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THE MOUNTAIN OF LIGHT



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Parakeets howled as Jassa plunged through the undergrowth. He could hear the heavy beating of wings, the frantic flight of small mammals, the crunch of dry foliage underfoot, but none of this could drown out the low, steady, unrelenting growl of the hunters behind him.

His heart was pounding, his breath came in ragged gasps and he could taste bile at the back of his mouth. His heavy legs fought against him with every step, but he could not stop now, *would* not stop. To pause, even for a moment, would mean capture. And worse.

His mind flashed back to an image of Sher and Banda, his fellow *Akalis*, and those horrors crouched on their chests. Blood was clotting in the long grass, so much blood.

Jassa put his foot down on empty air. He swung his arms in a desperate attempt to regain his balance, but it was too late. He tumbled forward, rolling down the steep slope and landing face first amid the brown leaves pooled in the dry riverbed. The sleeves of his robe were in tatters and there was an ugly-looking graze down his right forearm. Lights popped in his brain when he tried to bend his left knee, the pain forcing him back down onto his stomach. And just by his ear there was a soft, sibilant hiss.

Jassa turned his head. The cobra met his eyes, its black hood flaring as it rocked slowly from side to side. Jassa could see the snake's fangs, imagined them piercing his flesh, wondered if that might be a welcome relief. A better way to die surely than the fate meted out to his friends. He leaned forward, pulling his collar away from his throat to give the cobra easier access.

It was not to be.

A clawed hand shot into Jassa's field of vision, snatched the cobra up off of the ground and ripped the reptile in two. Jassa rolled onto his back, looked up into the face of his saviour.

"Banda?" he whispered.

The figure towering over him was his friend and fellow soldier, yet it was not. Its limbs were twisted at inhuman angles, its face distorted, pushed forward into a blunt muzzle. Fur seemed to ripple beneath its loose robes. It opened its mouth, baring long fangs, and growled softly.

"Banda," Jassa said again, "what have they done to you?"

Another figure joined Banda. The sun was behind it so Jassa could not make out his face, but he knew, with crushing inevitability, who it had to be.

"Sher, not you too."

A sharp talon hooked around the front of Jassa's robe and hauled him to his feet. He no longer had the strength to resist, nor the will. Sher's breath was hot in Jassa's face. Jassa could see blood staining his friend's lips, fragments of meat trapped between his teeth. Sher's once brown eyes were now golden, the pupils elongated like a cat's.

"Sher," Jassa begged, "please don't do this."

Banda laughed. "So it talks, does it?"

"It thinks these shells still contain its friends," Sher said. "It doesn't understand that they are long gone."

"But..."

Sher leaned into Jassa's face, depositing spittle on Jassa's cheeks with every word he spoke.

"Their spirits were weak," Sher hissed, "but we are strong."

"The strongest," Banda said. "The fastest. The deadliest."

"What do you want with me?" Jassa wailed.

In answer, Sher raised a razor-sharp claw. Jassa closed his eyes so that he would not see the killing blow. Even behind his eyelids, however, he could not escape the light that flooded the area.

"Hold!" a female voice called out.

Despite himself, Jassa opened his eyes, squinting through the illumination. A woman in a midnight blue sari was walking along the riverbed towards them. In her right hand, she held the object that was emitting all the light, but it was far too bright for Jassa to look at it directly.

"Maharani!" he shouted, his voice hoarse. "Flee! Flee for your life!"

"Oh, my life is in no danger," the Maharani replied. "You see?"

She raised her hand and Sher and Banda dropped to the ground, grovelling subserviently.

"We have to get out of here!" Jassa insisted.

He stumbled towards the Maharani, wincing every time he put weight on his injured knee. The Maharani shook her head slowly. She extended her left hand and gently stroked his cheek with her finger.

"Do you remember the *Khalsa*?" she asked him. "Do you remember what you did to my brother?"

The Maharani continued to run her forefinger over his bearded cheek before suddenly trapping his face in a vicelike grip between her finger and thumb.

"Do you remember what I said, little man?" she demanded. "I cursed you and all your kind and I promised you that I would have my revenge."

She shoved Jassa backwards and he fell into the waiting arms of Banda and Sher.

"Death is too good for you," she said, turning her back on his screams. "I want you to suffer."

* * * * *

Tom tried to shuffle his wicker chair further into the shade without actually getting up. The chair legs scraped noisily across the stone slabs of the veranda and Tom glanced guiltily in Val's

direction, but she was not paying him any attention. Tilting his straw hat forward, Tom cursed, not for the first time, the genes that cause his skin to burn like bacon on a griddle at the first sign of the sun. He wished he could be lounging out there in the garden next to her, soaking up the rays, but that would only lead to pain and embarrassment.

Tom studied Val from his perch in the shadows. She was wearing a light, muslin dress that left her arms bare. Like him, she had brought a hat from the TARDIS, but hers, with its large, floppy brim, was in the grass at her feet. Val's head was bare, her long, lustrous hair flowing freely past her shoulders. They had only been in Lahore a couple of days and her usual olive skin had already darkened to a deep nut brown. Her eyes were closed and she looked to be asleep.

Unbidden, a thought leapt into Tom's mind. The sun had winked out and he was lying in the semi-darkness of his cabin in the TARDIS, the ship's gentle humming lulling him to sleep after yet another exciting adventure with... That detail did not seem to be part of this fantasy, but, in the way of dreams, no sooner had Tom asked the question than it slipped away from him. He rolled over on to his stomach, burying his face in his pillow. Whatever he had been up to, it had worn him right out. Probably running away from the monsters again. He seemed to do that a lot.

He was jolted back to wakefulness by a knock at the door. A soft rap, twice and then twice again. He sat up, blearily casting about for his dressing gown. It was draped over the back of his chair, just out of reach. *Maybe if I don't say anything*, he thought to himself, *whoever it is will just go away*.

But the door was opening and a figure was stepping into his cabin, backlit by the light of the corridor outside. She - and it was most definitely a she - was wearing silk pyjamas, blue, the colour of her eyes. Her dark hair was wild and uncombed. And she was trembling.

"Val?" Tom sat up, not caring that he was wearing nothing but a pair of Daffy Duck boxer shorts. "What's wrong?"

"I... I just..." Whatever it was, Val was struggling to talk about it. "Can I sit down?"

Tom nodded and Val settled on the edge of the bed. Her pyjama jacket rose up over her hips as she did so, exposing her navel.

"I've been having nightmares again," she said. "All these things we've seen, the monsters and... and... I can't get them out of my head. I guess I'm just not as strong as you are."

"I wouldn't say that."

Val smiled. "You're sweet," she said. "Tom, I don't think I can be on my own tonight. Would you... would you hold me?"

And Tom's arms were around her and she felt so small and fragile in his embrace and his nose was in her hair, drinking in her aroma and she was turning her head to face him, tilting her lips towards his...

Tom shook himself, blinking repeatedly until the vision started to fade. What was wrong with him? Val was his landlord and, he liked to think, his friend, but no more than that. So where were these ideas coming from?

He knew where.

It was only a week or so since they had left Marinus and left behind the lives that had been forced on them by the Voord. For six months they had lived as other people, but the

memories implanted by the Conscience made it seem so much longer, made it seem like they had been Pax and Dea their whole lives. Pax had been a mill-worker from frozen Vriddi, Dea was employed by the Hall of Records in Myriad and they had been brought together by their shared troubling dreams and perhaps something more. A connection at once more nebulous and yet somehow stronger. But was that a connection that only existed between Pax and Dea or had it always been there between Tom and Val too? Was it real or just another fiction created by the Voord and the enslaved Brains of Morphoton? Worse, was it the Doctor's doing? He had been using his own mental powers to bring them back together after all. Had he inadvertently changed the way they felt about one another as a result? When Dea had kissed Pax, who was really being kissed and who was really doing the kissing?

It was not as if she was the first girl Tom had fallen for. There had been Anna and Sally and Ranveer and Lucy and Lynette and that was just since he started travelling in the TARDIS (though he had to admit that none of those relationships had exactly ended well). So why was it Val he saw in his mind's eye when he lay down on his bunk at night? He risked another glance at her, saw that she was still sleeping peacefully and wondered what she saw in her dreams. Whatever it was, he was sure it had nothing to do with him.

* * * * *

Val was not dreaming, she was only pretending to. If he thought she was asleep, Tom would probably leave her alone and she really did not know if she could deal with him at the moment. She knew that she had said that they needed to talk about it, but what was she supposed to say?

Since leaving Marinus, she had taken great pains never to be alone with Tom. She had dragged the Doctor along with her on a shopping trip to Neopolis 5 (much to his annoyance, though he did turn out to have a, hitherto unsuspected, eye for fashion). On Kappa Bayl, she had insisted that she needed to spend a day inside the (women-only) Temple of Enlightenment as research for a *Mysterious Times* article. And when in the TARDIS, she had shut herself in her room claiming - of all the pathetic excuses - a headache.

She knew full well that what she felt for Tom was not real. She had been travelling in the TARDIS for a year, perhaps eighteen months now and Tom had been the only constant male presence in her life for all that time (well, other than the Doctor, but his personality flaws had personality flaws) so it was only natural that she should form an attachment to him, but using that as the basis of a relationship was just... unhealthy.

There, she had said it. Being around Tom was not good for her. But, if that was the case, what was she supposed to do about it?

She was interrupted by the sound of grass bending underfoot signalling the approach of their hostess.

"Can I interest anyone in some *tiffin*?" Honoria Lawrence asked.

Val opened her eyes to greet her and caught Tom looking in her direction. He immediately looked away, scowling.

"I'm going for a walk," he announced, getting up from his chair. He muttered something else, too. Val could not quite catch it from where she was sitting, but it sounded very much like he was going in search of a cold shower.

* * * * *

Henry Lawrence looked up at a sky devoid of cloud and sighed.

"I'm praying for rain, Doctor," he said. "The garden back at the Residency desperately needs it."

"Well I don't," the man on the ground snapped. "The last thing I need is for this trail to be washed away."

The Doctor was on his hands and knees, poking about in the dust. Unlike Lawrence, who was wearing the traditional costume of an English gentleman, including tie, jacket and waistcoat, the Doctor was in native dress, a silk *achkan*, in red embroidered with gold, over *shalwar kameez*. Lawrence's horse whinnied softly, protesting at the flies settling on his muzzle, and Lawrence wafted them away before returning his attention to his companion.

"Remind me," he said, "what exactly is it we're looking for again? Wild boar. A tiger maybe?"

"Nothing so parochial." The Doctor stood up, running his hands through his thick hair as he did so, his long fingers unearthing strand of gold amid the darker brown. "And *we* aren't looking for anything. I didn't ask for you to tag along."

"I had noticed, Doctor," Lawrence said, "just as I noticed how quick you were to abandon your companions back in Lahore."

"They would only have slowed me down."

"Is that so?" The Doctor's pale eyes bored into Lawrence, but the latter did not flinch. One did not rise to the position of Resident without a strong will. "You walked out of the jungle yesterday with no papers and demanded accommodation for your companions and a horse for yourself."

"Requested," the Doctor amended.

"Demanded, Doctor," Lawrence repeated, "and I acceded to your demands, but the price of my hospitality is the host's right to poke his nose into your affairs."

"Fine."

The Doctor swung himself up onto his mare and set off in the direction of the Sutlej River leaving Lawrence with no choice but to follow. Their native bearers ran in their wake. Almost a full half hour passed before the Doctor spoke again.

"What we are tracking," he began without looking back, "is like nothing you have ever seen. Stronger than a boar, more ferocious than a tiger, more intelligent than a human being."

"I can think of plenty of people who would pay good money for the chance to hunt something like that," Lawrence joked.

"This isn't a laughing matter," the Doctor snapped. "You humans think that you're top of the food chain. You gleefully hunt other creatures not just for food or protection, but to prove your own superiority. How much blood have you shed in the name of sport?"

"Now steady on, Doctor..."

But the Doctor was not finished. "Let me tell you something, Lawrence. This time, you aren't the predator, you're the prey and those creatures out there make the violence of human beings look like a nursery tantrum. They have no pity, no mercy, no restraint. Only desire. And

what they want, they have more than enough power to take. Are you so sure you want to help me find them?"

"Doctor, I..."

"You're right, I didn't leave Brooker and Miss Rossi behind simply because I didn't want them underfoot. I did so because they don't need to face what's out there. Go home, Lawrence. Go back to your wife. This isn't something you need to see either."

Lawrence's face was pale, but his voice was steady. "I fought in Arakan and Afghanistan, Doctor. There are few horrors I haven't had to face already. You are my guest and under my protection so don't think I'm about to turn tail and abandon you to... whatever this is."

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of the Doctor's mouth.

"Suit yourself," he said, "just don't expect me to watch your back."

Their horses continued to carry them onwards.

"Doctor," Lawrence said, "if these things are as dangerous as you say, why are *you* seeking them out?"

The Doctor's tone was sepulchral.

"Unfinished business," he said.

* * * * *

Tom wandered aimlessly through the network of crooked alleyways that made up Lahore. It might be October and ostensibly mid-autumn, but the heat was such as to make a mockery of any summer back home. Tom's skin was slick with sweat and his shirt clung uncomfortably to his back. The streets were caked with dust and worse and Tom had to watch his step so as not to tread in something unmentionable.

He was conscious that he was a source of interest to the natives. As Colonel Lawrence had explained it to him, the British had only established a presence here within the last six months so a white-skinned man was still a novelty. Barely clothed children would point and stare, grinning and joking with their comrades or calling out names to him. The bravest would run up to him, poking him or tugging at his clothes. He even caught one lad with his hand in Tom's pocket. The adults were more discrete but their stares were just as fascinated, be they from veiled, kohl-rimmed eyes or out of bearded faces or beneath tightly bound *puggaree*. Tom smiled and waved in greeting, but that only caused them to turn away.

He was strolling near the city walls, which towered thirty feet above him, the stone glowing pink in the late afternoon sun. Up ahead was the Badshahi Mosque, the largest mosque in the world (or so the Lawrences had told him), with its red sandstone walls and minarets and three white, marble-covered domes resembling giant onions. On Tom's right was the Roshnai Gate, one of thirteen elaborate gateways into the city. The gate was awash with people. There were the guards, their fingers dancing impatiently over the hilts of their *tulwars*, the merchants, keen to be the first to hawk their wares to any new arrivals, and there were those with nothing better to do who just wanted to watch the spectacle. And spectacle was what they were currently getting as three decorated elephants jostled with each other to enter the city.

The Roshnai Gate - the Gate of Lights - was a massive structure, but even it was not big enough to allow three adult elephants through side by side. None of the elephants, however, nor the *mahouts* leading them, were prepared to concede supremacy to any of the others. Men yelled at one another to give way, the elephants bellowed and trumpeted as they became increasingly wedged between each other and the stone arch and the crowd laughed and jeered at the whole debacle.

Out of the corner of Tom's eye, he could see a *palki* held aloft by four bearers. A boy, who could not be more than eight or nine years old, was leaning forward in his seat, eyes wide, gold turban threatening to fall from his head. Curiosity got the better of him and he jumped down and scurried off for a closer look at the elephants. A woman in a blue and gold sari hurried after him, calling for him to stop, but he was too quick for her. He started peppering the *mahouts* with rapid-fire questions, which they tried to answer while *salaaming* and scraping deferentially. But while they were staring at their feet, they were not paying attention to what their animals were up to.

The largest of the three elephants, a mighty bull, seized his chance and surged forward, shouldering his companions aside. The *mahout* released his hold on his harness and ran for safety and the panicked crowd followed his example, scattering in all directions. The boy was not so lucky. Knocked aside by a fleeing stall-holder, he tripped over his own coat - splendidly ornate, but far from practical - and landed in the dirt. He rolled over, trying to right himself, and was confronted by the sight of the sole of the elephant's foot descending towards him.

Tom sprinted across the ground, scooping the boy up in a rugby tackle that sent the pair of them rolling across the street. The foot of the elephant slammed down into the space the boy had been sitting just moments before, raising clouds of dust.

"Thank you, thank you." The woman in the blue sari ran up to them, wringing her hands. "How dare you run off like that," she scolded the boy.

"It was nothing, really," Tom muttered, trying unsuccessfully to brush the dust from his hair and wondering if it was worth getting up or if he should just stay where he was until all the confusion died down. The decision was taken from him when a hand grabbed the back of his shirt and hauled him bodily into the air.

"How dare you lay your unworthy hands on the boy," his assailant demanded.

"I was trying to help," Tom said. "I'll know better next time."

"There won't be a next time."

The eyes of Tom's captor glowed amber and he opened his mouth to reveal long fangs dripping with saliva. Tom lashed out, fear driving his fists and his feet. The fanged man clearly was not expecting any resistance because he dropped Tom in shock and the latter wasted no time scooting off into the maze of alleyways. Here the buildings were close enough together that the sun could not reach the street and Tom hoped to lose the man amongst the shadows.

A cat sprang out in front of him, hissing its displeasure, and Tom's already hammering heart went into overdrive. He collapsed into a doorway, trying to regain his breath. Sweat was dripping into his eyes, making it difficult to see, so he strained his ears for sounds of pursuit. Everything was quiet. Still. He wiped his face on the front of his shirt and took a step backwards into the darkest of the shadows.

The shadow moved.

"You aren't from around here, are you?" the fanged man said as he wrapped his hands around Tom's throat.

"No, no I'm not," Tom stammered. "I'm a British citizen. You can't do this to me."

"Oh, you're much more than that. I can smell the winds of Time on you. I wonder how they taste."

The man bit down hard on Tom's shoulder. Tom screamed.

"Delicious," the man said, Tom's blood running down his chin. "Your fear just adds to the flavour."

He bent his neck again for another bite.

"Jassa, stop!"

A female voice echoed down the alleyway and suddenly Tom was surrounded by bright light, light so fierce it obliterated everything else. He could still hear his attacker, though, howling in pain, begging the woman to stop.

It was the last thing he heard before he passed out.

* * * * *

"Mr Hodson, please don't get up," Honoria Lawrence said as she breezed her way into the Residency. "There's no need to trouble yourself on my account."

