



# THE IMPREGNABLE IDIOT

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# Table of Contents

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead (or trapped inside forts), is entirely coincidental. The bats, however, are very real.

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Printed in India, within sight of the fort that inspired this madness.

For every architect who ever forgot something  
inside their own building.

And for the guards of Daulatabad, past and present,  
who protect the fort from everyone, including the  
people who built it.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Chapter 1: The Genius Returns

Chapter 2: The Moat Debacle

Chapter 3: Into the Dark

Chapter 4: Cannonballs and Poor Decisions

Chapter 5: Every Door Looks the Same (Because They Are)

Chapter 6: Smoke, Stairs, and the Treasury

Chapter 7: The Way Out is Worse

Chapter 8: The Guards Come Down (They Don't)

Epilogue: The Ghost of Devagiri

## Acknowledgements

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Before this book found its way into your hands, I had the somewhat unwise idea of visiting Aurangabad with my college class myself. “Research” and “Authenticity,” I used those words to convince myself when filing the travel expenses.

The fort, known today as Daulatabad Fort, sits atop a conical hill in Maharashtra’s Aurangabad district like a geological middle finger pointed at anyone foolish enough to try and conquer it. I arrived on a Tuesday morning in January, armed with a notebook, a camera, a water bottle that would prove tragically insufficient, and the confident ignorance of a man who had Googled “Daulatabad Fort difficulty level” and decided the results were exaggerated.

They were not exaggerated.

The Andheri passage, the famous pitch-black tunnel that features so prominently in this story, is not a literary invention. It is a real corridor, carved through living rock, and it is exactly as dark as you are imagining. Darker, probably. I entered it with my phone flashlight on maximum brightness, which illuminated roughly six inches in front of my face and cast the kind of shadows that made me reconsider every life decision I’d ever made. The bats are also real. They are not interested in your presence. They are not afraid of your presence. They simply do not care about your presence, which is somehow worse.

I climbed to the top of the fort, where the fictional treasury in this story is located, and stood there, wheezing, sweat-drenched, and deeply humbled. The view is extraordinary. The engineering is extraordinary. The number of steps is, frankly, an act of hostility. While catching my breath, I watched a group of schoolchildren sprint past me as though gravity were optional, and I seriously considered whether I should simply live on the hilltop rather than face the descent.

What you are about to read is a comedy, but it is a comedy built on a foundation of genuine wonder. Devagiri Killa is one of medieval India’s most remarkable feats of military architecture, a fortress so cleverly designed that it resisted siege after siege for centuries. Suryasen’s fictional frustration with his own creation is funny because the real fort is genuinely that impressive. Every trap, every passage, every devious architectural trick in this story has a root in the fort’s actual design. I merely verified this by walking into walls in the dark, which I feel was above and beyond the editorial call of duty.

A few notes on historical liberties: the timeline has been compressed, certain architectural features have been exaggerated for comedic effect, and there is no evidence that any real Yadava-era architect ever had to break back into his own fort. There is also no evidence that he didn’t, which I feel is the more important point.

I hope you enjoy this story as much as I enjoyed editing it, preferably from the comfort of a chair, far from any pitch-black tunnels or enthusiastic guards.

*New Delhi, January 2026*

*P.S. If you are reading this inside Daulatabad Fort, I respect your commitment and question your judgment in equal measure. The exit is to your left. Probably.*



## Chapter 1: The Genius Returns

The morning sun hit Devagiri Killa the way morning suns have hit imposing hilltop fortresses since the dawn of imposing hilltop fortresses, with a kind of dramatic golden light that made the whole structure look like it had been specifically designed for the opening scene of an epic poem. Which, in fairness, it had been. Three poets had already written odes to the place. Two of them had rhymed “impregnable” with “unforgettable,” which didn’t technically work but nobody was brave enough to tell them.

At the base of this architectural triumph stood Sthapati Suryasen, royal architect to the court of the Yadava dynasty, designer of the fortress, master of defensive engineering, and a man who was currently having the worst morning of his professional life.

He was forty-three years old, though the bags under his eyes added a generous decade. His turban, normally pristine and white, had been tied in what could charitably be described as “a hurry.” Under one arm he carried a set of rolled blueprints, the originals for the fort’s construction, annotated in his own cramped handwriting. Under the other arm he carried a deep and abiding sense of dread.

The problem was simple. The solution was not.

Three days ago, he had presented the final construction report to Sultan Bhillama V in the grand court. The sultan had been impressed. The courtiers had applauded. The treasurer, a pinch-faced man named Dhanuk, had nodded approvingly at the figures and said he would release the final payment, a sum so large it made Suryasen’s knees feel unreliable, as soon as Suryasen produced the itemised calculation sheets that accompanied the blueprints.

“Of course,” Suryasen had said, smiling the confident smile of a man who knew exactly where those documents were.

He did not know where those documents were.

He had spent two days turning his home upside down, terrifying his wife, confusing his children, and alarming his cat before arriving at the sickening conclusion that the calculation sheets were still inside the fort. Specifically, inside the treasury room at the very top, the most secure, most heavily trapped, most absurdly inaccessible room in the entire structure. The room he had personally designed to be unreachable by anyone who didn't belong there.

The irony was not lost on him. It sat on his shoulders like a particularly smug parrot.

He stared up at the fort. The fort stared back, indifferent.

“All right,” he said to nobody in particular. “How hard can it be? I built the thing. I know every trap, every passage, every mechanism. I'll be in and out in an hour.”

Somewhere high above, a crow cawed. It sounded like laughter.

\* \* \*

The first gate of Devagiri Killa was not, by Suryasen's estimation, particularly impressive. It was designed to slow invaders down, not stop them, a bottleneck to funnel attackers into a killzone overlooked by archers. For a lone architect with legitimate business, it should have presented no obstacle whatsoever.

It presented an obstacle.

The obstacle's name was Dhananjay.

Dhananjay was the kind of guard who made you understand why some fortresses fell. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and possessed the

unwavering confidence of a man who had never once been troubled by self-doubt or, seemingly, by thought of any kind. His chest was puffed out to a degree that suggested either extreme pride or a respiratory condition. His moustache was immaculate. His spear was held at precisely the wrong angle.

