers



flexed. Her long, curved nails shone like daggers. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

A snarl from behind him raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He turned to see two men standing there. They glared at Ashoka, smiling with crooked, jagged teeth in their thin mouths and long, greasy whiskers under their rodent-like noses. Their eyes were malevolent, burning crimson.

Cold terror flooded Ashoka. He held out his bag. “Here, take it.”

Jackie tutted. “Oh, Ash, that is not what we want.”

“What then? What do you want?” said Ashoka. *How does she know my name?*

She smiled. Even the darkness couldn’t hide the brilliance of her fangs. “We want to kill you, dear boy.”

Chapter Two

“**T**here must be some mistake, I... I don’t know you,” stuttered Ashoka. “Please, it’s a mistake.”

He looked at the woman, hoping to see a glimmer of pity, or compassion. But she just smiled, and there was no humanity in those fangs. “Please,” he repeated feebly.

“Begging, Ash? How disappointing,” said Jackie. “But then we can’t all be heroes.”

Without thinking, Ashoka slammed the bag into one of the rat mens’ face. He didn’t think about it; it just happened. The bag contained three huge hardback books, a large bag of dice, some lead miniatures and his boots. Rat-face Number One squeaked as the bag smashed into his nose. Ashoka then kicked Rat-face Number Two between the legs.

He’d seen it done a million times in movies and the guy always went down. Always.



Rat-face Number Two didn't go down. He just leered.

Ashoka charged. The two tumbled into a pile of rubbish and knocked over a bucket of compost. Ashoka pushed the rat-face down into a bag of rotting, stinking onions as he scrambled to his feet.

Claws, hot and sharper than razors, tore open the back of his coat and sliced his skin. But he was too full of fear and adrenaline to feel the pain, and was up and running a second later, stumbling out of the alleyway.

"Run, Ash, run!" Jackie laughed.

What am I doing? What am I doing?

He'd never been in a fight before and this was for *real* – life and death. His heart was pounding violently in his chest and his boots beat the pavement, the heavy impact echoing like a drum in the night. He was only a few hundred metres from his front door, but suddenly the alleyways through the estate turned into a labyrinth. He ran down one and came out into a small enclosed green, empty but for a pair of swings and a see-saw. He stared at the blank, unlit windows of the apartments that overlooked it.

"Help!" He raced past the swings, throwing them behind him in a desperate attempt to stop Jackie. She moved on all fours and bounded over them. *How is that possible?*

Lights came on in the estate around him, but he didn't dare stop to call for help. One swipe of those claws and she'd have his head for a football. He ran on, down into another narrow gap between the apartment blocks—

—and crashed straight into the rat-faces, who grabbed him. Ashoka wrestled and punched but couldn't get free.



“Hold him,” Jackie ordered. She panted and her tongue hung red and loose from her wide jaw. The rat-faces twisted Ashoka’s arms behind his back until they felt as if they’d break.

“What do you want? I don’t even know you!” Ash shouted. This was insane.

Jackie looked him over, coming so close he could smell her breath. Worse than a dead dog’s guts. “No, but I know you.” Jackie stroked his face with the back of her nail. “And I’m here to make sure you never do.” Then she turned her hand and dragged her fingers through his shirt. The cloth ripped open and she drew three thin, bleeding lines down his chest. She pulled his shirt wide open and peered at his skin. Her nail pressed against his belly. “No scar.” She grabbed his left hand and stared at his thumb. “Interesting.”

She flexed her fingers and the nails struck like a butcher’s blades. “Hold him still. I don’t want his blood on my suit.”

“Please...” begged Ashoka.

A steel scream rang out right in his ear and Ashoka cried out as blood showered over his head.

The rat-face gripping his right arm wobbled and Ashoka turned towards him to see blood vomiting from his severed neck. The head was still spinning in the air and Ashoka stared at the wide, surprised expression on his face, his mouth a perfect ‘O’.

A moment later another figure appeared to the left, a long triangular blade of bright, sharp steel shining in its right fist. The rat-face who still had a head dropped Ashoka and drew out a pistol. It wasn’t some cool Desert Eagle or Walther



PPK, it was an ancient gunpowder thing from a hundred years ago. But the barrel was huge, and in the narrow alleyway he couldn't miss. The flint burst a bright flash of powder, and then thunder exploded from the barrel opening, filling the entire alleyway with acrid gun smoke.