Lieutenant William Hodson, however, was already halfway to his feet, instinctively snapping to attention. He was a big man, sturdy like a bull, with a thick moustache that obscured the lower half of his sun-reddened face.

"Mrs Lawrence," he stammered then caught himself, unsure of where to go from there.

"Is my husband in his office?" Honoria asked. "Tell me he's not working you too hard."

"Colonel Lawrence is a fair man, ma'am," Hodson said. "Hard, but fair." Honoria seemed pleased with the description. "Alas, he's yet to return from his expedition. I could send one of the natives out to look for him if you'd like?"

"I wouldn't want to cause any bother," Honoria replied. "I'm sure Henry will be back in time for dinner. In the meantime, I'm sure you won't mind if I show Miss Rossi around the place, will you, William?"

Hodson flushed an even deeper shade of crimson. "No, ma'am."

Honoria beamed.

"Keep up the good work," she said, marching past Hodson. "Come along, Valentina."

The British Residency was located in an octagonal building surmounted by a large dome in the western part of Lahore. Turrets decorated each corner of the main structure. It was cool inside the stone walls, a pleasant change from the heat and humidity outside, but Val still felt uncomfortable. As she trailed behind Honoria, she scratched at an itch on the back of her left hand.

I should ask the Doctor to take me home, she thought to herself. Then he can take Tom far away while I try and put my life back together.

"This building hasn't always been a Residency," Honoria was saying. "Well, of course it hasn't. We only moved into Lahore at the end of the war. No, what I mean to say is that it hasn't

always been an administrative centre. The building was originally constructed to be a mausoleum."

But what about Vincent? Val's thoughts continued to plague her and she was only half-listening to what Honoria had to say. If I leave the TARDIS now then I'll never find my brother.

They rounded a corner and descended a short flight of steps into the heart of the building.

"Have you heard the story of Anarkali?" Honoria asked, oblivious to her companion's distraction. "Silly question, really. *I hadn't heard of it until we moved here.*"

But if I can't leave the TARDIS then Tom will have to. Would he do it if I asked him? Why should he?

"It was the time of the Emperor Akbar, some three hundred years ago, and his son, Prince Saleem had just returned to the palace after a decade serving in the emperor's army. There was much celebration, but one performance in particular caught the prince's eye, a dance given by a girl named Anarkali. It was love at first sight for both of them, but a prince could not love a commoner so they had to keep their relationship secret."

Would the Doctor help? It's his ship so if he wanted to boot Tom off then they'd be nothing he could do about it. And if he was only going to keep one of us then it would be me, right? He did give me a key to the TARDIS. That has to mean something.

Unless, I suppose, he decides to evict both of us and save himself any further hassle.

"In the end, though, Prince Saleem could not keep his love buried any longer and he told his father that he intended to marry Anarkali. The emperor was furious. He forbade Saleem from seeing the girl ever again and, when the prince refused, he had Anarkali arrested and thrown in the palace dungeon. Saleem rescued her, fled the city and raised an army with the intent of overthrowing his father, but his attempt failed. Saleem was captured and brought before his father who gave him a stark choice: to give up Anarkali or to face the death penalty. Saleem chose death."

It would be for Tom's own good. I mean, what kind of life is it trailing around the universe like some kind of cosmic backpacker? It's fun for a while, but sooner or later you have to grow up. And Tom doesn't need this, not like I need it. I'm helping him stand on his own two feet and he'll thank me for it. Eventually.

"But Anarkali could not allow Prince Saleem to die so she approached the emperor and struck a deal with him. She would give up her life if only Emperor Akbar would let her spend one last night with Saleem. The emperor granted her wish and, at the end of their final night, Anarkali drugged Saleem with a pomegranate blossom so that he would not stop her from fulfilling her side of the bargain. She gave herself up into the hands of the emperor and, for her love, she was buried alive."

Honoria looked at Val expectantly and the latter struggled to return her thoughts to the matter in hand.

"That's... tragic," she managed at last.

"Isn't it just," Honoria said, "but it's romantic too. I hope that I would have the strength to give my life for Henry if it came to it."

"I hope it never does," Val said.

Honorina smiled. "Well yes, so do I. And is there someone special in your life, Valentina? Mr Brooker, perhaps?"

"No!" Val said, more forcefully than she had intended. She took a deep breath and moderated her tone. "Tom and I are just friends."

"I see. Then perhaps you and the Doctor? The two of you seem to have a bond."

"What's that over there?" Val asked, pointing at the large, black sarcophagus in the centre of the room, anything to change the subject.

Honorina took the hint. "That, so they say, is Anarkali's final resting place. There's an inscription on it, but I'm afraid I don't read Persian."

Val stepped forward, the influence of the TARDIS unravelling the fluid script in her mind.

"I would give thanks to God unto the day of resurrection," she read, "if only I could I behold the face of my beloved once more."

* * * * *

I've died and gone to heaven.

Tom woke up lying on a bed of silver, satin cushions and surrounded by beautiful women.

"*Sahib*, you are awake?"

Tom's eyes struggled to focus as the pain in his head retreated.

"I must be dreaming," he said, giving it his best Sean Connery.

"No dream, *bahadur sahib*. You have already been asleep for many hours."

The woman leaning over him had smooth skin the colour of cream in coffee and wide, gazelle-like eyes. Tom recognised her as the woman he had seen at the Roshnai Gate, but she had exchanged her blue sari for a tight silver and black number that left her arms and most of her legs bare. Silver bangles on her left arm tinged against one another as she moved.

Tom tried to sit up, but the world started to spin again.

"What hit me?" he asked, sinking back into the cushions.

"It was an accident." Tom felt a cold, damp cloth being applied to his forehead. "Jassa thought that you intended to harm the Maharajah."

"Jassa? That'll be the big *maak* with the fangs and fur, like?"

"Fangs and fur? I think *bahadur sahib* is confused. Perhaps the blow to your head..."

"Aye, that's probably it. I'm not feeling so clever right now, to be honest." Something the woman had said earlier finally caught up with him. "Sorry, pet, but did you say 'Maharajah'?"

"Indeed." The woman smiled, baring her teeth. "His honoured majesty Dalip Singh, whose life you saved, *bahadur*. You are a hero."

"Give over."

"Oh, but you are..."

The woman put a delicate fingertip on Tom's chest. Her touch was cool, but it triggered a wave of heat that swept across his chest and up to his face as he belatedly realised that he was no longer wearing his shirt. Of course, the women would have to have taken it off him in order to bind the wound in his shoulder, but still...

He pulled away, snatching up one of the cushions and using it to cover himself.

"Forgive me, *bahadur*." The woman bowed her head. "Have I offended you?"

"No, no, it's just..." Tom could not finish the thought, distracted as he was by the numerous pairs of eyes studying his not-exactly-manly physique. He swallowed loudly.

"The Maharajah wishes to show his gratitude and his *nautch* girls were instructed to take care of you."

Tom was sweating now. His eyes darted around the room, but wherever he turned his gaze settled on yet another lightly-clad female with a predatory gleam in her eyes.

"I think I must have been hit on the head harder than I thought," Tom said in a hoarse voice, "because this really can't be happening to a bloke like me."

The woman above him pouted. "Don't you like what you see, *bahadur*?"

"Well, yeah, yeah I do. You're a right bonny lass and no mistake. You all are."

"Than what's the problem?"

Good question, Tom's libidinous subconscious told him. *Offers like this don't exactly come along every day.*

"Well, when you put it that way..."

Before Tom could act on that thought, however, they were interrupted by someone throwing open the heavy doors of the chamber.

"Mungela," the intruder snapped, "what do you think you're playing at?"

"But, *kunwari*," the woman above Tom replied, the sly smile on her face suggesting that she was far from cowed by the other's tongue lashing, "you told us to make sure the English *bahadur* was comfortable."

While Mungela might have been the ideal model for the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, this new arrival exemplified the work of Rubens, proudly displaying her voluptuous, womanly curves within red silk harem pants fringed with silver lace and a gold sash draped around her shoulders and across her chest. Her dark red hair was held in place by a jewelled net that caught the light as she sashayed towards them. She was shorter than Mungela, but her presence filled the room to an almost suffocating degree.

"So I did," she said, "but I don't recall saying anything about how he needed all of you pawing all over him."

"Perhaps, *kunwari*, we should ask *him* what he needs?"

The *kunwari*'s eyes flashed with fire.

"How dare you question me, Mungela? Out! Out, all of you!"

She clapped her hands and the room emptied, though more than one of the *nautch* girls cast a disappointed glance in Tom's direction as she hurried away.

The *kunwari* sighed. "I can't blame them, I suppose. It must be frustrating being part of a harem where ones master is only a child."

"Their master?" Tom tried to work past the obvious distractions. "You mean the Maharajah?"

"The very same," she said. "My son."

Tom tried once again to rise, but did not get very far.

"Save your strength, Brooker *bahadur*," the *kunwari* said. "Let me come to you."

"You know my name," Tom said as the woman reclined languorously beside him.

"I wouldn't be much of a Maharani to my people if I didn't pay attention to the activities of the *Qui hi* occupiers, would I?"

"Maharani? Of course, you would be. I'm sorry, your majesty. If I were in better fettle I'd have remembered to show the proper respect."

The *kunwari's* smile was cat-like. "You've shown respect enough for me, *bahadur*."

"*Bahadur*? That woman - Mungela? - used that word, too. What does it mean?"

"It means champion," she replied.

"Champion? Hardly."

"You saved my son," she said. "Many have been called hero for less."

"Still, I'd prefer it if you just called me Tom."

"Tom." The *kunwari* rolled the name around in her mouth. "And you must call me Jindan."

"Is that really appropriate?"

"We're all alone, Tom. Who else will know?"

Jindan held a goblet out to him. Had she been carrying it the whole time? In his confused state, Tom could not remember.

"Drink, Tom," she said. "This will help you recover your strength."

Tom sipped gingerly. Whatever was in that goblet, it was potent. His head felt suddenly full of cotton wool, but at least the pain in his shoulder seemed to have dulled.

For an instant, Jindan's face blurred before his eyes and Val's features floated in its place. Tom blinked to clear the image.

"So Tom," Jindan said, wriggling closer, "I haven't thanked you for saving little Dalip."

Tom's head was throbbing, though whether from his injury, the wine or Jindan's perfume he could not be sure. Her scent was filling his nostrils and he could taste it on the tip of his tongue.

"It was nothing, really," he insisted. "Always happy to help royalty, me."

"Is that right?" Jindan took a sip from the goblet, then pressed it to Tom's lips again. "I've been looking for a man like you for a long time."

"You... you have?" Tom stammered. Jindan was stroking the hairs on his arm.

"Since the death of my husband and then that of my brother, I've had to raise little Dalip and guide my people all on my own. The path of a Maharani is a lonely one, Tom. You understand that, don't you?"

"I, er, guess it would be."

"If only I had someone I could lean on." Her fingers were walking across his chest. "Someone courageous and strong and loyal. Someone I could rely on."

"Well, if I ever meet such a man," Tom tried to joke, "I'll be sure to send him your way."

Jindan's fingers were on his lips, shushing him.

"Oh, I think I've already found him, Tom, and I think you and I should get to know each better, don't you?"

* * * * *

There were four of them at dinner. Four of them and the rest.

Henry Lawrence and the Doctor sat at either end of the table. Honoria sat of her husband's right and Val sat opposite her. It was clear to Val from the behaviour of her dining companions that she was supposed to ignore all of the other people in the dining-room, but she was finding it difficult.

A *kahar*, or bearer, was pulling on the rope that turned the *punkah* hanging from the ceiling, its wide, cloth blades agitating the warm, humid air. Four white-garbed *khitmutgar*, or table-attendants, served the diners, but each would only serve the man or woman to whom they had been assigned. When not in action, they stood discreetly behind each chair, hands folded in front of them. The *khannsamah*, or house-steward, supervised their work, saying nothing, but expressing approval or otherwise with tiny movements of his head. And finally, Honoria's *ayah*, or maid, stood in one corner of the room, waiting to be called. She wore a white, chintz petticoat, a tight, short-sleeved jacket and a long, sky-blue *chuddar*, a piece of muslin thrown over the left shoulder, one end hanging down as a mantilla, the other folded round her head as a hood.

"Shouldn't we wait for Tom?" Val said. The itch on her hand was worse than ever and her skin was red and raw where she had been scratching at it throughout the afternoon. To make matters worse, she was now developing an itch between her shoulder-blades, but she could hardly scratch that at the dinner-table.

"Brooker knew when we were planning to dine," the Doctor replied. "If he wanted to be here then he would."

"What if something's happened to him?"

"Brooker isn't stupid. No more stupid than the rest of you, anyway. He's hardly likely to have gone looking for trouble, is he?"

"Trouble has a tendency to find us whether we're looking for it or not," Val pointed out.

The Doctor shrugged. "He'll be safe enough so long as he stays within the city walls. And *they* won't come out at night. Not while the moon's out."

"They?" Val asked.

The Doctor smiled, but there was mockery in it.

"Two days," he said.

"I'm sorry?"

"We've been here for two days and this is the first time you've thought to question me about why I'm here. It's not like you, Miss Rossi. Something on your mind?"

Val frowned and looked away. She was not about to share her feelings with the Doctor, especially not when he was in this sort of mood.

"You haven't answered my question," she said.

The Doctor's smile disappeared. His pale eyes were like ice.

"You're better off not knowing," he said.

"Don't I get a say in that?" Val asked.

The Doctor ignored her. "This pulao is excellent," he said to Honoria.

"Thank you, Doctor," Honoria replied.

"This kofte, on the overhand, is overcooked and the keema is too dry," he continued.

Honoria's face fell.

"I'll speak to our *bawarchee* about it," she said softly.

"Don't bother the cook on my account," the Doctor said, tearing of a chunk of his roti bread and dipping it in the spiced yoghurt. "I'm not planning to stick around long enough for it to matter."

"Well at least your companion seems to be enjoying it," Henry Lawrence said, drawing attention to Val's already empty plate.

Val flushed. The truth was that she agreed with the Doctor. She had been hoping for explosions of taste with every mouthful, but instead the flavours had been bland and timid. On top of that, the food had been cooked in a separate building and, by the time it had been carried to the dinner-table, it was cold. And yet Val had been ravenous and had had no compunction about wolfing down the lot.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't usually..."

"That's quite all right," Honoria reassured her. "It's always a pleasure to witness a healthy appetite."

"So, how long have the two of you been living here?" Val asking, hoping to change the subject.

"Lahore here or India here?" Henry Lawrence asked.

"Both, I guess."

Henry Lawrence was a gaunt man whose white linen suit, ideal in this hot weather, hung loosely on him. He had a long, narrow face - not unlike that of a greyhound, Val thought - and his hair was starting to turn grey. Val estimated that he was probably in his early forties, no more than ten years older than she was herself.

Honoria was perhaps a couple of years younger than her husband. She was not, in Val's opinion, a great beauty. She was pretty - with pale skin and red hair, curled into ringlets - but not stunningly so. If anything, her nose was a little on the large side (though Val could hardly criticise on that account). But whatever Val's opinion, Henry Lawrence's face lit up whenever he looked at his wife and she positively glowed when she felt his eyes on her.

"I've been in India for what must be something like twenty-five years now," Henry said. "Came here straight out of college. But Honoria's hasn't even been here half that time."

"I came to India to get married," Honoria said, treating her husband to a shy smile. "I couldn't wait any longer for Henry to come back for me so I decided to come out here to join him."

"And you've been together ever since?" Val asked.

Lawrence nodded. "Honoria refuses to leave my side, even if it means going into places no white woman has been welcomed before. I'm a very lucky man."

Honoria blushed and looked down at her plate.

"We've had to travel around a fair bit, though," Lawrence said. "Wherever my work takes me."

"And what *is* your work?" Val asked.

Lawrence glanced away. "Ah, well..."

"Lawrence is what they call a 'political'," the Doctor explained, lips crinkled in amusement. "In your time, you'd say he was a member of the Intelligence Service." He looked to Lawrence, who was turning pale. "It's quite all right, you can trust Miss Rossi."

"And what about you, Doctor?" Lawrence asked, recovering quickly.

"Oh, I suspect you're much too smart for that."

A tuneless wailing interrupted the diners. It was coming from the direction of the garden.

"'Cause the fog on the Tyne is all mine, all mine/The fog on the Tyne is all mine."

"The wanderer returns," Lawrence said, getting to his feet and pulling aside the *purdah* that separated the dining-room from the outside world.

"Who knew Tom could sing?" Val remarked.

"I rather think, Miss Rossi," the Doctor replied, "that you'll find that's ample evidence that he can't."

Val conceded the point as Tom staggered gracelessly into the house.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, louder than was necessary. "I've been... been..."

The Doctor was in his face. "I think we can all guess where you've been, Brooker, and what you've been up to. Don't you know the meaning of moderation?"

"You're jush jealous," Tom lisped, "'cause I've been rubbing shoulders with royalty. And more than just shoulders."

He grinned gormlessly. The Doctor scowled.

"Go to bed, Brooker," he said. "Sleep it off and maybe you'll make more sense in the morning, though somehow I doubt it."

"You... you..."

Tom poked a finger in the Doctor's direction or what he thought was the Doctor's direction. His aim was wide. He stared at his digit, struggling to comprehend how he had missed.

"I think I'll go to bed now," he said. "*Fog on the Tyne is all mine, all mine...*"

Tom staggered forward a few steps before colliding with the table.

"Maka?" Lawrence gestured to one of the bearers. "Help the young gentleman upstairs."

The native nodded, took Tom by the arm and guided him around the furniture.

"And another thing," Tom said, turning on his heel when he reached the door. He would have upended himself had Maka not been there to support him. "The Maharani has invited you to go hunting with her tomorrow. She is especially interested in you."

Tom gestured vaguely in the Doctor's direction.

"How nice for her," the Doctor muttered.

"Night all!" Tom waved at the assembled company, then pitched face forward onto the floor. This time, Maka was not quick enough to catch him, but the impact did not appear to have done Tom any harm. In fact, he had started snoring.