Beside him stood Mohan, who was everything Dhananjay was not: short, nervous, and holding a leather-bound manual upside down. Mohan had the permanently startled expression of someone who had just been told something alarming and hadn't yet figured out what.

Dhananjay: “HALT! State your business!”

The command echoed off the stone walls with considerably more authority than it deserved.

Suryasen: “I'm Sthapati Suryasen. I designed this fort. I need to retrieve some documents from the treasury room.”

Dhananjay's eyes narrowed. This was his suspicious face. It looked almost exactly like his regular face, except the moustache twitched slightly to the left.

Dhananjay: “Designed it, you say? Then you should know the password.”

Suryasen blinked. He blinked again. He considered the possibility that he had misheard.

Suryasen: “There is no password. I never designed a password system. The gate defence relies on architectural chokepoints and overhead archer positions, not on—”

Dhananjay: “A likely story.”

Behind him, Mohan was frantically flipping through his manual. He turned it right-side up, then upside down again, apparently finding it equally unhelpful in both orientations.

Mohan: “Dhananjay, I don’t see a password section in the manual. Maybe we were supposed to make one up?”

He whispered this, but Mohan’s whisper had the acoustic subtlety of a man shouting into a clay pot. Suryasen heard every word. So, presumably, did the archers on the wall above, the merchants in the town below, and possibly his wife back home.

Dhananjay processed this information with the visible effort of a man trying to light a damp candle. Then his face brightened.

Dhananjay: “The password is... ‘Bhillama is great.’”

Silence.

Suryasen looked at Dhananjay. He looked at Mohan. He looked at the gate. He looked at the sky, where the crow was still circling in what he was now certain was amusement.

Suryasen: “Sure. ‘Bhillama is great.’”

Dhananjay: “CORRECT! You may pass!”

Suryasen walked through the gate, making a mental note to include “competence requirements for guard hiring” in his next report. He suspected the note would be ignored. He made it anyway. Some battles, he reflected, were more impregnable than any fortress.



## Chapter 2:

## The Moat Debacle

The moat of Devagiri Killa was Suryasen's second-proudest achievement. His first-proudest was the dark passage, but the moat held a special place in his heart because it was elegant in its simplicity: a deep trench carved into rock, filled with water, spanned by a single narrow bridge that could be split in half at a moment's notice via a lever mechanism. During a siege, defenders would retract the bridge, and attackers would find themselves staring across six metres of crocodile-friendly water with no way across.

The crocodiles were the sultan's idea. Suryasen had argued for a moat without wildlife. The sultan had been insistent. The crocodiles had been delivered. They had lived in the moat for exactly eleven days before escaping through a drainage channel and traumatising a goatherd. They had not been replaced.

Suryasen approached the moat with the quiet confidence of a man walking through his own house. The bridge was intact, stretching across the water. The lever mechanism was safely housed in its stone pillar on the far side. Everything was exactly as he had designed it.

And then, somehow, Dhananjay and Mohan were there.

Suryasen had no idea how they had gotten ahead of him. The first gate only had one path leading to the moat, and he had been walking on it. But there they were, standing on the far side of the bridge like a pair of architectural gargoyles that had detached themselves from the wrong building.

Mohan: "Dhananjay, should we test the bridge defence system? The manual says we're supposed to test it weekly."

Dhananjay: "Excellent thinking! We must ensure everything works! A guard's duty is never done!"

Suryasen was on the bridge. He was, in fact, precisely at the midpoint of the bridge, which was the worst possible place to be when someone tested the bridge defence system. He had designed the split point at the exact centre for maximum defensive efficiency. He was now regretting this decision with every fibre of his being.

Suryasen: "WAIT! Don't touch that lev—"

Dhananjay touched the lever.

The bridge made a sound. It was not a good sound. It was the metallic groan of an ancient mechanism engaging, followed by the crack of wood separating, followed by the much more urgent sound of a forty-three-year-old architect scrambling backwards on a rapidly tilting surface.

Suryasen lunged. He threw himself backwards with the desperate, graceless energy of a cat that has misjudged a jump, and his fingers caught the edge of the near side of the bridge just as the two halves swung downward on their hinges. His blueprints were not so lucky. They sailed off into the moat with a gentle splash that felt deeply personal.

He hung there, fingers white-knuckled on the bridge edge, feet dangling above water that was disturbingly far below.

Dhananjay: "Strange! It's not supposed to do that when people are ON it!"

Suryasen pulled himself up onto the tilted bridge half with a grunt that contained more profanity than syllable. He lay there for a moment, staring at the sky, seriously reconsidering his career choices.

Suryasen: "It's not supposed to do that at ALL unless there's a SIEGE. That's the EMERGENCY DEFENCE."

Dhananjay: "Well, now we know it works!"

Suryasen sat up. Across the gap, the two halves of the bridge hung at steep angles like a wooden letter V opened too wide. Below, his blueprints floated serenely on the moat's surface, slowly absorbing water and, presumably, his will to live.

Suryasen: "Right. Fine. We need to get across. There should be emergency ropes stored in the pillar housing, the stone compartment next to the lever. Can you open it?"

Mohan, who had been reading the manual with the wide-eyed concentration of a man studying scripture during an earthquake, found the compartment and produced a coil of sturdy rope.

Mohan: "Found it! There's even a note here: 'In case of accidental deployment, secure rope to iron ring and traverse hand-over-hand.'"

Dhananjay: "I knew that."

Mohan: "You literally just asked me what the rope was for."

Dhananjay: "I was testing YOU, Mohan. Guard training never stops."

Mohan secured one end of the rope to the iron ring on the far pillar, Suryasen had to admit the boy at least knew his knots, and tossed the other end across the gap. Suryasen caught it, tied it to the matching ring on his side, and gave it an experimental tug. Solid. Good. At least he could rely on his own engineering if not on his own luck.

What followed was the least dignified crossing in the history of moat-based defence systems.