The bullet sparked on the steel blade as the figure swatted it aside, the lead ball rebounding to tear a chunk of brick off the wall.

He swatted a bullet, thought Ashoka. That's not possible.

The rat-face stared as the shadow rammed his right fist, and the steel triangular blade, into his chest so hard that he came off his feet. A second fountain of blood sprayed out as the tip of gore-coated metal tore through the rat-face's back. He scrabbled, and screamed a scream that should have shattered all the glass nearby, and almost did the same to Ashoka's eardrums. Then the figure, a boy in a hoodie, tossed the dead rat-face aside and stepped past Ashoka, his attention on Jackie alone. The boy's fingers tightened around the steel dagger in his fist.

A katar. An Indian punch dagger. Ashoka hadn't seen one since—
"Jackie," said the boy in the hoodie.

"It's true. You're here," Jackie snarled, edging away. She looked from Ashoka to the boy and back again. Then she threw back her head and screamed with demonic laughter and with two bounds vanished into the night.

"Are you all right?" asked the boy, turning to Ashoka.

Ashoka blinked and tried to wipe away the blood that covered his face. He thought he'd swallowed some. He swayed, his legs suddenly as solid as jelly.



“He’s going to fall,” said the boy.

Someone helped to support Ashoka: a girl of about fifteen or sixteen, dressed in a close-fitting suit of black-green. “I’ve got you,” she said. Despite the darkness she wore shades, so all Ashoka could see was the reflection of his own petrified face.

“Let’s get away from here,” said the boy. “And bring him.”

“I only live—”

“I know where you live,” the boy snapped. “Now come on.”

The girl steadied Ashoka. Then she picked up a long steel coil off the ground. The weapon had a sword hilt, but instead of a single blade there were four razor-sharp steel strips.

“An *urumi*,” said Ashoka. “The serpent sword. That’s... cool.”

He looked down at the now headless corpse of the first rat-face. She’d done it with the *urumi*. He could see the open arteries and the spine and neatly sliced muscle of the neck stump.

“Oh, God.” Ashoka tried to hold it down, but bile flooded to the top of his throat. Then came straight out over the ground and his shoes. His stomach spasmed and bitter vomit poured out again and again.

The boy in the hoodie sighed. “Pathetic.”

The girl was patting Ashoka’s back. “Oh, please. You were just the same when I first met you.”

“Was not.” The boy sounded petulant. “Have you quite finished?”

“Yes. Yes, I have.” Then Ashoka saw the second rat-face,



torso slick with black blood and white bone jutting from the gaping hole where his chest must once have been.

“No. No, I haven’t.” He vomited some more.

Once the vomiting was all done and he’d downed a bottle of water, Ashoka was eventually able to walk again, and he followed the boy and girl out of the estate. *I could run*, he thought, but something told him he wouldn’t get very far.

“What’s going on?” Ashoka demanded. “Has the world gone bat-loony? Why were those people trying to kill me? Who *were* those people?”

The boy hurried Ashoka across the road, his face still hidden in the deep shadow of his hood. “Last question first. Those aren’t people. They’re *rakshasas*.”

Ashoka scoffed. “Indian demons? Yeah, right.”

“You don’t have to believe me.”

“Thanks. I won’t.”

“But you should.”

Ashoka paused. “You were at the woods today, weren’t you? Have you been following me?”

“That’s right. I knew Jackie would make her move sooner or later.”

“Who are you?” Ashoka said, suddenly filled with a dreadful anticipation. A small part of his subconscious didn’t want to know. There was something terrible and familiar about the boy.

The girl nodded. “Tell him.”

The boy took off his hood. A pair of dark eyes gazed back at Ashoka. Eyes he knew. The boy’s face was gaunt, but



smooth and brown like his and his hair was the same as Ashoka's, maybe longer than he wore his and more dishevelled than his mum would allow. The boy smiled, and it was a smile Ashoka could mirror, perfectly. He struggled to breathe. "Who are you?" he whispered, even though he knew.

The boy's smile softened. "I am Ash Mistry."