Lawrence stepped forward, rolling up his sleeves. "Give me a hand, will you, Doctor? I don't think I can carry him all the way upstairs on my own."

"Might as well leave him where he landed," the Doctor said. "It's no more than he deserves."

Tom snored again. Loudly.

"On the other hand," the Doctor continued, "*that* is going to get very annoying."

* * * * *

Jindan sat in the centre of the room, her legs crossed beneath her. There were no windows, no candles. The only light came from the gemstone cradled in her hands, glowing like the fragment of a distant star. She stared deep into its many facets, watching the images dancing within, retreating into memory.

Half a dozen elephants, drawn up in a line outside the Roshnai gate. They are veritably dripping with gold, their *howdah*'s little palaces on the backs. Jindan is riding on the second elephant in line, Mungela waiting on her. The Maharani is dressed in virginal white, a veil hiding her face, and the crowd cheer whenever they catch a glimpse of her behind the *howdah*'s curtain. The lead elephant is reserved for the young Maharajah and for Jawaheer, regent and Jindan's brother. The crowd cheer again, louder this time, when Jawaheer lifts Dalip up so that he can be seen by all. There are no cheers for the regent himself, however, only mutterings of discontent. *If I were ruler*, Jindan thinks, *I would teach them respect, make them love me*. But Jawaheer is weak and feckless and the people despise him for it.

There are panniers strapped to the side of each elephant, each one brimming over with rupees. Horsemen riding below lean down from their saddles, scoop up handfuls of coins and throw them into the crowd, who drop to their knees and scabble for the bounty in the dust. Jawaheer hopes that he can buy their love and perhaps he is right, but he only understands the carrot, not the stick.

A band begins to play and the elephants start to march eastwards, following the line of the walls around the city. Flowers are strewn in their path, cannons are fired in salute and people cram against the ramparts for a better look at their rulers. At the Delhi Gate, the procession halts. Barring their way, stretching half a mile from one end of the line to the other, are four battalions of the *Khalsa*. Red, green, blue, a rainbow in rigid formation, the colours of their coats and turbans signifying caste and religion and regiment.

The cannons have fallen silent. The crowd does little more than whisper. And slowly, very slowly, the *Khalsa* drummers begin to beat of a rhythm. A funereal march. The horsemen again reach for the panniers, throwing rupees by the dozen, by the hundred, into the mass of soldiers. They do not even twitch. The *Khalsa* has not been paid in months. This mere *bakshesh* would not tempt them.

"Take it!" Jawaheer wails. He is standing upright within the *howdah*, a large diamond sparkling in the aigrette on his turban. "Take it as a token of the esteem in which you are held! Take it all!"

Not one in eighty thousand men stirs.

The elephants ease themselves to their knees. Ladders are raised against their flanks and servants help Jindan and Mungela to dismount. But on the lead elephant, Jawaheer has given in to panic. He is arguing with his *mahout*, urging the man to bring the elephant back up, to take him out of the reach of the furious soldiery.

It is too late.

An *Akali* - Jassa? - leaps onto the elephant, drawing his *tulwar* as he scrambles into the *howdah*. Half a dozen of his fellow Sikhs draw their blade in unison, the steel aflame in the sunlight, before following their comrade's example. Jawaheer grovels and pleads, offers money and land and women, but all the *Khalsa* want is a leader and Jawaheer has never, will never, be that. His pleas turn to screams as the blades descend. He tries to escape, tumbling over the rail

of the *howdah*, but he cannot get free. His ankle is caught in the many lengths of silk and he dangles helplessly over the side of the elephant as the *Akalis* continue to hack and slash.

His turban unravels, the aigrette falls. When it hits the ground, the impact knock the diamond free and it rolls through the dust, ending up at Jindan's feet. She crouches down, picks it up, holds it to her breast.

Now, now that it is all over for him, Jawaheer falls from the elephant, his body in ruins. Jindan falls upon his corpse, her brother's blood soaking into her sari. She throws back her head, howling at the sky. The sound she makes is barely recognisable as human. She is one, they are tens of thousands, but confronted by this keening banshee, the *Khalsa* take a step back, perhaps only now recognising the full import of what they have done.

Jindan's fingers twist as she claws at her own body, tearing her clothes. Her veil has fallen away and her face is covered with tears, creating black, bruise-like smudges where the kohl around her eyes had run. She talks to her brother, whispers in his ear, kisses him on the forehead, the cheek, the lips, but he is lost to her now and, as this realisation sinks in, she rounds on those who took him from her.

"Cowards! Butchers! Is this the fabled *Khalsa* justice? A hundred thousand of you against one and he unarmed. Such champions, such heroes. Sons of dogs are what you are. Is this how you serve your Maharajah?"

Little Dalip has hidden himself in Mungela's embrace, sobbing so hard he no longer has the strength to stand.

A bloodied *tulwar* has fallen beside Jawaheer's corpse. Jindan picks it up, her fingers tightening around the hilt.

"He was my brother, but he was your leader, your ruler, your *wazir*. Is this how you show your loyalty? Is this how you honour your oaths? You are less than men, less than swine, less than the lice crawling on the beggar. You are nothing."

She stands. Her unbound hair whirls around her. Her sari is in tatters. She brandishes the *tulwar* in the faces of the soldiers, flicking drops of blood from the blade with each curse that drips from her lips.

"Murderers. Traitors. You claim to be strong and pure and mighty. You wish to test your prowess against the British invaders. Do not make me laugh. If I go to war, I would rather it be at the head of a battalion of *nautch* girls than in the company of elephant dung such as you. Hear me, you children of mice, you will be broken, you will be shattered. Your women shall be widows, your children shall be fatherless. You have shed the blood of my brother, of your *wazir*, and in blood you shall pay a thousand-fold. This I swear."

The image faded from in front of her eyes and she was once again staring at the facets of the diamond, the same diamond that had fallen from her brother's head. She could still feel tiny, uneven spots of dried blood beneath her thumb. The *Khalsa* had been crushed at Sobraon and the British army had been her weapon.

And what of the *Akalis*, the seven men who had actually dealt the killing blow? Her eyes left the diamond and roamed the room, settling on each of the creatures curled on the floor, twisted and wretched. A few of them still looked recognisably human, but that would not last. They were hers now, her tormented playthings, her pets. She had thrown the snake into their bosom and it was devouring them from the inside.

It was no better than they deserved.

* * * * *

Once Tom had been safely put to bed and Lawrence and the Doctor had returned to the dining-table, yet another native, one Val had not spotted before, stepped forward to pour the port.

"Just how many servants have you got?" Val asked Honoria in a hushed voice.

The other woman started counting on her fingers. "At a conservative estimate? Perhaps thirty."

"Thirty?"

"It's the caste system, Valentina. None of them will do anything they consider outside their role. A bearer won't pour the tea, a *khitmutgar* won't pull the *punkah*. In India, it takes five people to do the work that in England would be the job of one."

Val opened her mouth to say something more, but the Doctor caught her eye and gave a small, deliberate shake of his head.

Under ordinary circumstances, this would be the point in the meal when the men and women retired to continue their conversations in different rooms. However, since there were only the four of them, there did not seem to be much point and Val was free to interrogate both her hosts.

"So," she began, "who is this Maharani then?"

"Jindan?" Lawrence said. "She's a strange one. A blend of the prostitute, the tigress and Machiavelli's Prince."

"And how long have you been waiting to use that line?" the Doctor asked.

Lawrence chuckled. "I'll have you know that's from my official report."

"Don't you think you're being a little harsh on her, Henry?" Honoria said.

"Harsh? No, I don't think so," Lawrence replied. "If anything, I admire the woman. She's got the whole Punjab dancing to her tune."

"Or she had until you rolled in and took her city from her," the Doctor pointed out.

"We are here at the request of the *Durbar*, Doctor," Lawrence said.

"Quite," the Doctor said "A request they made after you shattered their army and chased them to the gates of Lahore, correct?"

"But you still haven't told me who Jindan is," Val said, hastening to forestall an argument.

"Jindan was the daughter of Maharajah Runjeet Singh's kennel-keeper," the Doctor began. "Her father kept trying to force the girl on Runjeet, hoping he would make her his queen, in spite of her low birth, and, once she was old enough, Runjeet brought her into his harem."

"It seems the old kennel-keeper may have been on to something," Lawrence said, picking up the story, "because after many years in which she undoubtedly worked her wiles on him, the Maharajah made her his wife. And in return, she gave him a son."

"Always assuming that Dalip is Runjeet's son, of course," the Doctor said. "Given the way Jindan carried on, I doubt even Runjeet was sure."

"Doctor," Lawrence said, "is this really a suitable conversation with ladies present?"

"They're both women of the world, I'm sure," the Doctor replied, "and Miss Rossi did ask."

"I did, I'm sorry," Val said, but Honoria's curiosity had been piqued now.

"So what happened next? Given he's no longer around, I assume Runjeet passed away?"

"Yes, shortly after Dalip was born," Lawrence replied. "Officially, that made Dalip the new Maharajah, but he was just a baby so her Jindan's brother became regent."

"Until he met a sticky end himself," the Doctor said, "leaving Jindan in total control."

"She's still nominally the regent," Lawrence said, "so I suppose I should attend this hunt tomorrow if only to avoid giving offence. You'll come too, won't you, Doctor?"

"Certainly not," the Doctor snapped. "I have better things to do with my time than toady to a Maharani."

A moment of uncomfortable silence stretched taut.

"You're wrong about Jindan having total control though, Doctor," Lawrence said. "The *Khalsa* was where the true power lay."

"You think so?" the Doctor said.

Val raised a hand. "Excuse me? *Khalsa*?"

"The Sikh army," Lawrence explained. "One of the finest military forces I've ever encountered."

"They were," the Doctor said, "but you British made short work of them, didn't you?"

"They attacked us," Lawrence said. "We were defending ourselves."

"With extreme prejudice," the Doctor replied. "How many British soldiers died at Sobraon? Three hundred? Three fifty? And how many Sikhs? Ten thousand? More?"

"There are always casualties in war, Doctor," Lawrence said.

"*That's* your excuse? *That's* how you justify shooting people in the back?"

Val knew that she should intervene before this argument got out of hand, but before she could open her mouth, she was distracted by another voice.

So how close do you think Tom really got to this Maharani?

Val glanced at Honoria, but she was focussed on her husband and anyway the voice had not sounded like hers. If anything, it had sounded more like Val's own. And it was coming from inside her head.

If she's anything like Lawrence describes her, it's not as if she'd have put up much resistance.

Val tried to ignore the voice, focussing instead on the Doctor. He had risen from his chair and was pacing back and forth like a caged tiger.

"The battle had turned against the *Khalsa*. They were hemmed in on three sides, but they refused to surrender." The Doctor's voice was quiet, his narration slow, but both volume and tempo were increasing with every word. "They fell back to the river, slowly, fighting every inch, too brave, too proud to run. There was a wooden bridge across the Sutlej, a pontoon boats of wooden boats strung together, but they weren't tied tight enough, were they? And now the bridge is heaving with retreating Sikhs and the ropes are coming undone and the bridge is collapsing and guns, horses and men alike are thrown into the river. They're thrashing about, impeding one another's progress as they try to find their way to the back, any bank. And what do the brave, noble British soldiery do? Do they show compassion for a beaten foe? *Do they?* No,

they simply adjust the aim of their artillery, their rifles, their muskets and turn the black waters of the Sutlej into a ribbon of blood, choked with the dead and the dying. It must have been like - what's the phrase? - shooting fish in a barrel. Were there screams? Did any of them beg for their lives? Would it have made any difference if they had?"

"I was there, Doctor," Lawrence said. "I don't need you to tell me what it was like."

"But you condone it, don't you?"

"It was Gough's decision, not mine," Lawrence replied, "and I hated it, but yes, Doctor, it was necessary."

"Necessary?" the Doctor exploded, flecks of spittle flying from his lips.

"Yes, necessary," Lawrence shot back with equal vehemence. "You call them beaten. If you'd fought them, you wouldn't say that. They had no concept of surrender, barely one of fear, and if we had let them escape then they would have come at us again. And then how many more would have died. They had to be stopped, crushed completely, there and then. And if our positions had been reversed, do you think they would have shown us any more mercy. The *Khalsa* didn't take prisoners, Doctor, and they butchered our wounded where they fell."

"So you did it to them before they did it to you. Kill or be killed."

Let's give Tom the benefit of the doubt. The voice was back. Maybe it wasn't his idea. We both know that decisiveness isn't his strongest suit.

Val looked down at the table, into her glass of port. It was not her drink of choice and the glass was still full. She could see her reflection in the deep red liquid.

She probably seduced him.

"I wish there had been another way," Lawrence said. He was trying to restore some calm to his voice, but there were still traces of heat underlying his words. "Really I do, Doctor, but it could so easily have been us that were slaughtered in their place and if they hadn't waited quite so long to march on us then it probably would have. In the heat of summer they would have had the advantage, but by attacking in winter they gave that away. It was an error of judgement."

"An error?" The Doctor considered. His earlier anger had vanished, his mood having flipped to academic curiosity. "Perhaps."

"What else could it be?"

Not that Tom would have put up much of a fight. You know what a wandering eye he has.

"I wonder," the Doctor said. "Suppose, just suppose, there was someone who had the strength of personality to control the *Khalsa*, to hold them in check for six months longer than ideal for her own design."

"You're talking about Jindan."

"Don't tell me you haven't already thought about it. Jindan knew that when the *Khalsa* marched against you that you wouldn't simply send them on their way with a bloody nose. Why else do you think she sent you all that secret information about the movements of her own troops?"

You wouldn't even be here, Val, if Tom hadn't fallen for a pretty face.

"You're... remarkably well informed, Doctor," Lawrence said.

"Well, I have something of an advantage in that area."

"Even so, you're suggesting that she deliberately sent her own military marching to its destruction. It's brazen, I'll give you that, but it's also completely mad. I mean why would she do such a thing?"

And how many women have turned his head since he started travelling in the TARDIS? Fickle doesn't even begin to cover it.

"Revenge, that oldest of motives," the Doctor said. "The *Khalsa* killed her brother in front of her. And if that isn't good enough for you, you've already suggested that the *Khalsa* held the real power in the Punjab. She was eliminating a rival."

He's just playing with your feelings. You don't think Tom ever really cared for you, do you? Or that Pax did?

Lawrence drained the last of his port. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but I still don't see it. If that was her plan, it's backfired quite spectacularly. She's practically invited the British to occupy her city and she has even less power now than she had before."

"Yes, I suppose that is the flaw in my argument."

He hurt you, Val. He doesn't deserve you. The question is what are you going to do about it?

"Who are you?" Val whispered to the reflection in the port.

Her image smiled at her, the features blurring, taking on a feline aspect.

Boo! It said.

Val started, spilling port across the table-cloth. Honoria was on her feet in an instant, mopping at the spill while Val stammered her apologies. The Doctor cast her a baleful glance.

"Miss Rossi," he said, "was there something you want to add?"

Val struggled to recall what Lawrence and the Doctor had been discussing. Something about the Maharani using the British to destroy her own military.

"I was just telling the Doctor," Lawrence said, coming to her aid, "that the idea that Jindan manipulated us into destroying the *Khalsa* for her makes no sense given that she's effectively had relinquish all her former power for us."

"That's true," Val began, her mouth dry, "unless..."

"Unless?"

"Well, unless she's still manipulating you. Maybe her plan isn't finished yet and she's got you exactly where she wants you." She caught Lawrence's look. "Sorry, it's a stupid idea."

"Not finished yet. That's..." The Doctor was not quite so ready to dismiss the notion. "You know, Miss Rossi, that's quite an intriguing suggestion. On reflection, Lawrence, I think I will join you for that hunt tomorrow. It's well past time I met this Maharani Jindan of yours."

* * * * *

The hunting party met in the garden within one walled courtyard of the Fort. The sun had yet to burn away the early morning mist, but it had all the makings of yet another hot, bright day. There were four in the British contingent, not counting Lawrence's native bearers. The Doctor's jibe the previous evening about her not paying enough attention to what was going on had stung and Val had insisted on accompanying him and Lawrence. Honoria had been mortified,

but, when she realised that Val's resolve was unshakeable, she had loaned her some of her own riding clothes. Honoria was shorter than Val so she had even gone to the trouble of having her *ayah* make adjustments to the garments to ensure they were a comfortable fit.

William Hodson was the fourth member of the group.

"I'm a quite abysmal sportsman," Lawrence had confided in the Doctor, "but Hodson lives for this kind of thing. He'll see that British honour is maintained even as his commanding officer is letting the side down. And it will do him good to get out from behind a desk. He never gives less than his best, of course, but an administrator he is not."

Val worked her tongue around her mouth, probing her teeth. She had noticed in the mirror that morning that her canines appeared to be longer than usual and she was concerned that she was suffering from receding gums. When all this was over, she would have to ask the Doctor to stop off in the twenty-first century so she could book herself in for a dental check-up. She did not much fancy trusting her mouth to the hands of mid-nineteenth century dentistry.

"How much longer do you think she'll keep us waiting?" she asked.

The courtyard was filling up, not just with the requisite bearers and *shikaris*, but also with a number of people who looked like significant figures at the court. Of the Maharani herself, however, there was no sign.

"This is nothing," Lawrence said. "Jindan will want to demonstrate her power to her people by refusing to kowtow to the new British Resident. To be honest, you'd probably find it easier to get an audience if I *wasn't* here."

"Hush, you two," the Doctor scolded them. "Someone's coming."

The two figures descending the steps from the *Diwan-e-Aam* looked, to Val at least, like a native version of Laurel and Hardy. One was short and round and he did not so much walk as waddle. He wore a colourful, heavily embroidered coat that trailed on the floor behind him and had a bejewelled sabre strapped to his hip. The weapon looked magnificent, but Val doubted it would be much use in an actual fight. 'Hardy's' companion, by contrast, was tall and slim, dressed in simple, unadorned white. He had bright, intelligent eyes that glanced to each of them in turn, assessing them swiftly before moving on.