Suryasen went first, hanging from the rope by his hands and inching across, his legs dangling above the moat. He was halfway across when his turban unravelled slightly and drooped over one eye. He was three-quarters across when a fish, one of the ornamental carp the sultan had introduced after the crocodile incident, leapt out of the water and

slapped him on the ankle. He made it to the other side through pure spite.

Dhananjay crossed next, with the easy athleticism of a man who had never considered the possibility of failure. He swung across like he was performing for an audience, which he appeared to believe he was.

Dhananjay: "Nothing to it! A child could do this!"

Mohan went last. Mohan did not swing. Mohan inched. Mohan whimpered. Mohan made it approximately to the centre of the rope, looked down, made a sound like a deflating goatskin, and froze.

Mohan: "I can see the fish. The fish can see me. We have made eye contact. I cannot continue."

Dhananjay: "MOHAN! A guard of Devagiri does not fear fish!"

Mohan: "This guard of Devagiri absolutely fears fish!"

It took five minutes of encouragement, two threats from Dhananjay, and a surprisingly gentle pep talk from Suryasen to get Mohan across. He arrived on solid ground trembling, damp, and clutching his manual to his chest like a talisman.

Suryasen looked back at the broken bridge, the floating blueprints he'd have to retrieve later, and the general state of chaos that had been a perfectly functional defensive system twenty minutes ago.

Suryasen: "Nobody touches anything else. Are we clear?"

Dhananjay: "Crystal clear, Sthapati."

This was, of course, a lie.



## Chapter 3: into the dark

The Andheri Passage was Suryasen's masterpiece, and he hated it.

He hated it the way a painter might hate his most celebrated canvas, not because it was bad, but because it was too good, and because everyone who praised it completely missed the point. He had designed the passage as a defensive nightmare: a pitch-black tunnel carved through the hill's interior, with acoustics so confusing that sounds bounced and multiplied until you couldn't tell if the footsteps you heard were your own, an enemy's, or an echo from three minutes ago. Invading soldiers would enter the darkness and emerge, if they emerged, disoriented, terrified, and vulnerable to the guards waiting at the other end.

The problem was the bats.

The bats had not been part of the design. The bats had been the idea of Dhanuk, the treasurer, who had visited the half-finished passage, declared it "lacking atmosphere," and arranged for several hundred fruit bats to be imported from a cave system near Ellora. Suryasen had protested. Dhanuk had overruled him. The bats, freed from their cave, had found the cool, dark passage enormously to their liking and had been fruitfully multiplying ever since. There were now, by Suryasen's conservative estimate, approximately one million bats living in the passage. This was probably an exaggeration, but when you were standing at the entrance listening to the chittering of a great many small mammals in total darkness, mathematical precision felt less important than visceral horror.

Suryasen took a lamp from the wall bracket, he had designed the brackets at precise intervals, each one containing a fresh oil lamp, and was gratified to see the system was being maintained, and lit it with a flint. The flame cast a warm circle of light that extended roughly two arm-lengths in every direction and failed completely after that.

Suryasen: "Right. The passage is approximately two hundred paces long.

Stay close to the right wall. Walk quietly. And whatever you do...”

He turned to emphasise this point and discovered that Dhananjay and Mohan had acquired torches the size of small trees and were in the process of lighting them.

Suryasen: “do NOT bring those in here.”

Dhananjay: “Nonsense! We need light for our patrol! WE SHALL INSPECT THIS SECTION!”

He said this at full volume. The passage’s acoustic design caught his voice, multiplied it, and bounced it around the interior like a stone in a drum. The effect was as though six Dhananjays were simultaneously announcing their intention to inspect things, which was arguably worse than one.

Mohan: “Dhananjay, the manual says we should be quiet in the Andhe—”

Too late.

The sound hit the bat colony like a thunderclap hits a flock of pigeons, except that pigeons weigh almost nothing and fruit bats weigh enough to be felt. The ceiling exploded. There was no other word for it. One moment there was darkness above them; the next moment the darkness was moving, and it had wings, and it was screaming, and it was everywhere.

Suryasen dropped to a crouch. He had designed three emergency exits for exactly this scenario, he had, in fact, argued to Dhanuk that the bats made emergency exits necessary, and Dhanuk had signed off on them while insisting the bats stay, and his architect’s memory fired the locations into his consciousness like arrows: one fifty paces ahead on the left, one a hundred paces ahead on the right, and one at the far end of the passage.

He could not share this information, because Dhananjay was screaming.

Dhananjay was not screaming out of fear, because Dhananjay did not experience fear. Dhananjay was screaming because a bat had become entangled in his moustache, and he was attempting to fight it with one hand while holding his enormous torch in the other. The torch swung wildly, casting deranged shadows on the walls and further agitating the bat swarm, which responded by becoming, impossibly, louder.

Mohan was also screaming, but Mohan was screaming out of fear, and he was doing it while running in a direction that Suryasen was fairly certain led directly into a wall.

Suryasen: “LEFT WALL, FIFTY PACES, THERE’S A DOOR—”

Nobody heard him. The acoustics, designed to confuse invading armies, were doing an excellent job of confusing three people who were supposed to be there. His voice arrived from six directions simultaneously, and by the time Dhananjay processed it, the instruction had been garbled into something that sounded like “Let Paul hit the decrees of the boar.”

Suryasen gave up on communication and navigated by feel. Right hand on the wall. Count the stones. Every seventh stone was slightly raised, a navigation aid he’d built for the guards, though clearly no one had told the guards about it. At the thirty-eighth stone, his fingers found a recessed handle. He pulled it. A section of wall swung inward, revealing grey daylight, fresh air, and the blessed absence of bats.

He stumbled out onto a narrow ledge on the hillside, gasping. A single bat was clinging to his hair with the quiet determination of a creature that had found a new home and saw no reason to leave. Suryasen detached it gently, held it at eye level, and stared into its tiny, unbothered face.

Suryasen: “No hard feelings. You’re just doing your job.”

The bat blinked at him, then flapped away into the morning light. Suryasen watched it go with something almost like fondness. It was, he reflected, more competent than anyone else he'd met today.