"Lal. Tej." Lawrence *salaamed*. "It's good to see you."

"Likewise, Lawrence sahib." The men returned his greeting.

"Won't the Maharani be joining us?"

"She will meet us at the stables," "Laurel" said. "Perhaps you could introduce us to your guests as we walk."

The pair began to set out across the courtyard, Lawrence falling into step beside them.

"Lal Singh, Tej Singh, may I present the Doctor and his associate Miss Valentina Rossi. You already know Lieutenant Hodson."

"Indeed, indeed." 'Hardy' - Tej Singh - leaned closer to the British officer. "I see that you've chosen to bring your own spear on this expedition."

"I prefer to fight with my own weapons," Hodson said stiffly. "I know their balance and how they've been looked after."

"I'm sure Lieutenant Hodson means no disrespect," Lawrence added swiftly.

"None taken, none taken," Tej assured him. "Your Lieutenant Hodson is clearly a warrior after my own heart."

"Tej here is the commander of the Maharani's military forces," Lawrence explained, "and Lal..."

"Is the Maharani's consort," Lal said before Lawrence could finish his sentence.

"Just her consort?" the Doctor asked.

"None of us are 'just' anything," Lal replied, "or are you 'just' a doctor."

"Touché."

Tej had turned his attentions on Val.

"So pray tell, my beautiful flower, what brings you to our humble city."

"Unhappy accident," Val said, hoping to shut him up.

He was undeterred, however. "Oh, we must do what we can to improve your mood, we must. You like the hunt, no? Perhaps the radiant blossom would like to see the trophies I have bagged in my time. It would be my pleasure, to show them to you in my chambers."

Val had had more of this than she could stand. She raised a hand to strike Tej, her nails sparking like razors.

Lal Singh smoothly inserted himself between Val and her pray.

"Tell me, Miss Rossi," he said, "your name, it does not strike me as being British."

Val could already feel her temper cooling. "I'm part Italian by birth," she said

"Is that so?" Lal said. "I know so little of Italy. Does it differ very much from Britain?"

For the remainder of the stroll to the stables, Val entertained Lal with her descriptions of Britain and Italy - admittedly not of this time period, though he was not to know that - while Tej Singh bobbed around them, trying and failing to get a word in edgeways. As they passed under the arch the separated the main part of the Fort from the stables, Val's words trailed away mid-sentence.

"She makes quite an impression, doesn't she?" Lal said.

Directly ahead was an elephant caparisoned in a livery of blue and gold. It glittered with precious stones and silver bangles shone where they hung from ivory tusks. A *howdah*, like a giant silver birdcage, rested on the elephant's back and within the *howdah* sat -

"Maharani Jindan, I presume. And the Maharajah. This is truly an honour, your majesty."

The Doctor bowed low, which seemed to please the Maharani immensely. Mungela was sitting next to her, holding little Maharajah Dalip in her lap. The boy was protesting furiously, trying to escape through the bars of the *howdah*, but Mungela's grip was firm.

"You must be the Doctor," Jindan called down to him. "I've heard so much about you."

"All lies, your majesty."

"I hope not."

So this was Tom's Maharani. Val could not see the appeal. In her view, the woman was carrying both too much flesh and too much makeup. *What is it that Tom sees in her?* she wondered. *And what does it matter to me anyway?*

Lal Singh clapped his hands and the *syce* led out the horses. One of the grooms led a chestnut gelding over to Val, perhaps fifteen hands tall. She had learned a fair bit about horses during her time in Camelot and she stepped forward to inspect the animal, but, when it saw her, its eyes widened, its ears pricked up and it reared away from her, whinnying plaintively. The *syce* snatched at the reins, trying to calm the horse.

"A thousand apologies, *memsahib*," the *syce* said. "It is normally much better behaved than this. I will fetch another."

The replacement horse - a grey with white stockings - behaved exactly the same as the first.

"What seems to be the trouble, Miss Rossi?" the Doctor asked, striding over.

Val gestured to the horse. "The animals seem to have taken a dislike to me for some reason."

The Doctor leaned in close and sniffed at her before she had a chance to react. "Maybe it's your perfume."

"But I'm not wearing any," Val protested.

The Doctor was not listening. He was standing close to the grey, stroking its muzzle while whispering in its ear. Slowly, the horse calmed. The Doctor produced something from a pocket and offered it to the horse who snatched it from the palm of his hand.

"Jelly baby?" Val asked.

"Polo mint." The Doctor threw the packet to Val. "Your turn."

"Doctor, I really don't think this is a good idea."

"Nonsense, you need to earn her trust. Now go on."

Val took a mint from the packet and, cupping it in her right hand, gingerly held it beneath the horse's nose. The horse looked at her warily then its nostril's flared and it gobbled up the mint, leaving a gobbet of horse saliva in its place.

"See, she likes you," the Doctor declared.

Val looked around for something to wipe her hand on, eventually settling for simply shaking it in the air until it dried.

Tej Singh waddled over and offered a spear to the Doctor.

"From my own personal collection," he declared.

"Not really my thing," the Doctor said, taking the spear from Tej and handing it to Val, "but I'm sure Miss Rossi will be able to make good use of it."

Tej looked as though he had swallowed a fly.

The bamboo haft of the spear was taller than Val was, the slim steel head almost as long as her hand.

"I never expected to have to kill anything, Doctor," Val whispered to him.

"Hopefully you won't have to," the Doctor replied, "but, in this company, I'd rather you had something with which to defend yourself. Humour me. Now up you get."

Using both hands, the Doctor launched Val onto the back of the grey, which this time did not protest, and then started to show her how best to hold the spear.

"But mother," came a wail from the *howdah* above them, "I want to ride in the hunt."

"Oh, very well, Dalip," Jindan said with weary resignation. "Tej, prepare a horse for the Maharajah. I am placing him in your care, do you understand?"

"It will be my honour," Tej replied, bowing low.

"It will be your death if anything happens to my son," Jindan assured him.

With a gleeful grin plastered across his face, Dalip scrambled down from the back of the elephant and went running into the stable to choose his mount.

"Doctor," Jindan called, "if you're not planning to spear anything today, perhaps you would like to ride up here and keep us company?"

"How could I refuse a royal command," he called back. He had a final piece of advice for Val. "Keep your wits about you," he said, "and trust no one."

"I never do," Val replied.

The *shikaris*, the native huntsmen, set out on foot, ahead of riders. They were acting as beaters to drive the boar back towards the hunt in a not dissimilar matter to a grouse shoot in the Home Counties. After half an hour or so of gossip and not entirely patient waiting - during which time Val more than once contemplated putting Tej out of her misery with the sharp end of her spear - Lal Singh gave the signal and the riders moved out, which the Maharani's consort in the lead. The elephant, spurred into motion by the *mahout* sitting on the back of its head, walked some distance behind the horses, so as not to frighten off the boar by the mere fact of its presence.

They rode north-west out of the city, following a path between two hills until they reached the edge of a large, open plain, stretching to the horizon, which was dotted by thickets of weedy trees and rocky outcrops. Here the riders spread out, forming a wide arrowhead, like geese in flight, with Lal at its point. Dalip wanted to ride out in front and Val could not help but smile at the sight of Tej holding him back with a hand on the little Maharajah's gold turban. She could hear the *shikaris* now, maybe half a mile or more away, making enough noise to disturb the animals, but not to frighten them. No one wanted the boar to panic - or worse, to attack - just to move along, out into the open.

Somewhere overhead, a mynah bird cawed.

Val blinked. Dark shapes had materialised in the distance, the first of the *shikaris*. Being driven ahead of them, fast-moving herd of pigs rocketed through the grass. Almost as one, the horses surged forward at a gallop. Val tried to hang back, but her grey had other ideas. Clearly the horse was an old hand at pig-sticking and was not about to let this opportunity go to waste, whatever the qualms of her rider. All Val could do was cling on to the reins with one hand and the haft of her spear with the other.

Hearing the thunder of approaching hooves, the pigs scattered. The smaller members of the herd, the sows and the piglets, peeled away, seeking cover beneath bushes and scrub and stands of green sugar cane. They left behind them the large males, dark, angular slabs of muscle racing into the distance as fast as their stumpy, powerful legs would carry them.

Dalip whooped with delight as he raced in pursuit. Tej called desperately after him, by the boy had slipped the general's grasp, leaving Tej with only a rapidly unravelling *puggaree*. Dalip narrowed his eyes and levelled his spear, a boar in his sights. The animal was sprinting for a copse of trees, but Dalip steered his horse between the boar and safety, cutting off any escape. Not wanting to be trapped in open ground, the pig lunged for Dalip. Val's heart was in her mouth and Tej was squealing louder than the pig, but the Maharajah skills belied his age. He tugged on his reins, causing his mount to shy, not by much, but by just enough that the boar's headlong charge sent him running by and not through the horse. And as the boar passed below, Dalip brought down the point of his spear. He timed the thrust perfectly, finding the weak spot between the animal's shoulder-blades and skewering it to the ground.

Dalip's little fist punched the air. Val and Tej shared a relieved glance and a sigh of relief. Then the colour drained from Tej Singh's face.

The Maharajah had jumped down from his horse to examine his kill. All his attention was on his prize so he could not see what Tej saw, did not know what was causing his guardian to yell himself hoarse. A second boar had emerged from behind cluster of trees, murderous intent in its tiny eyes.

"Dalip!" Tej screamed.

The boy looked at him, confusion writ large across his face.

"Behind you!" Val cried.

Now Dalip turned. *Now* he saw the boar advancing towards him, wickedly curved tusks glistening. *Now* he screamed.

There was not time for him to remount his horse, so Dalip simply turned and ran, fear adding wings to his feet, fear that multiplied every time he glanced over his shoulder.

Tej kicked his horse in its flanks and drove forward. He was more than twice as far from Dalip than the boar was, but he did not let that stop him. His mount ate up the ground in long, swift strides which the boar could not hope to match and as he closed on his target, Val dared to let herself hope. Tej was leaning out of his saddle, reaching out with a short, pudgy arm, intending to scoop Dalip up as he rode by and carry him back to safety.

Val willed him on.

Tej's fingertips brushed Dalip's wrist.

Val stood up in her stirrups.

But Tej had misjudged it. Rather than hauling Dalip up onto his horse, Tej found himself yanked out of his saddle, ending up in a heap on the floor next to the boy he meant to rescue while his horse galloped away. He scrambled to his feet, pushing Dalip behind him, hoping to buy the Maharajah a few precious second by using himself as a human shield. Val knew in her heart it was hopeless. The boar would simply tear through the pair of them.

Val was in motion. There seemed to be no transition to it. One moment she had been standing watching with mounting horror, the next she was galloping straight at the boar. She had no idea if the act had been her decision or that of her horse, but she did not have the time to worry about it. It was all she could do to hang on for dear life and try to aim her spear properly. The wind tugged at her hair. Dust was in her eyes, causing tears to stream down her cheeks. Her spear bounced and wove with each beat of her mount, but she gritted her teeth, fought to hold the weapon steady, and focussed grimly on the target on front of her.

The boar heard her coming. It turned aside at the last minute, denying Val a clean kill, but the blade of her spear still opened a deep wound in its shoulder. Val tried to turn her horse, but she was a less skilled rider than the Maharajah and, by the time she had arced about in a wide circle, the boar was moving. With an injured shoulder, it knew that it could not outrun the horse, so rather than trying to flee, the boar had instead decided to stand and fight. It charged.

Val's horse reared up, trying to keep its belly out of the reach of the boar's savage tusks. Val jabbed down with the spear, but the charge had been a feint and the blade caught only empty air. The boar had already executed a tight turn that brought it up against the horse's right flank. Val tried to bring the spear around, but the angle was awkward. Rather than digging

deep into the boar's flesh, the blade skipped and scraped a shallow path down its back. The spear's haft bent then broke, shattering in a cloud of bamboo splinters.

The boar howled in pain and then fixed its red eyes on the source of that pain, the rider, not the horse.

"Miss Rossi! Catch!"

Val looked over her shoulder, saw Lieutenant Hodson draw back his arm and hurl his spear in her direction.

The boar tensed, coiling its muscles.

Val snatched the spear out of the air with both hands.

The boar launched itself at her.

Val pivoted in the saddle, thrusting the spear at the oncoming boar with all her strength.

The impact threw her from her horse and she landed heavily on her back. She threw up her arms to protect herself from assault by teeth and tusks, but it never came. Val opened her eyes, blinking back blood, and came face to face with the ugly visage of her assailant. The boar simply stared at her, silent and still. And quite, quite dead.

Val was still holding on to the haft of Hodson's spear, unable to unclench her hands and let go. She was also holding up the boar she had impaled. Her spear had entered through its open mouth and exited just above the base of its spine, killing it instantly. Val's hands started to tremble. There was blood on her clothes, on her face, in her hair. She could even taste it at the back of her throat. She should have been horrified, terrified, numb.

Instead, all she felt was gloriously alive.

* * * * *

In the *howdah*, the passengers on the elephant were oblivious to the threat to the Maharajah. Jindan's focus was entirely on the Doctor, as was Mungela's, though the Doctor was studiously ignoring the latter's attentions. Well, Jindan thought, she would just have to work her own magic on this man.

"Doctor," she said, "I'm so glad we have this opportunity to talk in private."

"In private?" the Doctor said, his gaze travelling to Mungela.

"I could hardly dare meet with you alone, could I, Doctor?" Jindan said. "What if you took it into your head to try and do away with me?"

"Do you think that's likely?" There was something predatory about the Doctor's smile. Jindan liked that.

"I hardly know what to think. Your friend's description of you is difficult to credit."

"Brooker should know better than to run his mouth off."

"Don't be too harsh on him, Doctor. I can be very persuasive."

Jindan put a hand on the Doctor's thigh, but he showed no reaction to her touch.

"I'm sure you can, your majesty," the Doctor said, "but that kind of thing is wasted on me."

"Are you sure?" Jindan shifted the placement of her fingers.

The Doctor brushed her hand away. "Completely."

"A pity," Jindan said. "Most men in my experience struggle to resist my advances."

"Perhaps you need a wider circle of acquaintances."

"Perhaps I do. Your Mr Brooker tells me that you are a traveller. You must have quite a wealth of experiences."

"I seen a fair few things," the Doctor replied.

"And what would it take to get you to share those experiences with my son? He is in need of a good tutor."

"I'm sure Lal is an excellent advisor to the Maharajah," the Doctor said.

"Lal is... adequate," Jindan said.

"But Lal isn't British, is he?" the Doctor said. "And with the British becoming such important players in the Punjab, you need someone within their ranks who can tell you how they think, what they are planning, how to put them in their proper place, am I right? Why haven't you approached Colonel Lawrence?"

"I have, Doctor, but he rebuffed me," Jindan said, scowling. "He loves only his wife and he claims informing on his country would be dishonourable."

"Good old devout, incorruptible Lawrence." The Doctor laughed cruelly. "That must have been quite a blow for you."

"It displeased me," Jindan said. "It isn't wise to displease me, Doctor."

"I'll bear that in mind. Did Brooker displease you too?"

"Hardly that," Jindan said. "Your friend was most compliant, but why waste time on the servant when you can have the master."

"That isn't quite how our relationship works," the Doctor corrected her.

"But you are the man I want, Doctor. I've no doubt about that."

"Very flattering, I'm sure, your majesty, but you'll just have to manage without me. I'm not for sale."

"Every man has his price," Jindan said. "What is it you most desire? Women, money, power? I can give you all three."

"Your majesty, you don't have anything I could possibly want."

"Is that so?" Jindan reached into the folds of her sari and produced a diamond the size of her fist.

"The Koh-i-Noor," the Doctor said. "The Mountain of Light."

"You recognise it?"

"Of course. But I thought you agreed to hand it over to the British after the war."

"They cannot have it," Jindan said. "It belongs to my son and to me."

"Yet you would use it to buy my loyalty?"

"Nothing so crude." The diamond had begun to glow. "Look deep into its heart, Doctor. Do you see that pinprick of light, like a star trapped in ice?"

The Doctor leaned in closer, the light reflected in his pale eyes.

"That's not a reflection," he said. "The light is actually being generated from within the diamond. It's like it's fused around some kind of phosphorescent impurity."

"It's a gift from the gods, Doctor."

"Unlikely. No, this is a quirk of geology. Certain meteorite fragments might radiate light in this way."

Jindan smiled mockingly at him. "Do you know the history of the Koh-i-Noor, Doctor?"

"I know it was mined in Golconda, probably sometime in the twelfth century," the Doctor replied without looking up from the stone, "and that it passed from the kings of Kakatiya to the Mughal emperors in Delhi, from Nader Shah of Persia and to Ahmed Shah Abdali of Afghanistan and from there into the hands of Runjeet Singh, the father of your child."

"But you don't know where the stone really came from, do you, Doctor?" Jindan allowed the hand holding the diamond to drift to her left. The Doctor's eyes followed it. "It was Nader Shah who first named it Koh-i-Noor, but it has a much older, much more potent name. Have you heard the legend of the Syamantaka, Doctor, the jewel worn around the neck of the Sun God? When the world was young, he bequeathed the stone that contained his light to a mortal who presented it to his brother, who was killed for it by a lion who in its turn was killed by the bear that walked like a man. The Syamantaka has always been an object of desire, Doctor, for men and for beasts and for those who are at once both and neither."

"I can well believe it," the Doctor said dreamily.

The light was drawing him in, like a siren's call leading him to disaster on the rocks. Just a few moments more...

"Even Lord Krishna had an eye for the stone," Jindan continued soothingly, "and he fought the bear and defeating him, recovering the Syamantaka. But he returned the jewel to the mortal chosen by the Sun God, taking for himself only the bear's daughter for his wife. And the jewel passed from one mortal man to another until..." The Doctor's eyes had glazed over, his breathing had slowed to almost nothing. He was under. "Until it ended. Up. Here."

Jindan focussed on the diamond, channelling her willpower through the stone and into the Doctor's mind. There he was, clinging desperately to the rock, waiting for her to come and save him. She swept imperiously through the surf to his rescue and undying gratitude. Except she did not. The water rose up against her, spinning, tugging, churning. She had been wrong. The Doctor was not struggling, he was standing proud, lord of all he surveyed. His eyes spared no pity for Jindan as the whirlpool sucked her down.

Shapes clawed at her, figures with murderous intent. Faceless men in black, sword-wielding reptiles, implacable armoured knights. And sweeping up at her with a speed that belied its size, a thing of nightmares, all tentacles and hate. It reached for her, wrapping her up in its limbs, squeezing tighter and tighter and tighter and...

Jindan was snapped out of her trance by a pain in her wrist. The Doctor was gripping her tight enough to grind the bones together.

"Doctor," she said, struggling to regain her composure, "you're hurting me."

"I don't appreciate people poking around inside my head."

"Who are you, Doctor?"

The Doctor's answer was drowned out by a scream.

* * * * *

"You were magnificent," Tej Singh said, swamping Val in a fleshy embrace the moment she had found her feet. "Magnificent! How can I ever thank you? Perhaps," he added hopefully, "we could discuss the matter back in my chambers at the palace?"

Did this guy never learn?

"You can start by letting me go," Val suggested.

Lieutenant Hodson was on his haunches, examining her kill.

"A fine beast," he was saying, "and one of the largest I've seen. You'll want the tusks, of course."

Val blinked. "I will?"

"A trophy," Hodson explained. "I know a chap who can have them mounted for you if you like."

"No, thank you," Val said. The mental image of the boar's head hanging from the wall of her room was distinctly unpleasant. "Keep them for yourself if you like."

"I wouldn't dream of claiming credit for a kill I had no hand in," Hodson said, a wistful look in his eye. "Shame to let a fine specimen go to waste, though."

"I wouldn't say you had no hand in it," Val said. "If you hadn't thrown me your spear..."

Placing a booted foot on the boar's shoulder, Hodson yanked his spear free of the corpse and offered it to Val.

"Keep it," he said.

"I couldn't."

"If you won't accept the tusks," Miss Rossi, "at least take this as a token of the achievement," Hodson said. "You've earned it."

Val accepted the weapon reluctantly. She could not think of a way to refuse that would not cause offence. At least the weapon had a certain beauty about it, unlike the boar's head.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll treasure it."

Hodson grunted and looked away, colour rising in his cheeks.

"Let me see, let me see!"

Dalip had recovered from his fright and was shouldering his way through the adults to examine the kill. He was disappointed that Val's boar was larger than his own.

"Would you like the tusks for yourself, your majesty?" Val suggested. "After all, it was you who lured it out of hiding for me."

"I did, didn't I?" Dalip beamed, puffing up his chest with pride.

The bonhomie was shattered by a blood-curdling scream. Hodson snapped to attention.

"That's Colonel Lawrence," he said.

* * * * *

"This way, Lawrence *sahib*," Lal Singh said, leading Lawrence away from the rest of the party.

"There's better hunting over here."

"If you say so, Lal," Lawrence replied, "but don't you think we should wait for the others to catch up?"

"And let them bag the best kills? I don't think so."

They rode down a sandy hillside until they were out of sight of the rest of the group. The bushes were thicker here, the clusters of trees more numerous and there was a strip of jungle up ahead.

"I think we may have taken a wrong turn, Lal," Lawrence said, laughing nervously. "I may not know much about pig-sticking, but you can't expect me to hunt boar in there."

"Not *in* the jungle, no," Lal agreed, "but this close to safety the prey gets complacent. See there?"

Lawrence followed the line indicated by Lal Singh's outstretched finger. He had to squint against the sun, but he could just make out a dark shape foraging in the undergrowth.

"Good hunting!" Lal said, slapping Lawrence's horse on the rump.

Startled, the horse broke into a canter, which quickened to a gallop as the animal bore down on its target. Lawrence readied his spear. He did not really expect to achieve a kill, but he was determined at least not to disgrace himself in front of the Maharani's consort.

As they closed the distance to the prey, Lawrence realised that his target was not the boar he had first thought it was. A buffalo, perhaps? But no, the shape was all wrong. A tiger? Then the creature reared up on its hind legs and Lawrence realised that what he was charging was a man, but a man like no other he had ever seen.

He was naked from the waist up, his skin covered by blue-black fur beneath which muscles upon muscles rippled as he stretched. His face and jaw were distorted, pulled forward to form a muzzle and when the creature opened its mouth, it was filled with fangs like curved daggers.

Lawrence tried to rein in the horse, but the creature was faster. In a blur of motion, it was at his side, ripping out his horse's throat. The horse collapsed and Lawrence could not free himself from the saddle in time. He cried out as the horse landed heavily on his leg. He had heard the bone crack and the wave of pain that swept through him made him feel light-headed.

The half-man, half-beast towered over him, luminous eyes gleaming. Questions bobbed about in Lawrence's mind, but he did not have the strength to turn them into words. The creature licked blood from its whiskers. It raised a hand decorated with wicked-looking claws. Lawrence thought of his sons, Alick and Harry, safely back in England with his sister and her husband. And he thought of Honoria, waiting for him at the Residency and he wished that he had had the chance to say sorry for leaving her all alone.

The claws scythed through the air.

Lawrence screamed.

* * * * *

The grey mare protested as it was forced to run faster and faster, but Val ignored it as she tried desperately to keep pace with Hodson's gelding. The pair of them topped the rise in time to see the black-furred demon tearing open Lawrence's chest.

"Colonel!" Hodson bellowed as he tried to coax yet more speed out of his mount.

Val gave up on her mare, vaulting to the ground, spear still clenched in her fist. Her heart pounded in her chest as she ran, overtaking a surprised Hodson and descending on Lawrence's attacked like a Fury.

The creature's eyes widened, jaw hanging open in surprise.

"You!" it snarled.

Val slammed into him, her momentum carrying them both away from Lawrence's motionless body.

"Leave him alone!" she yelled.

The creature scrambled out from under her. It did not even bother to fight back, simply raced for the concealing shadows of the jungle. Val was on her feet an instant later, blood pounding in her ears.

The creature dropped to all fours to increase its speed through the underbrush and Val fought the temptation to do the same. Startled birds took to the air as they approached, langur monkeys hooted. Branches snatched at Val's hair and clothes, vines tried to snag the haft of her spear, but she simply tore through all obstacles, barely slowing.

They were through the belt of jungle now and on the shore of a small lake. Buffalo and blackbucks who were sharing the opportunity to drink, scattered as the predators burst into the open. The creature that had attacked Lawrence skidded in the black mud and the moment it took him to recover his balance was all the Val needed. She led with the butt of the spear, thrusting it between the creature's ankles, tripping him. He fell onto his back, half in and half out of the water, and Val jumped on top of him, her knees on his chest. She held the haft of the spear across his throat and slowly began to apply pressure.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Why did you attack us?"

"Why ask?" The creature was struggling to breathe. "You know who I am."

"I've never seen you before in my life," Val said, but there was a lie at the heart of her words. There *was* something familiar about the creature pinned beneath her. She felt a kinship with him.

The creature saw the confusion in her eyes. "You *do* recognise me. How did you escape? What are you doing here? Why are you associating with the prey instead of hunting them? Have you lost your edge?"

"I've lost nothing!" Val snapped, breathing heavily.

The voice was hers, but the words seemed to come from somewhere else. She struggled to maintain control. She lifted the spear in her left hand, gripping it near the blade and aiming the point at the creature's left eye.

"Tell me what I want to know," she said.

"Or what?" the creature asked.

"Or... or I'll kill you!"

It was an empty threat. Or was it? In her mind, she could see herself bringing down the spear, saw the creature's face split open like an overripe fruit, covering her in blood. She held him down while he flailed ineffectually, waited for the death rattle the signalled the passing of his spirit. In her mind, she took his life and she enjoyed it.

She dropped the spear, burying her face in her hands, overcome with waves of conflicting emotions. The creature took his chance, kicking up and out with both his legs, catapulting Val over him and into the lake. She plunged headfirst into the algae-filled water. It was surprisingly cold and she floundered for several moments before finally surfacing, gasping for air.

By the time she clambered back onto the shore, the creature had disappeared. Val could not decide if she was frustrated or relieved.

* * * * *

"Out of the way, I'm a doctor." The Doctor skidded to his knees at Lawrence's side, his *achkan* billowing behind him like a cape. "I need alcohol to clean his wounds and something with which to bind them. Your shirt."

Hodson shrugged off his shirt and offered it to the Doctor. The latter barely glanced up. "Tear it into strips, man," he snapped. "Do I have to do everything?"

Tej Singh joined them, having recovered his wayward horse. "What can I do to help?"

"Alcohol." The Doctor held out a hand. "Quickly, or do you really expect me to believe those saddlebags are empty?"

Tej handed him a bottle and the Doctor doused a clean handkerchief with the bottle's contents before starting to clean the dirt from the wounds in Lawrence's chest. Lawrence hissed, his whole body tensing with pain.

"So you're still conscious, Lawrence," the Doctor said. "That's good." He turned to Hodson. "These wounds are deep and he'll need a surgeon. I assume there's one back at the Residency?" Hodson nodded. "I'll patch him up as best I can for now, but you'll need to be very gentle when you carry him home. You and you." He used his little finger to point at Tej and Dalip. "Make yourselves useful and start constructing a stretcher."

"Me?" Dalip asked.

"Do you see any other maharajahs standing around wasting air? Get a move on!" The Doctor held up another hand. "Bandages!"

By the time Val returned, still dripping wet, they were manhandling Lawrence onto the makeshift stretcher.

"Gently," the Doctor was saying. "Gently!" He looked up. "Miss Rossi, what happened to you?"

"I went after the thing that did this to Colonel Lawrence," she said, "but it got away."

"You did what?" The Doctor stepped away from the stretcher and marched right into Val's personal space. "Have you any idea how dangerous these things are? *Have you?*"

"No, I don't," Val snapped back, "because you won't share with the rest of us."

The Doctor looked away, stung.

"You know what these things are, don't you?" Val said, softening her tone.

"Yes, I do," he said, still not meeting her eyes. "I've encountered them before. When they killed me."

* * * * *

"Stay with the stretcher, your majesty," Tej Singh said.

"But..."

"Stay or I'll tell your mother."

Dalip pouted, but he stayed put.

Leaving the Maharajah behind, Tej hurried across the dry scrub. Lal had climbed back onto his horse and was about to ride back to the city when Tej grabbed hold of the bridle.

"I want a word with you."

"I'm in a hurry, Tej," Lal said. "It will have to wait."

Tej ignored him. "You led Lawrence out here. Why?"

"We were looking for boar. That was the whole point of the day, Tej, after all."

"Try again, Lal. You weren't expecting to find boar, not out here."

"Then what was I doing?" Lal tried to make a joke of it, but it fell on deaf ears.

"You tell me."

"I don't have time for this, Tej."

Lal tried to pull away, but Tej refused to relinquish his hold on the bridle.

"I know you had a hand in this, Lal," Tej said. "What I don't know is how much *she* knows about it."

"How much do you think, Tej? She doesn't just know about it, it was her idea."

"But why?" Tej took a step back. "The British are our allies now. We signed a treaty."

"At the barrel of a gun."

Tej held up his hands. "Even so, we can't afford to make enemies of them now. If they want to retaliate, we don't have an army to fight them with."

"And whose fault is that, Tej?" Lal asked. "Who sabotaged the bridge at Sobraon?"

"I was following Jindan's orders," Tej protested.

"As was I," Lal said.

* * * * *

"They don't have a name for themselves," the Doctor said, "but they are sometimes referred to as Therianthropes."

"You mean like werewolves?"

"Therianthropes, Miss Rossi. Not lycanthropes."

"And the difference is?"

The Doctor pointed at Lieutenant Hodson.

"It's Greek, isn't it?" Hodson said. "Lycanthrope comes from *lukos*, meaning wolf, and *anthropos*, meaning man. Literally, wolf-man."

"Very good," the Doctor said. "Dr Arnold would be proud."

"Never expected to have much use for the classics out here," Hodson admitted. "Now Therianthrope, that's *anthropos* again, but combined with *therion*, which means... beast?" The Doctor nodded. "So a lycanthrope is specifically a wolf, but a Therianthrope can be any animal."

"Any predator," the Doctor corrected, "at least in this context. That's all they are, really. Predators. And everything else in the universe is their prey."

"So how come I've never heard of them?" Val asked.

"Because they were banished, back when the universe was still in its infancy. The other races could not coexist with them, a race that knows no pity or compassion and restraint, just hunger and desire and need. So the Therianthropes were rounded up and stripped of their physical form before being locked away in an infinite prison that exists outside of space and time, somewhere they could act out their hunt for all eternity without, so it was believed, doing anyone any harm."

"Why didn't they just kill them?" Hodson asked. "I mean, if these things are as dangerous as you say, it seems the obvious solution."

"Yes, it does seem obvious, doesn't it," the Doctor said, "but, unlike the Therianthropes, their captors were possessed of pity and compassion and restraint and they were unwilling to kill an enemy simply for acting in accordance with its own nature."

"And you don't agree?" Val asked, picking up on the Doctor's tone.

"I'm sure some of my predecessors would have," he replied, "but what you have to understand is that the Therianthropes don't kill to eat or to defend themselves. They kill for the sake of killing and it's a desire that's never sated. Set them loose amongst their prey and they will hunt until they are the only ones left. There isn't a harmonious balance to be achieved here, we and they cannot coexist."

"So your saying it's kill or be killed, is that it?"

"I have some previous experience with these creatures, Miss Rossi. I know what I'm talking about."

"You said they killed you," Val reminded him.

"An earlier Doctor," the Doctor replied. "He encountered the Therianthropes in twenty-first century New Orleans, not so long before your own time, Miss Rossi. You see, there were cracks in the walls of the perfect prison and a determined Therianthrope could wriggle through those cracks, particularly if it had help from the other side. Lacking physical forms of their own, the escaped spirits possess host bodies, reshaping them in their own image and overwhelming the host's identity."

"And that's what happened to you?"

"That's what happened to *him*." The Doctor stressed the distinction between himself and his eighth incarnation. "He lost himself completely and became that which he hated the most."

"He became the monster."

The Doctor nodded. "The last Doctor, the one you know, also crossed swords with the Therianthropes. They almost did for him too. That time the Therianthropes were searching for something - for *someone*, rather - that was out of their reach. It's the only time I've known their desire force them into a partnership with another race. It was a one-sided partnership, of course, they bonded with them subtly enough to give their hosts freedom to bring their own skills to bear, suppressing their base desires, but it was only a matter of time before the beast came to the fore." He closes his eyes. "It is a terrible thing to have someone feast on your soul."

"The soul? Isn't that a bit of an airy-fairy concept for you, Doctor?"

The Doctor turned on her. "Tell me how airy-fairy it is, Miss Rossi, when *your* soul has someone else's fingerprints all over it!"

"And you came here to hunt these things, Doctor?" Hodson interjected, trying to turn his attention away from Val.

"The TARDIS alerts me to things she thinks I might find of interest," the Doctor replied, "and Therianthropes are definitely of interest."

"And when were you planning to tell Tom and me about this?" Val asked.

"I wasn't. I wanted to keep you out of this. This is personal."

"Well, we're involved now."

"No, you're not," the Doctor said. "You're going to take Lawrence back to the Residency and make sure the surgeon looks after him."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll tie you to the horse myself and send you on your way."

Val doubted he was joking. "And what will you be doing while I'm behaving myself?"

"Tracking this Therianthrope, hopefully with more success than you displayed."

"I'm going with you," Hodson said.

The Doctor shook his head. "I prefer to work alone."

"You need someone who knows the lay of the land," Hodson pointed out, "and someone to watch your back."

The Doctor conceded the point. "You'd better be able to keep up," he said.

Val put a hand on the lieutenant's arm. "Look after him, won't you."

"Don't you worry, miss," Hodson said. "I'll bring him back safe and sound."

"Doesn't it bother you, all this talk of aliens and time travel and other dimensions?"

"That thing, whatever it is, almost killed my commanding officer," Hodson said, "and I intend to make it pay for that. And if I have to listen to a few fables to get that chance then so be it."

* * * * *

It was early afternoon when Val got back to the Lawrence house. When she saw her, Honoria put down her sewing and sprang to her feet.

"Valentina, you look terrible. What happened?" A heartbeat. "Where's Henry?"

"They took your husband straight to the Residency," Val said. "He was hurt. He's with the surgeon now."

"The surgeon? How badly was he injured?"

Honoria wanted to run to Val, to run out the door to her husband, to run away. Indecision froze her to the spot.

"It's... not good," Val said.

Honoria picked up her sewing then threw it back down. "I should go to him. Should I take anything. I could get the *bawarchee* to make up a basket. He's bound to be hungry. Or maybe he'd prefer one of his books. Or..."

Val put her hands on Honoria's shoulders, forcing her to look into her eyes.

"Honoria," she said, "the only thing Henry wants or needs right now is you."

"Right, yes, of course." Honoria snatched up a hat, planted it crookedly on her head. "I'll be at the Residency if anyone needs me. Will you be all right on your own, Valentina?"

"Go," Val said wearily.

She's weak, that one. Why do you waste your time on her?

Val collapsed into the seat Honoria had just vacated. Ignoring the voice in her head was draining. Part of her just wanted to give in, to stop resisting it. Would that be so bad?

I'm only after the best for you, Val. Why do you insist on limiting yourself, on conforming to the views of others rather than doing what you really want?

There was a sudden noise, a creak of hinges as a door was pushed open. Val was on her feet before she knew what she was doing, teeth bared, fingers curled into claws.

Tom took a startled step back. "I guess someone's pleased to see me," he joked feebly.

Val forced herself to sit back down, her heart beating like a hummingbird's wings.
"What do you want, Tom?"

"I was hoping there was still some breakfast going."

Tom was bleary-eyed and wearing the same clothes as the day before, albeit considerably more rumpled. He had not shaved and there was stubble on his cheeks and chin. Val found herself focussing on the dark hairs on his upper lip.

You want him, don't you? So why don't you take him? Who could stop you?