From inside the passage, he could hear the diminishing sounds of Dhananjay yelling battle cries at the ceiling and Mohan reciting what appeared to be a prayer. He sighed, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted instructions toward the emergency exit until, eventually, two soot-covered, bat-bitten guards stumbled out to join him.

Dhananjay's moustache was askew. This was, Suryasen suspected, the most traumatic thing that had ever happened to the man.

The emergence was not dignified. Suryasen came out sideways, having misjudged the exit's width in the dark. Dhananjay came out swinging his torch at shadows, which was both unnecessary, the bats had lost interest in them, and dangerous, because the torch was still lit and the exit opened onto a ledge with a meaningful drop. Mohan came out last, backwards, because he had been walking backwards through the passage for reasons he could not later explain.

They stood on the ledge, blinking in the sudden daylight. Below them, the hillside fell away in a tumble of rock and scrub. Above them, the fort continued its upward climb toward the summit. Somewhere inside, the bats were resettling on their ceiling, chittering amongst themselves about the interruption with the indignant energy of theatre patrons who have had their performance disturbed by latecomers.

Suryasen took stock. His lamp was gone, dropped somewhere in the passage and probably now the property of a bat with good taste in home furnishings. His blueprints, already moat-damaged, now had bat guano on them, which was not an improvement. His turban had come further unravelled and was trailing behind him like a sad, white tail.

Dhananjay: "The bats have been defeated!"

Mohan: "We ran away."

Dhananjay: "We executed a STRATEGIC RETREAT. Very different."



## Chapter 4: Cannonballs and Poor Decisions

The cannon ball corridor was designed to kill people, and Suryasen felt it was important to state this clearly before they entered it.

Suryasen: “This corridor has pressure plates in the floor. Step on the wrong one, and stone balls the size of your head will roll out of those holes in the walls at considerable speed. They will not stop. They will not slow down. They were designed to crush armoured soldiers. Do you understand?”

Dhananjay: “Understood!”

Mohan: “The manual has a section on this. It says... ‘Walk along the marked safe path.’”

Dhananjay: “What marked safe path?”

Suryasen pointed at the floor. In the dim light, barely visible unless you knew what to look for, a series of lotus symbols were carved into the stone tiles. They were small, each one no larger than a coin, and they were spaced at irregular intervals among dozens of identical-looking tiles.

Suryasen: “These lotus symbols. Every third one marks a safe tile. Lotus. Skip two tiles. Lotus. Skip two tiles. Follow the sequence, and you’ll be fine.”

Dhananjay: “Why so complicated?”

Suryasen: “So that enemy soldiers, running in the dark during a siege, can’t figure it out. It’s meant to be read by people with training and lamplight, not decoded in the middle of a charge.”

Mohan: “Can... we figure it out?”

Suryasen rubbed his temples. “Watch me.”

He demonstrated. Step on the lotus. One, two, skip. Step on the lotus. One, two, skip. His feet found the safe tiles with the ease of a man following a path he had drawn with his own hands. He moved ten paces down the corridor without incident.

Suryasen: “See? Simple. A child could—”

Behind him, there was a click.

It was a very small sound. It was also the worst sound Suryasen had ever heard in his life. It was the sound of a pressure plate depressing under the weight of a confident foot placed on entirely the wrong tile.

He turned around slowly, the way one turns around when one already knows what one is going to see and is hoping that somehow the laws of cause and effect might make an exception just this once.

Dhananjay was standing on a tile that did not have a lotus on it. He was standing on it with the full authority of a man who believed himself correct. His posture radiated certainty. His foot radiated pressure. The tile radiated doom.

Dhananjay: “Like this?”

The walls answered.

From the holes in the stonework, twelve on each side, which Suryasen knew because he had specified twelve on each side in his blueprints and was now violently regretting every single one, came a rumble. It started low, like distant thunder, and then it acquired dimension and weight and terrifying proximity as stone balls the size of watermelons began rolling out of their channels.

Suryasen had designed the balls to be heavy enough to crush a man in

armour and smooth enough to roll at speed down the corridor’s slight downhill gradient. He had been very proud of this at the time. He was less proud now.

Suryasen: “RUN!”

All three men ran.

What followed was the kind of scene that balladeers would later describe in heroic terms and eyewitnesses would describe rather differently. Three grown men sprinted down a stone corridor while enormous spherical rocks rolled after them with the implacable persistence of boulders that had been waiting years for this moment. Suryasen ran with the loping, efficient stride of a man who had once been an athlete and was now an architect with bad knees. Dhananjay ran with the dramatic, arms-pumping intensity of a man who believed himself the hero of an epic. Mohan ran with the high-kneed, manual-clutching panic of a man who was absolutely certain he was about to die.

The corridor was fifty paces long. Suryasen covered it in what felt like two steps and a prayer. At the far end, he could see the doorway, a stone arch that opened into the chamber beyond. The cannon balls, due to the corridor’s narrowing design, would jam in the archway and stop. This was a feature. He had designed it as a feature. He was very grateful for past-Suryasen’s foresight and very angry at past-Suryasen’s decision to put so many cannon balls in the walls.

They dove through the archway.

Suryasen went first, hitting the ground in a roll that would have been graceful if he hadn’t also been screaming. Mohan came second, sliding on his stomach like a man attempting to swim across a stone floor. Dhananjay came last, launching himself through the arch in a flying leap that would have been impressive if he hadn’t immediately landed on Mohan.

Behind them, the cannon balls hit the narrowing archway with a sound like thunder trapped in a box. They jammed. They stopped. The corridor fell silent.

For a long moment, the only sound was breathing. Suryasen lay on the cold stone floor, staring at the ceiling, and breathed.

Mohan: “Maybe they’re... overdue for maintenance?”

Suryasen: “The fort is three months old.”

Mohan: “...Early maintenance?”



The confusion chamber was Suryasen's quiet favourite. Not his most dramatic invention, not his most lethal, but certainly his most elegant. The concept was beautifully simple: a circular room with eight identical doors, each one bearing the royal seal of the Yadava dynasty. Only one door led forward. The rest led to dead ends, loops back to the moat, or, in one memorable case, a storage room that the kitchen staff had been using to age cheese.

The idea was that invading soldiers, already disoriented from the dark passage and terrified from the cannon balls, would arrive in this room and be forced to guess. Seven wrong choices out of eight. It was, statistically, devastating. It was also, aesthetically, one of the most beautiful rooms in the fort. Suryasen had insisted on identical stonework around each door, identical ironwork on each handle, and identical royal seals, crafted by the same mason, using the same template, to ensure there was no visible difference.

Almost no visible difference.

Dhananjay: "Aha! The confusion chamber! I know this one!"

Suryasen, who had been studying the doors with the focused attention of a jeweller examining stones, turned slowly.

Suryasen: "Do you."

It was not a question. It was a statement of profound disbelief packaged in the syntax of a question.

Dhananjay: "This door! No, wait. That one. The left one. My left or... hold on. That one has a seal. This one also has a seal. They all have seals."

Mohan: "The manual says the correct door is marked with the royal seal."

All three men looked at the eight doors. All eight doors displayed the royal seal. The room seemed to get slightly smugger.

Dhananjay: "Perhaps we should try them all."

Suryasen: "One of them drops you into a pit."

Dhananjay: "...Perhaps we should not try them all."

Suryasen stepped up to the nearest door and examined the seal closely. The Yadava royal seal featured a lotus in the centre, surrounded by a border of geometric patterns. He had designed the authentic seal himself, seven petals on the lotus, precisely spaced, with a slight asymmetry in the fifth petal that was invisible unless you knew to look for it. The decoy seals were near-perfect copies, but they had either six or eight petals. A master forger might catch the difference. An invading soldier, in the dark, with cannon balls behind him, would not.

Suryasen counted petals. First door: eight. Second: six. Third: six. Fourth: eight. Fifth,

Seven. And there it was, the barely perceptible asymmetry in the fifth petal: a fraction wider than the others, the mason's chisel having caught a slightly different angle in the stone.

Suryasen: "This one."

Mohan: "How can you tell?"

Suryasen: "Seven petals on the lotus. The fakes have six or eight. I designed the seal."

Mohan: "All of the seals?"

Suryasen: "ALL of the seals. The real ones AND the fakes."

He pushed the door open. Behind it, a staircase spiralled upward into dimness, exactly where it was supposed to be. Suryasen permitted himself a small moment of professional satisfaction. Then he remembered that the staircase also had a trap, and the satisfaction evaporated.



The stairs were Suryasen's least favourite part of the fort. Not because they were badly designed, they were expertly designed, but because they were exhausting. One hundred and seventeen steps in a tight spiral, hewn from the rock of the hill itself, climbing from the confusion chamber to the treasury level. He had proposed a pulley-operated lift. The sultan had said it was "unwarriorlike." Suryasen had bitten his tongue so hard he'd tasted copper.

The smoke trap was embedded in the stairwell's walls: a network of ceramic pipes connected to sealed chambers containing a mixture of dried herbs and treated wood shavings. When activated, the mixture ignited and produced a thick, acrid smoke that filled the stairwell from top to bottom. The smoke was, as Suryasen had promised in his design documents, entirely non-lethal. It was also, as he had not emphasised in his design documents, absolutely miserable. It made your eyes water. It made your throat burn. It made you sincerely reconsider whether the top of these stairs contained anything worth reaching.

The activation mechanism was a wall torch on the thirty-seventh step. Pull it, and the trap engaged. Push it back, and... well, nothing, actually. The trap disengaged on a timer. Suryasen had designed it to clear in approximately fifteen minutes, which was enough time for defending guards to ambush smoke-blinded attackers from the top.

Mohan was reading the manual again. This was never a good sign.

Mohan: "Dhananjay... it says there's a smoke trap on these stairs."

Dhananjay: "Smoke trap! I remember the training! You're supposed to... ah, what was it..."

He looked at the wall. On step thirty-seven, a torch sat in its bracket, angled slightly differently from the others.

Dhananjay: "Pull the torch? That disables it, right?"

Suryasen: "NO—"

Dhananjay pulled the torch. He pulled it with the full-bodied enthusiasm of a man who believed he was being helpful, which made it worse. The torch came free of its bracket with a click, followed by a hiss that started quietly and grew to a sound like an angry kettle the size of a horse.

Smoke erupted from vents that Suryasen had cleverly concealed in the decorative stonework and was now deeply regretting making so efficient. Within seconds, visibility dropped to nothing. The stairwell filled with grey-white smoke that tasted of burnt sage and regret.

Suryasen: "That ACTIVATES it, you magnificent disaster of a human being!"

Mohan: "What disables it?!"

Suryasen: "TIME! Fifteen minutes! Or the ventilation sequence, which requires accessing a panel on the OUTSIDE of the building!"

Dhananjay: "Should I put the torch back?"

Suryasen: "It doesn't MATTER anymore! JUST GO UP!"

They climbed.

If the earlier parts of the journey had been uncomfortable, the smoke-filled stairwell was genuinely awful. Suryasen tore a strip from his already-abused turban and tied it over his nose and mouth. Mohan used his manual, pressing it flat against his face like a cotton shield, which would have been more effective if he hadn't periodically lowered it to check which step he was on. Dhananjay simply held his breath, which lasted about eight steps before he gasped, inhaled a lungful of smoke,

and spent the next twenty steps coughing so hard that Suryasen genuinely worried the stairwell might collapse.

Suryasen's internal monologue, which had been maintaining a steady commentary throughout the day, now achieved new levels of eloquence. He thought about the design document where he had described this smoke as "merely irritating." He thought about the meeting where Dhanuk had asked if it could be made spicier, and Suryasen had said yes, because Suryasen was an architect who took pride in fulfilling client requirements. He thought about how much he hated past-Suryasen for being so accommodating.

Sixty-seven steps. Seventy. Eighty. His thighs burned. His eyes streamed. His lungs felt like they had been scrubbed with sand.

One hundred and seventeen.

The door at the top was iron-reinforced and heavy, but Suryasen hit it with the desperate, full-body momentum of a man who had just climbed one hundred and seventeen smoke-filled steps, and it burst open.

Fresh air. Cool stone. The treasury room.