"It's gone noon, Tom," she said. "Breakfast was hours ago."

"A wee spot of lunch then?"

"You'll have to get it yourself. There's no one else about."

"Why, what happened?"

"If you hadn't been sleeping off last night's binge," Val sneered, "you'd already know."

"Gan canny, pet." Tom was losing his patience. "I was only trying to have a bit of fun."

Val jumped to her feet. "Oh is that what you were doing with that slapper of a Maharani?"

"Is that what your problem is?"

"I'm not the one with the problem, Tom." Val jabbed him in the chest with her index finger.

Tom caught hold of her hand and held it still. "Nothing happened!"

"But you said..." Val struggled to break his grip.

"I was stotting about drunk. I didn't know what I was saying."

"So what? It was just a joke?"

"Yeah, I guess."

He's playing with you. He knows he's hurt you, but he doesn't care.

Val snatched her hand away and wrapped her arms around herself. "It wasn't funny." Maybe you should hurt him.

"I'm sorry." Tom said. "You know, you've got something..."

He reached out and plucked a tiny twig from her hair. Val shoved him away.

"Don't touch me!"

"Sorry, pet. I didn't mean..."

"I'm not your 'pet'!"

They glared at each other, tension mounting. Tom broke first.

"Have it your own way," he said. "I'm going to get something to eat."

Kiss him. Kill him. Do *something*, Val.

Shaking his head, Tom walked away.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Hodson unslung his rifle from his shoulder and checked that it was loaded.

"So how do we kill these things, Doctor?" he asked.

"Therianthropes have two weaknesses: silver and moonlight."

"Moonlight? But I thought werewolves only came out under the moon."

"And you were such a promising pupil," the Doctor sighed. "These things aren't werewolves, remember, Hodson. There are similarities, but if you want to survive then you need to forget all your assumptions." He looked up at the sky. "Moonlight is fatal to Therianthropes. Unfortunately, we've still got a few hours until nightfall."

"And I'm all out of silver bullets," Hodson joked.

"I'm not." The Doctor produced a box from his pocket. "Try loading a few of these."

"You came prepared," Hodson said as he followed the Doctor's advice.

"They caught me with my guard down once," the Doctor said. "Never again."

* * * * *

Val lowered herself into the bath Honoria's *ayah* had drawn for her. The water was cloudy and tepid, but it was soothing. The door to the room did not lock so she had propped a wooden chair beneath the door-handle to discourage unwanted interruptions.

She had examined herself in the mirror, expecting to see a livid bruise down her back where she had landed after being knocked from her horse, but she seemed to have got away with barely a mark. In fact, her body seemed to be in better shape than in a very long time, possibly ever, though her legs looked overdue for a shave. But while she might feel great physically, mentally she was all over the place. Was this still the after-effects of her experience on Marinus and her mixed-up feelings for Tom or was this something else, something related to that thing she had seen at dinner last night?

She ran her tongue around her mouth. If anything, the issue with her teeth was getting worse. Could her gums possibly have drawn back that far or were her teeth actually getting longer? The sharp point of a canine opened up her tongue and blood flooded her mouth. The taste triggered memories of the boar and of the Therianthrope, the exhilaration, the thrill of the chase, the pleasure of the kill. She recalled pinning the Therianthrope to the ground, dominating him, holding his life in her hands.

You enjoyed it, didn't you?

"No!" Val insisted out loud. "You're twisting things."

Why deny it? How many times have you been imprisoned or threatened or assaulted? How many times have you been made to feel powerless? Didn't it feel good to take that the power back? Didn't it feel good to wield it?

"Yes. No. I don't know. It's wrong."

Wrong? If you hadn't done it to them, they would have done it to you. Kill or be killed, isn't that what the Doctor told you?

"Yes, I suppose so, but this isn't what he meant."

Isn't it? Are you sure? Do you really know what goes on his head?

"No, but..."

But?

"I say it's wrong. *I* do. *Me*."

That's what you say, but it's not what you feel, is it? Not what you felt when you had that spear in your hands. You can't lie to me. I'm you.

"No, no you're not. You can't be."

Who else could I be?

Val pressed the heels of her hands against her temples. "You're a Voord or something the Voord left inside of me or..."

Go on...

"You're a Therianthrope, aren't you?"

How I hate that name. Such a small word to encompass so much.

"Get out of my mind!" Val started to rock from side to side in the bath, as if she could dislodge the intruder by physical effort.

You don't mean that, not when I can give you so much.

"Let go of me!"

I can help you. Give in to your desires.

"Get out of my head!"

The bath tipped over and the wave of water washed Val across the floor. The *ayah* was at the door, trying to force it open, but the chair held it in place. She peered through the gap between the door and its frame.

"*Memsahib*, what has happened?"

"Get out," Val snarled, her long fingernails digging deep grooves in the floorboards.

"But *memsahib*..."

"*Get away from me!*"

The *ayah* fled and Val curled up on the floor, tears in her eyes.

"Get away from me before I hurt you."

* * * * *

Lal Singh sat in the *darbar*-room, a sultry-eyed *nautch* girl in his lap.

"I did just as you asked, *kunwari*," he was saying. "I led the English *sirdar* right into your trap. It's not my fault your pet was unable to finish him off."

Across the room, the Therianthrope growled.

"Calm yourself, Lal," Jindan said from behind the *purdah*. "You too, Jassa. Do you think I care two *pice* whether the *Qui hi* dies today? I am toying with them, letting them know that they are not the lords of this land that they think they are. I want them to know fear before I wash them all away."

"It is a dangerous game that you are playing, *kunwari*," Lal said.

"Dangerous, yes, but not for me. Not when I have our pets to protect me, isn't that right, Jassa?"

The Therianthrope growled.

"And what of this Doctor?" Jindan asked. "He intrigues me."

"He thinks he knows us, but he knows *nothing!*" Jassa's voice was distorted, his mouth no longer shaped for speech. "I led him far from here before I shook him loose. He thinks *he* is hunting us. He doesn't realise how close the danger really is."

"And is that all you have to report, my pet?"

Jassa did not reply.

"Don't try to hide things from me." Jindan drew back the curtain. She was holding the Koh-i-Noor in her right hand. "Remember that I hold that which you desire and that while I possess it, your will is mine to command."

"You are only prey," Jassa told her, but every word was a struggle.

Jindan tilted her head imperiously. "I am ruler here," she said, "and you will obey me." Candlelight sparkled off the facets of the diamond. "Tell me what I wish to know."

"There is... there is another of my kind here," Jassa said.

"One more of your pack?"

"No. This one is an Alpha. You will not find her as easy to control as the others."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Jindan said, "but she will be mine in the end. I always get what I want."

"Not this time. No one can best an Alpha, not even you."

"Oh, Jassa, my sweet little thing, do you really think so little of me. Perhaps you need to be reminded of your place." She kicked off her silk slippers to expose her painted toenails.

"Come over here and lick my feet."

"I. Will. Not." The Therianthrope clenched his fists, every muscle in its body taut and trembling.

"Yes, you will," Jindan replied, tightening her grip on the Koh-i-Noor.

Jassa took a step towards her. Then another.

"No, not like that," she said mockingly. "You're not showing enough humility. Crawl to me, on your belly."

Jassa snarled in protest, but could not stop himself dropping to the floor and slithering across the tiles.

"This Doctor and his companions worry me," Lal said, absently stroking the hair of the *nautch* girl. "They aren't like the other *feringhee*. They don't belong."

"None of them belong," Jindan told him, "and soon, very soon now, I'm going to wipe all of these strangers from my lands."

"All of them?" Lal looked pointed at the creature who was rasping his pink tongue along the arch of Jindan's foot.

The Maharani laughed. "All of them," she repeated, "just as soon as they've outlived their usefulness."

* * * * *

Most palaces are riddled with secret passages and the Lahore Fort was no exception. Jindan believed that the passages were known only to her and to her closest intimates, but she had forgotten that the Fort pre-dated her and that there were those from the previous regime still around and still willing to talk, for a handful of coin. This particular passageway had been designed for someone slimmer than Tej, but the grille capping the end gave him a clear view into the *darbar*-room.

He had not wanted to believe Lal. He supported Jindan because he felt that she was the best hope for their people's future and, more importantly, for his personal future. But to hear

her talk now, to see her ally herself with those... those *things*... She was going to throw it all away.

He started wriggling back the way he had come, sucking in as much of his gut as he was able. He had to warn somebody. If he told the British what she was planning then perhaps they could stop her without annexing the kingdom. And perhaps - Tej perked up at this thought - they might be grateful enough to reward him. This could turn out to his advantage after all.

He popped out from behind a curtain into one of the main corridors of the Fort. High windows provided views onto the courtyard with its shrubs and fountains. Tej brushed the dust and cobwebs from his clothes. All he had to do was act naturally. No one need know that he had been spying on the Maharani, not until he was safely protected behind the walls of the British Residency.

"Did you like what you saw?" a voice purred.

Tej jumped. His heart thundered against his ribs, threatening to escape.

"I don't, that is, um... What do you want?"

Tej tried to salvage his tattered dignity as he turned to face his interrogator. He almost jumped again at what he saw. It was one of Jindan's bodyguards - Banda, Tej thought his name was - and he was hunched almost double, heavily muscled and covered in thick blue-black fur. Thick tusks protruded from beneath his lips.

"What would Jindan say if she knew you'd been spying on her?" Banda lisped around his tusks.

"You will refer to her majesty by her proper title," Tej said with as much haughtiness as he could muster.

Banda flexed his wrist and with one swipe knocked Tej to the floor. "Make me, little man."

Tej scrambled backwards.

"Run," Banda said. "Run as fast as those stumpy little legs will carry you, but don't forget to keep looking over your shoulder because I'll be right behind you."

Tej cowered against the wall, trembling with fear.

Run!" Banda bellowed.

Tej ran.

* * * * *

Tom lay in his bed staring up at the ceiling. Lunch had been a mistake. He had thought that he was hungry - no, scratch that, he *had* been hungry - but his stomach had not been able to keep the food down. He was still paying for the excesses of the night before so he had retreated to his bedroom to get some more rest. He had closed the wooden shutters on the windows to keep out the light, stripped out of his soiled clothes and dived beneath the cool, cotton sheets, but sleep eluded him.

What was up with Val? Okay, he was prepared to admit that it was partly his fault. He had made up that stuff about getting close to Jindan to try and make her jealous, but to say he had been well oiled at the time would be an understatement. He had not known what he was

saying. And besides, it was not as if it had provoked any kind of reaction out of her. Clearly, what she had felt as Dea did not carry over to what she felt as Val.

Which made last night something of a wasted opportunity. There he was with a beautiful girl who was obviously interested and willing and Tom had blown it because he could not get Val's face out of his head. Maybe a night with the Maharani would have been just what the doctor ordered to cure that particular affliction, but he had needed so much alcohol to fortify himself that by the time he had plucked up the courage to do anything about it, he was pretty much incapable of any action at all. Instead he had spent the evening running at the mouth, telling Jindan all about his adventures, painting himself as the kind of action hero he idolised from the movies. At least, that's what he thought he had done. Truth was that the whole evening was kind of hazy.

But none of that explained Val's actions of this afternoon. If she did not have feelings for him, that why did it matter to her what he and Jindan had been up to? Maybe she was jealous after all, but if she was into him then she had a funny way of showing it. He just wished someone would give him a sign.

"Tom?"

There was a figure at the end of his bed. In the dim light and at this distance he could only make out her silhouette, but she was most definitely female. Then she moved closer.

"Whey ye buggor mar!" Tom exclaimed under his breath.

Val was wearing tight jodhpurs that hugged her calves and a white shirt with several buttons undone. Her hair was loose and, as she climbed up onto the bed, Tom could see that her skin was still damp from her bath. The bed creaked as she crawled towards him.

"Um, Val, what do you think you're doing?"

"What's the matter, Tom? Don't you like me?"

"Course I do, pet. I mean love. I mean Val. And it's not like I'm not flattered, but don't you think we should talk about this first, like?"

"Words get in the way." Val's weight was on his legs now and moving higher. "Why talk when you can act."

"Yeah, but normally I like to take a girl for a drink first, you know? Maybe dinner for two or a movie? Why don't we give that a whirl?"

Val slammed her palm down on Tom's chest, knocking the breath from his lungs and pinning him to the mattress. "Who cares what you want!"

"Val," Tom gasped, "you're not sounding yourself." He lifted his head, met her amber eyes with narrow, cat-like pupils. "You don't even look yourself."

"Close your eyes if it bothers you." Val buried her face in his chest, running the tip of her tongue over his bare skin. Tom shivered. Val spat in disgust and recoiled. "Liar! Betrayer!"

"Oh thank god," Tom said as she drew away from him.

"I can smell her on you, *taste* her on you!"

"Who? Jindan?"

Val hissed angrily, baring teeth that were now pointed fangs.

"Down, kitty," Tom said. "I already told you, nothing happened."

"Don't lie to me. Her musk is all over you."

"Well, yeah, she was a bit eager, a bit touchy-feely, but we didn't do anything." Tom was scrambling up the bed, trying to free his legs from the tangle of sheets.

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yeah, actually I do. I thought we trusted each other. I..." Tom's sentence was cut off as Val clamped a hand around his throat. "Val, you're choking me."

"I thought you were special."

"Can't... breathe..."

"You won't hurt me again."

The wooden shutters shattered as Val hurled Tom through them and out of the window.

* * * * *

"We can organise more men back at the Residency," Hodson said, "and stage a proper hunt."

The Doctor grunted. He had barely said a word since they had lost the Therianthropes trail and been forced to admit defeat and return to the city.

"Don't you worry, we'll find this thing, Doctor."

"This isn't a tiger shoot, Hodson," the Doctor snapped. "It's not just going to wait for you to come and take a crack at it. It's hunting us as much as we're hunting it."

"Doctor, I really don't think..."

A crash cut Hodson off in mid-flow. Both he and the Doctor swung their heads round to take in the Lawrence house and the figure crashing out of the upstairs window.

"Brooker!"

The Doctor was in motion even before Tom landed in the vegetable garden, Hodson a hair behind him, but he hesitated when a second figure vaulted out of the window and started sprinting round the edge of the house.

"See to Brooker," the Doctor ordered Hodson before veering off in pursuit of the other.

He scissor-jumped a fence, catching the figure around the waist as she rounded the corner of the building and wrestled her to the ground. They rolled through the dirt, over and under one another, until the Doctor managed to trap her beneath him, his hands on her wrists, holding them above her head. Only then did the Doctor take the time to study her face.

"Miss Rossi?" he said.

"Hardly," Val replied.

She snapped her head forward, pressing her lips against his. Stunned, the Doctor returned the kiss for a moment before he regained control and pulled his face away.

Val laughed. "Mmmm, you taste just as good as I remember."

The Doctor looked into her eyes, running his tongue over his lips. There was something familiar about her, something on the tip of his mind...

"And you," he began slowly, "taste just the same... Cinnamon."

The Therianthrope grinned. "Miss me?"

* * * * *

Tom woke up back in his bed. His head was spinning and for a moment he hoped that he had just woken from a drunken dream brought on by his night with Jindan. Then reality set in.

The Doctor was pottering about in the room, putting odds and end in a wooden *petarra*. He had his back to Tom and his red *achkan* was stained with mud and dust.

"Hey-up, Doctor," he said.

"So you're awake at last, Brooker," the Doctor said without turning. "You have the Lawrences' cabbage patch to thank for that. Shame though. That particular specimen might have had a fair chance of winning some prizes if your head hadn't flattened it."

"I'll be sure to make it up to Henry when all this is over," Tom said. "I'll buy him all the cabbages he can eat."

"I think Honoria is the more green-fingered one in that relationship." The Doctor turned. "It's good to hear your voice, Brooker."

"Careful, Doctor, for a minute there it almost sounded as if you liked me." The Doctor's face was ashen, his eyes sunken. "Man, you look like I feel."

"Yes, well, I've just had a bit of a shock, that's all." The Doctor perched on the windowsill.

"You and me both," Tom said. "Doctor, that thing that attacked me, it wasn't really Val, was it?"

"I'm very much afraid it was, in a manner of speaking." The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Brooker, I thought I could keep you and Miss Rossi out of this, but I miscalculated. I wasn't expecting the Therianthropes to strike so close to home, but then I wasn't expecting *her* to show up."

"Who is she, Doctor, and what does she want with Val?"

"I suppose you could call her an old flame, Brooker, and as for what she wants..." The Doctor hefted the box he was carrying. "I'll be sure to ask her just as soon as I've got together a few bits and pieces I need."

"I'll go with you." Tom tried to sit up, but the room lurched wildly and he sank back onto the bed. "On second thoughts, maybe I'll just bide here a while."

The Doctor nodded and hopped down from the windowsill. He was at the door when Tom spoke again.

"Doctor, you'll save her, right?" Tom said. "You'll get her back the way she was?"

"I'll save her," the Doctor promised, "beyond that..."

* * * * *

The Doctor got up off of his hands and knees.

"You can tell your men to stand down, Lieutenant," he said.

Hodson's rifle did not waver. "With respect, Doctor, I'd rather they kept covering that... whatever it is."

"Don't you recognise Miss Rossi anymore?" the Doctor asked.

"*That* is not Miss Rossi."

"I really hope you wrong about that, Hodson," the Doctor said. "Anyway, she's not going anywhere, not so long as that circle remains unbroken."

"You really think those knick-knacks will keep her contained?"

The Doctor had set up a circle of silver around Val. He had turned the Residency upside down searching for objects he could use and he had created his barrier from cutlery, jewellery boxes, figurines, candlesticks, anything and everything just as long as it was silver.

"She can't cross that line, Hodson, I promise you that," the Doctor said. "In any case, neither Cinnamon nor I want to have this conversation in front of an audience."

"I don't know, Doctor," Val said, "I'm something of an exhibitionist myself. Maybe we could get a bit of audience participation, what do you say, William?"

"I'll be right outside if you need me, Doctor," Hodson said.

Val laughed as the lieutenant fled. The Doctor was not so amused.