They collapsed through the doorway like three sacks of wet laundry dropped from a height. Smoke billowed out behind them, curling around the doorframe and dissipating into the cavernous room. For a long, blessed moment, nobody spoke. They just breathed.

The treasury room was, even in Suryasen's exhausted and smoke-addled state, beautiful. High ceilings supported by carved pillars. Ornate chests lining the walls. Document shelves organised with the meticulous precision of Dhanuk's clerks. Light filtering in through narrow windows set high in the walls, designed to be too small for a man to climb through but wide enough to illuminate the room's contents.

Dhananjay: "We... made it... successfully patrolled... all sectors..."

Mohan: "Is it... always this difficult?"

Suryasen: "It is not supposed to be difficult for people who are SUPPOSED TO BE HERE."

He stood. His legs disagreed with this decision, but he overruled them. He walked to the document shelf, third row, second compartment, exactly where he'd left them, and pulled out a sheaf of papers. Payment calculations. Itemised costs. Material manifests. Everything Dhanuk needed to release his fee.

He held the papers in his hands. He felt their weight. He permitted himself a single, profound sigh of relief.

And then he looked at them.

And then he looked at the rolled blueprints under his arm, the ones he had been carrying all morning, the ones that had fallen in the moat, the ones that were now muddy and torn and bat-stained.

And then he unrolled the blueprints and looked at the documents tucked inside them, documents he had rolled up with the blueprints three days ago and completely forgotten about, and saw, with a clarity that felt like being struck by lightning, that they were the original payment calculations. The ones in the treasury were copies. He had been carrying the originals the entire time.

The room was very quiet.

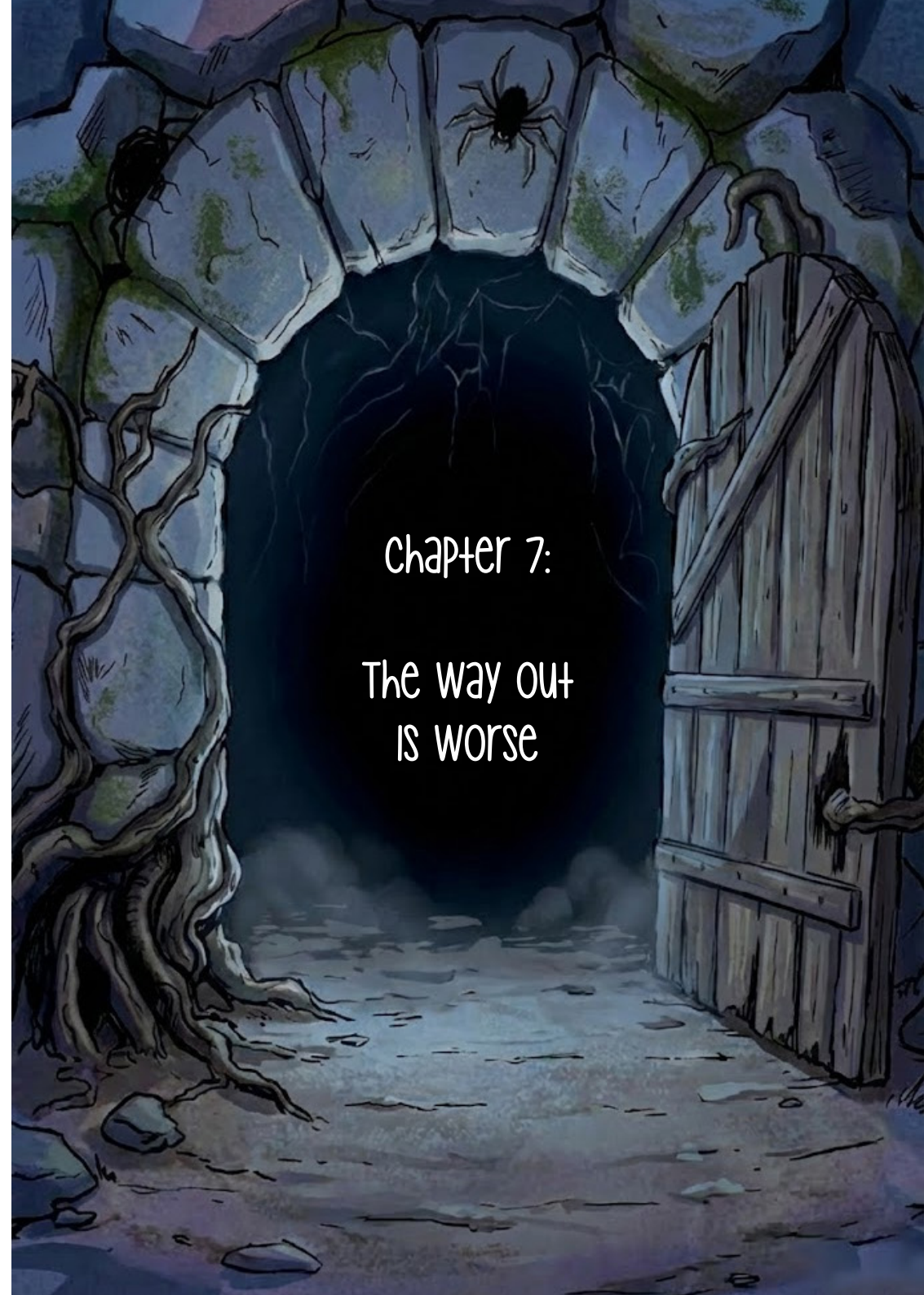
Suryasen's left eye twitched. It was a small twitch, barely visible, but it contained entire civilisations of frustration.

Dhananjay: "Everything in order, Sthapati?"

Suryasen: "Fine. Everything is fine."

It was not fine. Nothing was fine. But Suryasen was a professional, and professionals did not scream into document shelves in front of guards.

Usually.



Chapter 7:

The way out  
is worse

Dhananjay stood up with the springing enthusiasm of a man who had not just nearly died four separate times.

Dhananjay: “Well! Mission accomplished! Shall we escort you back out, Sthapati?”