"What are you doing here, Cinnamon?" he asked.

"Cinnamon, Cinnamon. That was the name of my host body, wasn't it? When we first met?"

"Would you rather I called you something else?"

"No, no, I rather like Cinnamon. It suits me, don't you think? Spicy, sweet and a bit exotic."

The Doctor pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Don't I get a chair?" Cinnamon asked.

"Sit on the floor if you're tired."

"I'd rather stand. That way I can look down on you."

"Suit yourself. Now tell me how you got here. That last time we met I got the distinct impression you died."

"Likewise, Doctor, and yet you're looking particularly spry. I must say I'm rather taken with your new body. You'll have to give me the chance to examine it under better circumstances."

"Not going to happen," the Doctor said. "The question, Cinnamon. Answer it."

"Tit for tat, Doctor. You want me to answer your question, you have to answer one of mine first."

"This isn't a game, Cinnamon."

"Life's a game, Doctor, you just don't know the rules."

"And you do?"

"I know enough to make my own rules."

The Doctor crossed his legs. "Ask your question."

"Do you remember when we ran through Audobon Park, Doctor?"

"No," the Doctor said.

"Come now, Doctor, you can't lie to me. I can smell deceit, remember. Answer honestly or it doesn't count."

"In that case, yes, I remember."

"And do those memories excite you? Would you like to relieve the experience?"

"I remember it," the Doctor told her, "in my nightmares. Your turn. Tell me how you survived."

"You thought you'd destroyed me back in New Orleans," Cinnamon said, "luring the pack into a trap and blowing us all up. It did for my pack-mates, but not for me."

"Why?"

"When my people were banished, we were stripped of our physical form. To interact with this universe, we need to possess host bodies, but for most of us, those bodies become prisons just as tight as the pocket dimension to which we were exiled. Destroy the host and you destroy the spirit inside. But there are some whose willpower is strong enough to draw their spirit back out of the host, to escape at the very moment of death. We call those Alphas."

"I thought I was possessed by the Alpha of that particular pack," the Doctor said.

"Silly man. Do you think only males can become Alphas? You were the Alpha Male, but I, I was the Alpha Female."

"Does that mean that you can remove your spirit from your current host?" the Doctor asked. "That you can set Miss Rossi free?"

"Possibly," Cinnamon said, "but why should I want to? I rather like it in here. I must say, your taste in travelling companions has improved markedly since that baby you were with last time we met."

"Miss Silverstein was worth ten of you."

"If you say so, but then why isn't she here now? Did you get bored of her, Doctor?"

The Doctor clenched his right hand into a fist. "You still haven't explained how you got from twenty-first century New Orleans to nineteenth century Lahore."

"Surely it's not difficult for someone like you to grasp, Doctor. I could free my spirit from my host, but, somewhat annoyingly, you had removed any other potential bodies I might have occupied so I couldn't stop myself being pulled back to my prison. It exists outside of time and space as you know it, a Möbius strip of infinite dimensions. Within, we have no concept of temporal progression and our lives certainly don't advance concurrent with the timelines of this universe. When a door opens up, we have no idea of where it will take us, or if it will be before or after our last encounter as prey perceive it."

"And a door opened up leading here, I take it?" the Doctor asked.

"Now, now, Doctor, surely it's my turn to ask a question. How many have you killed?"

The Doctor's tone was flat. "I don't remember."

"Be honest now, Doctor."

The Doctor gritted his teeth. "I don't remember."

"That many? I'm impressed. And did you enjoy it?"

"I don't find anything enjoyable in killing."

"There's just the two of us here, Doctor. There's no need for secrets. Do you really expect me to believe that you've never taken pleasure in a death, that you've never felt a thrill in taking the life of someone you thought deserved it? Not even once?"

The Doctor's mouth was set in a narrow line.

"No answer, Doctor? I'll take that as a yes. You're more like me than you want to believe."

The Doctor bounded to his feet, kicking the chair away in his anger and lunging at Cinnamon.

"I'm nothing like you!" he snarled.

"Temper, Doctor," Cinnamon taunted. "You almost broke your precious circle."

The Doctor looked down. His toe was pressed against a silver angel. He exhaled and took a step back.

"I'm nothing like you," he repeated more quietly.

"Tell that to the Brains of Morphoton," Cinnamon said. "Tell me, Doctor, when did you stop being the healer and become the warrior?"

The Doctor turned away, stooping to right the chair.

"There are things in this universe that need to be fought," he said.

"Things like me?"

"Yes! Things exactly like you, who put their own desires above other people's freedoms."

"And what about our freedoms, Doctor? Don't we have rights, too?"

"You gave away those rights the instant you took another's life for pleasure."

"And what about you, Doctor? Do you deserve to be punished?" Cinnamon asked. "Is that why you've made yourself into something you're not? Is that why you've built all those walls around you, keeping everyone, even your travelling companions, at arm's-length? Is it some kind of penance?"

"I'm not the man you knew, Cinnamon," the Doctor said. "I've regenerated. Maybe this is just who I am now."

"And maybe that's just what you want everyone to think," Cinnamon said. "You don't owe the universe a thing, Doctor. Take off the mask. Let the real Doctor out to play."

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but there was a commotion at the door. Honoria Lawrence burst into the room, closely followed by Lieutenant Hodson.

"I tried to stop her..." Hodson began.

"Is that it?" Honoria asked, pointing at Cinnamon. "Is that the thing that attacked my husband?"

Tears were drying on Honoria's cheeks.

"I didn't touch your husband, Honoria," Cinnamon replied. "I prefer my men with a bit more vitality."

She winked at the Doctor.

"You really expect me to believe that?" Honoria asked.

"I don't care what you believe," Cinnamon said. "My only interest in you is twofold: how fast you can run and how loud you can scream."

"Perhaps we should take this outside." The Doctor put an arm around Honoria and led her to the door. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"I'll be waiting," Cinnamon purred.

The Doctor closed the door behind him.

"I don't understand why you haven't killed that thing already," Honoria said.

"I can't, not yet," the Doctor said. "There may still be a way to free Miss Rossi."

"And if you can't? What then, Doctor?"

"If the only way to save Valentina is to kill her then I'll pull the trigger myself."

* * * * *

Tej Singh's breath came in ragged gasps. His legs felt like lead weights and his stomach was about to turn itself inside out. Over on his right, the setting sun was giving everything a deep red hue. The colour of blood.

Stallholders were packing up for the evening, men were heading home to their wives and children or staying out to take advantage of the entertainments the night had to offer. Tej shoved them out of his way, waving his jewelled sabre as if it were an actual deadly weapon instead of a piece of gaudy decoration.

He glanced over his shoulder. Banda was loping after him, his huge knuckles dragging along the ground. He did not appear to be moving particularly fast, but was effortlessly keeping pace with Tej. Perhaps he was playing with him. What would happen when he got bored?

He could see the white dome of the British Residency up ahead, emerging out of the twilight. He was almost there. Just a little further. Just a little...

He slipped, slamming face down into the road. He tried to lever himself back up, but he had no strength left in his limbs. Banda would be on him in moments. Tej closed his eyes and waited for it all to be over.

But the end never came. Tej risked looking up and saw Banda perched on a low wall, seemingly waiting for Tej to get his breath back. Noticing Tej watching him, Banda beat on his chest and let out a mighty below, but still he did not move to attack.

Not understanding, but not about to question his luck, Tej started to crawl forward until he managed to regain his feet and headed off in something halfway between a stumble and a jog. Banda kept pace, but kept his distance.

"Open up!" Tej hammered on the gate of the Residency. "Let me in. Please, you have to let me in."

The gate swung open and Tej staggered inside, shouldering his way past the bemused young man on guard.

"Quickly," Tej wheezed, doubled over, "you have to lock the gate. He's after me. He's going to kill me."

"Who's going to kill you, sir?" the guard asked.

Tej looked over his shoulder. Banda had disappeared.

* * * * *

"I'll pull the trigger myself."

Tom had not meant to eavesdrop, but sound carried down the stone hallways. His head was still ringing, but he had not been able to just lay in his bed any longer, not while Val was in danger. Using his left hand to steady himself against the wall, he set off round the corner.

"Brooker, what are you doing here?" the Doctor asked. He was awkwardly holding a tearful Honoria Lawrence in his arms.

"You can't expect me to just sit this one out, Doctor." Tom nodded towards the closed door. "Is she in there?"

The Doctor nodded. "I was just about to go back in and continue our chat."

"I want to talk to her," Tom said.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Just for a little while," Tom said. "Doctor, you look beat. Grab yourself forty winks while I keep an eye on her, like."

The Doctor let go of Honoria and put a hand on Tom's shoulder. His pale eyes met Tom's own, his stare probing for secrets. Tom fought to keep his expression neutral. He dared not give anything away.

"Brooker, that thing in there, it isn't Miss Rossi anymore," the Doctor said. "She'll get inside your head if you let her."

"All the more reason why you should put your head down for a bit. Tackle her again when you're fresh."

The Doctor still looked doubtful. "You really think you're up to this?"

"Doctor, I've spent most of the day in bed," Tom said. "I'm as rested as I'm going to be."

"All right." The Doctor clapped him on the back. "But I'll be back to take over in half an hour, okay?"

"Whatever you say, skipper," Tom said.

Whatever was in there, it must really have knocked the Doctor off his game for him to be willing to relinquish responsibility for it, however briefly, and Tom almost had second thoughts about facing it himself. Almost.

She was standing in the middle of a circle of assorted silver objects. She had removed her leather riding boots because they no longer fitted her feet, which, Tom noted, were paw-like and covered with reddish fur. Her legs were bent at odd angles and, as she stretched her spine, Tom winced as he heard bones crack and re-knit themselves into new configurations. Her hair had coarsened, sticking out from her head like the bristles of a brush and her face had taken on a more bestial aspect, though Tom could still discern Val's features underneath.

Tom swallowed.

"What do I call you?" he asked.

"What's wrong with Val?"

"You're not Val," Tom said, closing the door behind him and drawing the bolt across so that they would not be interrupted. Cinnamon raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing. "You've just stolen her body."

"Do you think she'd object to what I've done with it?" Cinnamon asked. "You know how it is, you move into a new place and your first urge is to redecorate."

"What have you done with her?"

"Nothing yet." Cinnamon tapped a claw against her - Val's - temple. "She's still rattling around in here. I'll get round to devouring her eventually, but right now it's amusing to listen to her reactions to losing control."

"You're sick!"

"Why? Because I'm not afraid to admit what gives me pleasure and then to take it?"

"Let Val go!"

"I've been trying to get Val to let go since I first moved in here," Cinnamon said, "but she's so repressed. She simply refuses to give in to her desires. In the end, I had to take a hand to show her what she's been missing. Did you enjoy our little bedroom encounter, Tom? I know I did."

Tom could feel the heat rising to the tips of his ears. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I want to play with the Doctor. Can you imagine how much it must hurt him to see me wearing the flesh of his friend? And his pain gives me pleasure."

"So Val doesn't even matter to you at all."

"Sorry to disappoint you, sweetheart," Cinnamon said. "As far as I'm concerned, the rest of you are just prey animals, good for a snack, but little else. But the Doctor, he's different. There are some deep passions in there, very deep, but he keeps them all locked away inside, like he doesn't trust himself. Can you imagine what would happen if someone ever prised open the lid of that well, if he were ever to give vent to his basest desires?"

"I don't care about the Doctor," Tom said. "I just want you to stop hurting Val."

"You care for her, don't you?"

"She's my friend."

"Much more than that." Cinnamon laughed. "I can smell your need from over here. And have you told her how you feel? No, of course you haven't. The two of you are a perfect match, both as repressed as the other."

She beckoned Tom closer, lowering her voice as if confiding a secret.

"Do you want to know what she thinks about you, Tom?" she asked. "I'm in her mind. All her secrets are open to me. I can tell you what she really feels."

"I don't want to hear it from you," Tom said, digging deep for the last of his courage. He had come this far... "You say Val's still in there, somewhere. Could I hear it from her? Can I talk to Val, please?"

"Please?" Cinnamon mocked. "You must be desperate. Say I were to let Val out for a bit, what would you say to her? Would you prevaricate and hide behind words or would you admit your true feelings?"

"I might never get another chance," Tom replied.

Cinnamon's lips curled into a smile and then her features softened. Her eyes darted about in panic.

"Tom?" Val said. "Tom, is that really you? Everything's turned about and I don't know what's real anymore."

"I'm real, pet," Tom said, taking her hand in his. He kicked aside the silver objects, creating a hole in the barrier. "I'm real and I'm getting you out of here."

* * * * *

Banda loped into the *darbar*-room.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" Jindan demanded.

"Your man, Tej," Banda growled. "He knows."

"Knows what?" Jindan asked. "Knows how to be a good little servant like the rest of you?"

Banda grimaced. It might have been a sneer, but his facial construction would not allow it.

"He knows about us."

Jindan sat up. "Lal, find him. Bring him here."

"Too late," Banda said. "He is with the British. I followed him there."

"You followed him?" Jindan was on her feet now. "Why didn't you stop him?"

Banda ignored the question. "The British know now. They will bring others. Many others."

"But at the moment, there are only a few of them," Jindan said. "I'm sure you wouldn't have any trouble taking care of this little problem for me before word got out, would you, Banda?"

"Can't," Banda said simply. "The moon has risen." He looked pointedly at the Koh-i-Noor in Jindan's hands. "Unless..."

"No!" Jindan snatched the diamond back, hiding it in the folds of her sari. "It's too soon. I'm not ready."

"I say do it now," Banda said, "or it will be too late."

He barked at her, a short, staccato sound. It took a moment for Jindan to realise it was laughter.

"Stop that!" she yelled, covering her ears as the rest of Banda's pack joined in. "Stop that, all of you."

But the laughter only became louder.

* * * * *

"This way," Tom said, pulling on Val's hand, "it leads to a rear entrance."

"I can't," Val said.

"Yes, you can," Tom said. "There won't be anyone there to stop us and I'm going to be with you every step of the way."

"It's not that, Tom, it's just I'm a Therianthrope now and it's after dark." Tom still was not getting it. "If I'm exposed to moonlight, it will kill me."

Tom was quick to adjust his plan in light of this new information. "In that case, we'll just find somewhere to lie low until morning. We'll make a break for it as soon as the sun comes up."

Val nodded. "This way," she said.

Val led Tom down stairs and along poorly illuminated corridors into the bowels of the Residency building. More than once, they had to duck into the shadows because Val sensed other people approaching and Tom was almost grateful for her newly enhanced senses. Then he remembered the price she had paid to get them.

"What is this place?" Tom asked as he finally emerged into a large, round chamber. There was a large, black sarcophagus in the centre of the room.

"This is the Tomb of Anarkali," Val explained. "We'll be safe down here."

"Can't say I much fancy spending the night in a tomb, like," Tom said. "Still, I'm sure it'll be fine if you're with me, pet."

He managed a smile, but Val did not share it.

"Are you sure we're doing the right thing, Tom? I don't know how long it will be until Cinnamon resurfaces and then what? At least upstairs the Doctor had her contained. If she gets loose down here..."

They knelt down beside the sarcophagus, facing one another.

"She won't." Tom took both her hands in his. "You're stronger than she is."

Val shook her head. "I don't know. I think we should go back, ask the Doctor for help."

"No!" Tom surprised Val with his vehemence. "If we go back then the Doctor will kill you."

"Kill me? I don't think so."

"I heard him talking about it, pet. He said he'd shoot you himself."

Some of the colour drained from Val's face. "Well, maybe as a last resort, you know, if he couldn't find a way to save me. But he's the Doctor, Tom. He always finds a way."

"Have you heard the way he talks about these Therianthrope things? Do you really think he'll put our lives ahead of taking care of them?"

"Of course he would. The Doctor's our friend, Tom."

"He *was* our friend. Then he changed. Who knows what he thinks about us now. I'm sorry, Val, but we can't trust him, not on this."

"I guess..."

"As soon as it's light, we'll find some horses and get out of the city."

"And then?"

"We'll figure it out, but as long as we're alive there's still hope, right?" Tom touched his fingers to Val's cheek. "I don't want to lose you, Val."

Val closed her eyes, holding back tears.

"Is it true what Cinnamon was saying," she said, "about your feelings for me?"

"You heard all that?" Val nodded. "Truth is, I don't know, pet. I feel *something*, but whether it's love I don't know if I'm qualified to say. Maybe I'm still struggling with those memories the Voord gave us. Maybe it's just plain old-fashioned lust, you are a very sexy lassie after all." Val laughed in spite of herself. "What I do know is that I want to find out what these feelings mean, if you'll let me."

Val idly strokes his tangled brown hair, a sorrowful smile on her lips.

"What about you, pet?" he asked, struggling with the words. "Do you feel anything for me?"

Val glanced away, her eyes setting on the sarcophagus. "If only I could behold the face of my beloved once more," she quoted.

"What's that?" Tom asked.

"Nothing." Val leaned closer. "Truth is, I'm scared, Tom. Could you... would you hold me?"

"Of course, pet." Tom wrapped her up in his arms and she rested her head on his shoulder. He could feel her tears dampening his shirt.

She whispered in his ear, "Forgive me."

* * * * *

The Doctor kicked open the door, took in the empty room and rounded on Lieutenant Hodson.

"How could you let her escape?"

"I was only gone for a minute."

"A minute was fifty-nine seconds more than she needed."

"Brooker was with her. I thought he was keeping an eye on her."

"Yes," the Doctor said. "I think, lieutenant, we may both have been had."

"I'm sure Tom will apologise when he wakes up," said a figure in the doorway. "Can you say sorry to him from me when he does. I didn't mean to hit him so hard, but I guess I don't know my own strength anymore."

"Cinnamon," the Doctor said darkly.

The figure shook her head.

The Doctor's eyebrows shot up. "Miss Rossi?"

Val stumbled over to the broken circle.

"I need your help, Doctor," she said. "I don't know how much longer I can hold her back."

She tried to nudge the silver objects back into place with her foot, but her toes started to smoke where she touched the silver and she had to snatch the foot back.