Suryasen stood at the treasury window and looked down. The window was narrow, too narrow for a man in armour, which was the point, but not too narrow for a desperate architect who had recently lost weight through sheer stress. Beyond the window, the fort’s exterior wall dropped steeply to a rocky slope, then to the hill’s base. It was a long way down. It was not, however, through the cannon ball corridor, the bat tunnel, or the company of Dhananjay and Mohan.

Suryasen: “How sturdy would you say the exterior masonry is? Hypothetically.”

Mohan: “You’re not thinking of—”

Suryasen: “I am absolutely thinking of it.”

What followed was a brief but spirited negotiation in which Suryasen requisitioned Dhananjay’s sash, Mohan’s sash, a length of decorative curtain from the treasury window, and the remainder of his own turban. He tied them together with the knots his father had taught him as a boy, his father had been a sailor before becoming a builder, and the knots were the one part of his inheritance that was proving useful today, and tested the resulting rope against the window’s iron bracket.

It held. It was not elegant. It was not professional. But it held.

Dhananjay: “This seems dangerous, Sthapati.”

Suryasen: “More dangerous than the cannon balls?”

Dhananjay: “...”

Suryasen: “More dangerous than the bats?”

Dhananjay: “...”

Suryasen: “More dangerous than the smoke?”

Dhananjay: “Point taken.”

Suryasen squeezed through the window, gripped the rope, and began to descend. The exterior wall of Devagiri Killa was, he noted with some professional pride, extremely well-constructed. The stones were tight, the mortar was sound, and the handholds he found himself gripping were the result of decorative carving that he had personally insisted upon despite the mason’s objections that “nobody will ever see the outside of the wall up close.”

He was seeing it up close now. He was seeing it very close indeed.

The descent took seven minutes, which was approximately six minutes and fifty-five seconds longer than Suryasen wanted it to take. When his feet finally touched the rocky slope at the base of the wall, he released the rope and stood there for a moment, breathing in air that was not smoky, batty, or trapped inside a fortress.

He looked up at the fort. The fort loomed above him, ancient and massive and exactly as imposing as the day he had finished building it. From the treasury window, high above, he could see two small figures looking down at him.

He raised a hand in farewell. He did not know if it was a wave or a rude gesture. He suspected it was both.

Then he tucked his muddy, bat-stained, water-damaged, smoke-scented blueprints under his arm, and he walked away.

Suryasen: “Impregnable, they said.”

He shook his head.

Suryasen: “They were right. Just not in the way I intended.”



Aurangabad, Maharashtra, Present Day.

The television was on in the chai stall across from the bus stand, and nobody was watching it because the cricket was over and the news had started, and news was the thing you endured between cricket matches. But today the anchor was saying something unusual, and one by one, the plastic chairs turned toward the screen.

“...and we go live to our correspondent at Daulatabad Fort, historically known as Devagiri Killa, where locals have reported strange noises coming from inside the structure for the third consecutive night.”

The screen cut to a young reporter standing at the base of the fort. It was night. Behind her, the fort’s silhouette rose against a sky thick with stars. She was holding her microphone with one hand and her dupatta against the wind with the other, and she had the slightly frantic expression of a person who had been told this was a “fun human-interest piece” and was now standing alone in the dark next to a medieval fortress.

Reporter: “Thank you, Priya. I’m standing here at the base of Daulatabad Fort, one of Maharashtra’s most iconic historical sites, where residents of nearby Daulatabad village have reported hearing what they describe as ‘a voice crying for help’ from somewhere inside the fort’s upper structure. The sounds have been heard over the past three nights, always after sunset, and have been variously described as ‘ghostly wailing,’ ‘someone yelling about a rope,’ and, this is a direct quote, ‘a man arguing with bats.’”

The reporter paused, glancing over her shoulder at the fort with the expression of someone who was professionally obligated to be skeptical and personally obligated to be terrified.

Reporter: “The Archaeological Survey of India has confirmed that the fort is locked after visiting hours and no one should be inside.

Ramesh Patil, who has been studying the fort for thirty years, says the reports are consistent with stories that go back centuries.”

The camera cut to a man in his sixties, sitting in a well-lit office surrounded by maps and photographs. He had a white beard, wire-rimmed glasses, and the patient expression of a man who had been asked about ghosts before and was not impressed.

Ramesh Patil: “There is a very old local tradition, unverified, of course, about a guard who was trapped inside the fort during the Yadava period. The story says he was left behind after some incident with the security systems and could not find his way out. Villagers have heard sounds from the fort at night for centuries. Most of us assume it is the wind passing through the Andheri passage. But the older residents... they have their own theory.”

Reporter: “And what is their theory?”

Ramesh Patil: “That the guard is still in there. Still trying to get out. Still checking his manual.”

He said this with a perfectly straight face. The reporter nodded solemnly. In the chai stall, someone laughed into their tea.

The camera cut back to the reporter, who was now walking along the fort’s base path with her cameraman. The microphone picked up the ambient sounds of the night: crickets, wind, and,

A sound. Distant. Thin. Echoing off centuries of stone.

It could have been the wind. It could have been the acoustics of the Andheri passage doing what they were designed to do: distorting, multiplying, carrying sounds from deep within the fort’s interior out into the night air.

It could have been a lot of things.

But if you listened, really listened, the way the old villagers did, with your head tilted and your chai going cold in your hands, it sounded, unmistakably, like a man's voice. Distant. Desperate. Familiar, somehow, across seven hundred years.

And what it said, carried on the wind from the hilltop fortress that had never been conquered, was this:

“DHANANJAY! THE ROPE! I STILL NEED THE ROPE!”

In the chai stall, the television switched back to the studio anchor, who thanked the reporter, made a joke about needing to send a guard to guard the guards, and moved on to the weather.

The weather anchor, who had clearly been watching the segment with more interest than professionalism allowed, took an extra moment to compose himself before announcing that tomorrow would be hot and dry, which was exactly the same as today, which was exactly the same as yesterday, which was how weather worked in the Deccan for most of the year.

In the stall, nobody changed the channel. A boy who had been playing a game on his phone looked up and asked, quite seriously, whether the ghost could be caught with a net. His grandfather, sitting beside him, said that you could not catch a ghost with a net, but you could appease it with an offering of good chai and bad company, and he gestured broadly at the stall as if to suggest that the resources were readily available.

The chai-wallah, who had been listening from behind his counter with the quiet authority of a man who owned the only television in a fifty-metre radius, added his own theory: the ghost was obviously a bureaucrat, because only a bureaucrat could remain stuck in one place for seven hundred years and still not find the exit. This received the biggest laugh of the evening.

Nobody changed the channel. For a moment, the stall was quiet.

Then the man nearest the television, an old farmer with weathered hands and a knowing grin, shook his head, took a long sip of chai, and spoke.

Old Farmer: “Should have gone out the front gate.”

The stall erupted in laughter.

Outside, against the darkening sky, the fortress of Devagiri stood silent and immense, keeping its secrets the way it always had: stubbornly, brilliantly, and with just a hint of malice.

THE END



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not exist without the following people and entities, listed in descending order of how much they would disapprove of being mentioned:

The bats of Daulatabad Fort, who did not consent to being characters in a comedy and would probably sue if they had thumbs.

The actual architects and engineers of the Yadava dynasty, whose work is so remarkable that I had to invent an idiot to make a story around it. The real fort is a masterwork. Please visit it. Bring water.

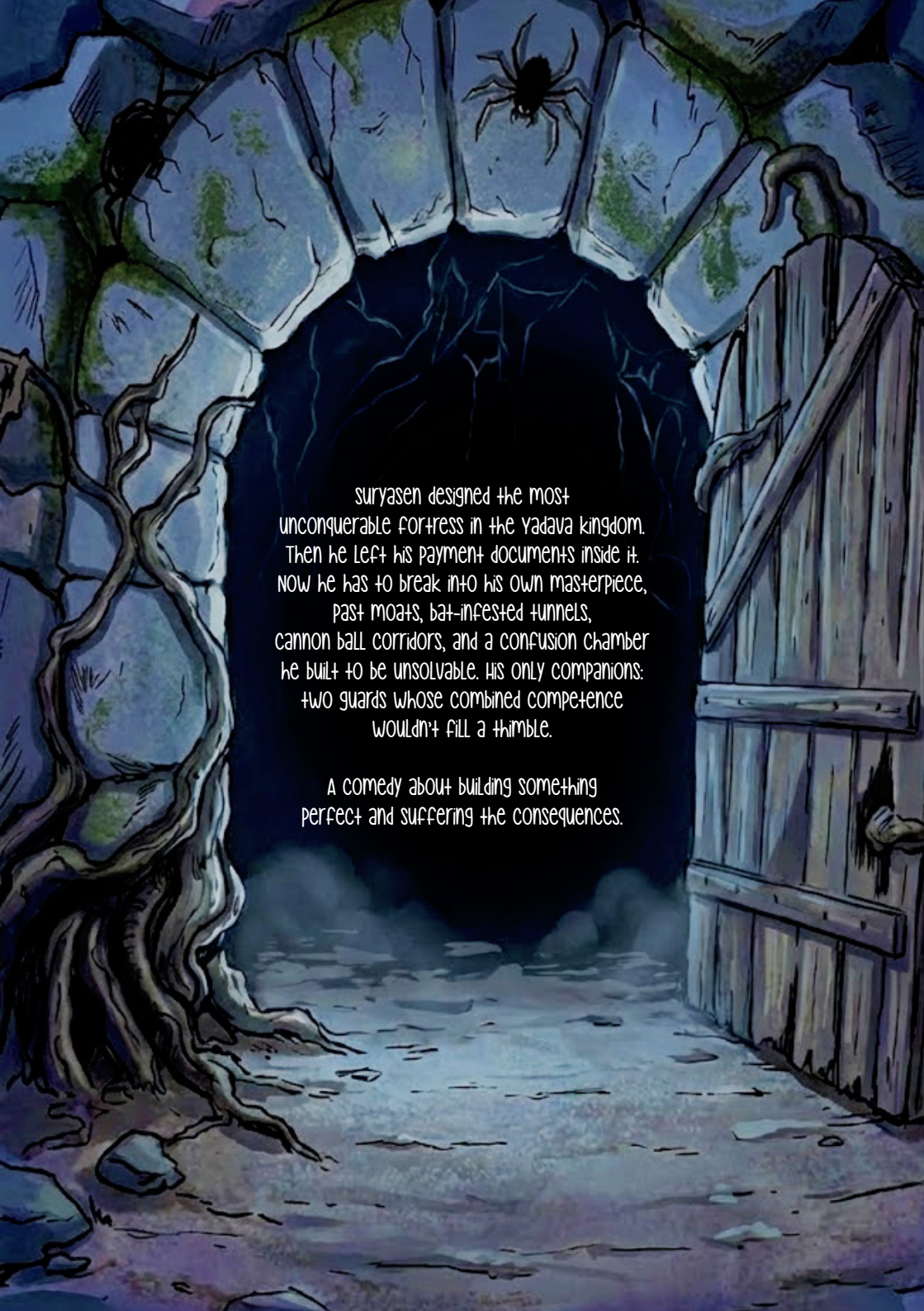
The guard at Daulatabad who, when I asked how often tourists get lost in the dark passage, said: "Every day, sir. Every single day." He was smiling when he said it. I think he enjoys this.

My friends, who listened to me describe the cannon ball passage mechanism at lunch and responded with: "You are becoming the architect from your story." They were not wrong.

My mentor, Shaaz Ahemd, who sat through me yapping about this absurd imagination for several days and still encouraged me going ahead with it.

And finally, Indiana Jones, for making it acceptable for grown adults to run from rolling spherical objects in adventure narratives. I owe you a debt I can never repay.

*New Delhi, 2026*



Suryasen designed the most  
unconquerable fortress in the Yadava kingdom.  
Then he left his payment documents inside it.  
Now he has to break into his own masterpiece,  
past moats, bat-infested tunnels,  
cannon ball corridors, and a confusion chamber  
he built to be unsolvable. His only companions:  
two guards whose combined competence  
wouldn't fill a thimble.

A comedy about building something  
perfect and suffering the consequences.