"I've got that," the Doctor said, hastily reassembling the circle around her. "This is fantastic. If you can keep Cinnamon contained then maybe we have a chance of forcing her out completely."

"You don't understand," Val's voice was rising. "She's strong. Too strong for me."

"Then let me help you."

Val nodded with an enthusiasm born of panic. "Yes, help me. I know what she can do, Doctor. I don't want to be like that."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Yes you do, Doctor, you just don't want to," Val said sadly. "If the only way to stop Cinnamon is to kill her, then that's what I need you to do."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?" Val's voice broke. "It feels like there's so little of me left, little enough that I recognise. Better to go like this than whatever she has planned for me."

"Are you sure?" the Doctor said. "There must be something we can do, something I've missed."

"Please, Doctor. Don't make me beg."

"I'll do it." Hodson was loading his rifle. He dropped a silver bullet into the barrel and tapped it down.

"No, I will." The Doctor snatched the weapon from him. "A long time ago, my then travelling companion put a bullet in me to save me from what Miss Rossi is going through. What kind of man would I be if I couldn't do the same."

He lifted the rifle to his shoulder, sighted along the barrel.

"I'm sorry, Valentina," he said.

"Don't be," she told him. "Make it quick."

The Doctor's finger tightened on the trigger.

* * * * *

Honorina held her husband's hand in both of hers. She wanted to squeeze it tight, but was afraid of hurting him. Normally, Henry was a man whose vitality gave the lie to his years, but lying motionless on the camp-bed, Honorina was struck by how frail he looked, how old. If he recovered - *when* he recovered - she would encourage him to resign his commission. He had already done more than enough for his country. It was time to go back to England where he could rest and they could live out their remaining years in safety and comfort.

She closed her eyes, bowed her head over his body.

"Father," she whispered, "if you can hear me, please make my husband well again. Give him back his strength and his warmth and his love. I don't think I could face the world without him."

Someone cleared their throat behind her. Honorina raised her head, blinking back tears.

The young soldier ran a finger round the collar of his uniform jacket. "Excuse me, ma'am, but this gentleman insists on speaking to Colonel Lawrence."

"Well, you can tell him," Honorina replied hotly, "that he'll just have to settle for Lieutenant Hodson instead."

"No, no underlings," the short man accompanying the soldier said. "I only trust Lawrence."

Honorina wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. "Mr Singh, isn't it?"

"Tej Singh, *memsahib* Lawrence." Tej *salaamed*.

"Well, as you can see, Mr Singh, my husband is currently indisposed," Honorina said, "thanks to that wretched hunt you invited him on."

She held her handkerchief close to her face, but she refused to cry in front of a stranger.

"I know," Tej said. "In part, that's why I am here."

"I see." Honorina stood up. She was not a tall woman, but she towered over Tej and she used the height difference to her advantage. "If you know something about the attack, Mr Singh, then I would very much like to hear what it is."

"I don't... that is..."

Tej's eyes darted here and about, everywhere except at Honorina. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He looked lost and Honorina was struck by the resemblance to her son Alick when he had broken something during exuberant play. He wanted to confess, but was frightened of the consequences.

"I can assure you that I have my husband's complete confidence," Honorina said, softening her tone. "Now why don't you sit down and tell me all about it."

* * * * *

The bullet whistled past her ear and impacted with the wall behind her.

Cinnamon threw back her head and laughed.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to do it."

"Bring her back!" the Doctor said. "I want to talk to Val."

"How do you know she was even here? Maybe I was just playing with you the whole time?"

The Doctor raised the rifle again, squeezed the trigger, but he had already shot his bullet.

"Doctor, Doctor, Doctor," Cinnamon said, "you think too much, that's your trouble. And the gap between thought and action is doubt. Do you think *I* ever have doubts?"

The Doctor shoved the rifle violently into Hodson's hands. "Reload that for me. Then we'll see just how many doubts I really have."

Cinnamon applauded. "Now you're getting it. Give in to the beast inside you."

"I'm just following a logical course of action," the Doctor said, not looking at her. "You are a threat that needs to be eliminated."

"Is that really the case? Did you come all this way, hunting for us, just because it was the 'logical' thing to do? This is personal for you. These aren't the actions of a dispassionate observer, these are actions driven by hate and fear. We've really got under your skin, haven't we?"

"That's it, isn't it?" the Doctor jumped on her comment. "There's still a bit of Therianthrope inside me, some trace of that Alpha Male. That's how you're manipulating me."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Doctor, but the truth is we've done nothing. This is all you."

"Doctor." Hodson had finished reloading the rifle. The Doctor snatched it from him.

"We'll see about that," he said.

There was a knock at the door.

"What is it?" he snapped.

The door was opened by the nervous young soldier. He was flanked by Tej and Honoria.

"Sorry, sir," he said, addressing his comments to Lieutenant Hodson. "Could we have a word?"

"Not now, Swales," Hodson said. "Can't you see we're in the middle of something?"

"It will have to wait." Honoria marched up to the lieutenant. "You need to hear what this man has to say and you need to hear it *now*."

* * * * *

Jindan had retreated to her bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed and stared out of the window at the full moon hanging over the city. Her son was running around the room waving his little sword at imaginary enemies. Jindan smiled at him, but she was troubled by the sounds she could hear from the *darbar* below. She knew that her pet demons were part-animal, but tonight they seemed even more bestial than ever.

"You shouldn't give into them," Lal said from the doorway. "They're trying to manipulate you into acting precipitously."

Jindan sighed. "What choice do I have? If the *feringhee* have a chance to arrive in force..."

"Let me talk to them."

"Like Tej is talking to them. Will you betray me to?"

"Of course not, *kunwari*? I love you."

"And will you love me, Lal, when I am old and fat?" Jindan scoffed. "Your love is fleeting and unreliable, not like his."

She nodded in Dalip's direction. Realising he was under scrutiny, the Maharajah stopped his playing and looked up at them. Jindan reached down and chucked him under the chin.

"I brought the devils here to guarantee his kingdom," Jindan said, "and mine. What future do we have with the British looking over our shoulder all the time?"

"What future will we have when we owe our kingdom to demons?" Lal retorted.

"I can control them."

"But for how long. They're already rebelling against you. Sooner or later, they'll..."

Jindan made a cutting motion with her hand, silencing Lal.

"I won't give them that chance," she said, "but for now, I still need them and tonight I will turn them loose."

"You're giving them what they want," Lal warned.

Jindan nodded. "Yes, I am," she said, "because they're going to give me what want, one way or the other."

* * * * *

"How quickly can you evacuate the Residency?" the Doctor asked Hodson.

"It will take us at least a day to pack everything up," Hodson replied.

"That won't do. You'll have to leave everything behind. We need to leave tonight."

"Tonight?"

"We'll be safe so long as the moon is out, but they'll be coming for us as soon as the sun rises. We need to be long gone by then."

"We could stay and fight," Hodson suggested. "We have silver bullets."

"Not nearly enough," the Doctor replied.

"So you're running away?" Cinnamon taunted.

"A tactical withdrawal. We'll be back when we're better prepared."

"And where will we go?" Honoria asked.

"There's room for everyone in the TARDIS," the Doctor said. "My transport. It's not far."

"Someone will need to carry my husband," Honoria said.

"I'll arrange it," Swales said, relieved to have something to do.

"And then there's Brooker." The Doctor turned to Cinnamon. "Where did you abandon him?"

"Where better?" Cinnamon replied. "He's in a tomb."

"I know where she means," Honoria said before the Doctor's temper could flare. "I'll fetch him for you."

"Thank you, Mrs Lawrence."

"I'll stay behind with a couple of volunteers," Hodson said. "We'll cover your retreat, buy you more time to get away."

"No," the Doctor replied. "I'm not leaving anyone behind."

"What about me?" Cinnamon asked.

"You'd better hope that the pack take pity on you, though that's probably an alien concept to a Therianthrope."

"An alien concept to a Time Lord too, it seems. What happened to not leaving anyone behind? Do my kind not count?"

"You'd be quick enough to stab me in the back if our positions were reversed," the Doctor said.

"So you'll do it to me before I can do it to you?"

Cinnamon could not have provoked more of a reaction had she physically slapped him.

"Just be grateful I don't have time to deal with you properly," the Doctor hissed.

* * * * *

They gathered in the courtyard behind the Residency's main gate. Hodson was doing a headcount and the Doctor sidled up to Tom, shining the light of his sonic screwdriver into his eyes and checking for concussion.

"I'm fine, Doctor," Tom said, pushing him away. "Nothing a good night's sleep won't cure."

"You can sleep for as long as you like once we get to the TARDIS," the Doctor said. "I just need to know you're not going to collapse on the way there. We don't need any more dead weight on this trip."

"Everyone's accounted for, Doctor," Hodson told him.

"Good, then let's get this show on the road."

"What about Val?" Tom asked.

"She's not coming."

"But..."

"Val's gone, Brooker. You need to accept that and move on."

"That's easy for you to say, Doctor." The Doctor had started to walk away so Tom had to shout to be heard. "Some of us are only human."

"Open the gates!" the Doctor ordered. "We're moving out!"

The heavy gates were hauled into motion, but they were barely half-open when everyone in the courtyard had to stop what they were doing and shield their eyes.

Night had suddenly become day.

"Everyone back inside," the Doctor said. "*Now!* And barricade those gates."

"What is it? What's happening?" Honoria asked him.

The Doctor shook his head. "They're coming for us."

* * * * *

Jindan stood on the roof of Lahore Fort, her sari billowing in the wind. Her bare arms were stretched out above her, the Koh-i-Noor cradled between her palms. Her eyes had rolled back in her head, such that only the whites were visible, and her lips were moving, forming words of power and purpose. She drew energy up through her feet, up through her legs and trunk and, by willpower alone, fired it up and out through her hands like an arrow.

A pillar of the brightest light shot up from the glowing diamond, piercing the darkness of the night. Where the sky was blackest, a ball of fire began to form, boiling, growing, a second sun in the firmament. It blazed bright and proud, spreading a warm, buttermilk glow over the city, swallowing and overriding the cold, silvery light reflected by the moon.

Below, in the palace courtyard, the seven Therianthropes stepped out from their shelter, bathing their limbs in this new, impossible dawn. Roaring in unison, they swept out into the streets.

* * * * *

"Back so soon?" Cinnamon sneered.

The Doctor barged into her cell, closely followed by Tom, Hodson and Honoria.

"You knew that was going to happen, didn't you?" the Doctor demanded.

"I knew it was a distinct possibility," Cinnamon replied. "I'm just surprised she didn't do it sooner."

"What I want to know is how it's being done at all," Tom said. "You can't just whistle up a second sun."

"They do say the Maharani practices witchcraft," Hodson said.

"Come on. You don't seriously believe this is all being done by magic."

"Most likely latent psychic ability being enhanced by the proximity of a psychoactive meteorite," the Doctor said.

"Come again?"

"In terms you might understand, Brooker? Magic." The Doctor turned back to Cinnamon. "But I'm right, aren't I? She's using the Koh-i-Noor to do this." He lashed out, kicking the chair across the room. "How could I have been so blind? She practically told me as much herself. 'An object of desire for men and for beasts and for those who are at once both and neither.' She meant Therianthropes and what could be more desirable to a Therianthrope than a way of neutralising the moon's hold over them. That's how she brought you here, isn't it?"

"Not me, Doctor," Cinnamon corrected him. "She might be able to lure those weak-willed males with her trinket, but an Alpha Female is made of stronger stuff. I just took advantage of the open door."

"Which also helps explain why you've been acting as a free agent while the others have been dancing to her tune. *They* have no choice."

"All this is fascinating, Doctor, I'm sure," Hodson said, "but what are we going to do about it?"

"Barricade all the doors and windows," the Doctor told him, "and prepare for a siege."

"Can't we make a break for the TARDIS, like?" Tom suggested.

"We'd never make it. Out in the open, they'd have no trouble picking us off. At least here we have thick stone wall between us and them."

"And how long do you think that will keep them out for?" Cinnamon asked.

"Do you have a better idea?" the Doctor snapped. "What am I saying? Of course you have a better idea. *This* is what you've been biding your time for."

Cinnamon smiled, exposing her fangs. "Let's make a deal."

* * * * *

"Lock the gate behind us," the Doctor told Hodson, "and don't open it for anyone."

"Or *anything*," Cinnamon added.

"Can you really trust her, Doctor?" Hodson whispered.

"What choice do I have?"

"I can hear you, you know," Cinnamon said. "Don't worry, William, I'll keep the Doctor safe. I haven't finished playing with him yet."

"That doesn't exactly fill me with confidence," Hodson said.

"You think *you've* got problems," the Doctor replied. "Right, let's get this over with."

A gap opened in the gate, barely wide enough for the Doctor and Cinnamon to wriggle through. The gate slammed shut behind them.

The screams hit them first.

"It seems your friends have been let off the leash," the Doctor said grimly, "and they're not picky about who they vent their anger on."

"They are not my friends, Doctor," Cinnamon replied. "They let themselves be controlled by a human woman and I despise weakness. Still, it's good to see that her hold on them has its limits."

"You call this good? This is indiscriminate slaughter!"

"They're expressing their true natures, Doctor. Would you have them deny themselves?"

"I'd have them show restraint."

"Squeamishness ill becomes you, Doctor. You've killed more than they ever will."

The Doctor opened his mouth to retort, but Cinnamon cut off.

"Spare me your moral justifications. We don't have the time," she said. "Tell me, how fast can you run?"

"Fast enough to keep up with you," the Doctor said.

Cinnamon's expression was wistful. "I remember."

"Shall we dance?"

They ran. Despite his boasts, the Doctor could not match Cinnamon for speed, but he did not need to. He only had to run in a straight line, her job was to run interference. When they scented the pair of them in their midst, the pack broke off from what they were doing. Meals were left unfinished, prey abandoned mid-chase or left cowering in a corner, badly injured, but still clinging to life. There was better quarry to hunt - more challenging, more dangerous - and it was sprinting right through them.

The Doctor ignored them. Eyes fixed on the towers of Lahore Fort, he ran as if his lives depended on it, hearts screaming in his chest, lungs on fire. He looked vulnerable, a target, a victim. He was not.

Cinnamon weaved and zigzagged around him. Whenever a member of the pack got too close, she was there to parry the blow and to deliver a savage reprimand in blood. Sometimes she ran on the ground, sometimes she bounded from rooftop to rooftop. She could be seen bouncing off walls, diving through windows, vaulting even the Doctor himself to intercept an attack aimed his way. Her fangs would clamp down on one enemy while the claws of her foot

raked at another and her fist delivered an uppercut to a third. She picked up her share of wounds, but, despite their numbers, the pack was faring far worse.

One darted beneath Cinnamon's arm when she was otherwise engaged. He was not quite fast enough to reach his target, but his claws nevertheless shredded the Doctor's *achkan*. The Doctor shrugged out of the coat without slowing.

"Cinnamon, that was a bit too close for comfort," he said. "You're not slowing down, are you."

Cinnamon grabbed the wrist of the offending Therianthrope, breaking his arm over her thigh.

"Don't be such a baby, Doctor," she said. "Such a pity we don't have time to deal with them properly."

"Focus on the job. Playtime later."

"Promise? Oh Doctor, you're such a tease." She fell into step beside him, close enough to whisper in his ear. "Are you having fun yet?"

The Doctor threw back his head and laughed with wild abandon.

* * * * *

The creature was scaling up the side of the Residency building with all the dexterity of a monkey. Swales fired at it three times, but each of his bullets missed their target and only served to chip away at the stone.

Hodson pushed him away from the window.

"Don't waste your bullets, lad," he said. "We haven't got many."

"Are we sure they'll even work, sir?"

"The Doctor said there'll work so there'll work," Tom said. "You just have to make sure you hit with them."

Tom was standing at the interior door, keeping watch in case the Therianthropes found a way into the building. In the far corner, Honoria sat next to her husband, who was lying on a stretcher on the floor. Every so often he would groan something unintelligible.

"Easier said than done," Hodson replied. "These creatures are fast."

"Lieutenant, look out!"

Hodson had turned to talk to Tom and so had his back to the window. He did not see the Therianthrope vaulting through the opening, but Swales did. The young soldier threw himself forward, knocking his superior officer to the ground and taking the blow that had been meant for Hodson. The Therianthrope tore right through him. Swales did not even have time to scream.

Hodson hit the ground hard and the impact knocked the rifle from his hand. Tom dropped to his knees, scrabbling across the floor for the weapon, but the Therianthrope was faster. It dived forward, clamping its jaw around Tom's forearm. Tom yelled in agony.

"Get away from him."

The quavering voice belonged to Honoria. Somehow she had managed to pick up the rifle and while her voice might have been shaking, her hands were not. The silver bullet struck

the Therianthrope in the back of its head, exiting just in front of its right ear. Its body tensed, then went limp. Tom shook the dead thing's teeth from his arm.

Honorina was still holding the rifle, her arms locked, fingers rigid with fear. Hodson gently prised the weapon from her hand and propelled her into a seat.

"It's over," he told her, soothingly. "It's dead."

"Yeah, that one is." Tom eyed Swales's dismembered corpse. "But how many more of those things are still out there?"

* * * * *

Jindan was still standing on the flat roof of the Fort. Her arms were at her sides, the Koh-i-Noor clutched loosely in her left hand. She looked down at the city and the wave of destruction that had torn through its heart.

"Was it worth it?"

Jindan spun round at the sound of the voice. The Doctor was standing behind her, accompanied by someone Jindan did not recognise, a demon, but not one of the seven she had summoned.

"Who are you?" she asked the demon.

"So this is the woman who was able to bind a pack of my kind," the demon replied. "She doesn't look like much."

"I am Maharani Jindan," Jindan said haughtily, "wife of Runjeet Singh, mother of Maharajah Dalip, ruler of the Punjab. You would be wise to treat me with respect."

"So you are an Alpha among your kind." The demon stalked forward. "I'd be more impressed if your kind weren't forever destined to be pitiful little prey animals."

Jindan snapped her arm up, holding the Koh-i-Noor level with the demon's eyes.

"I bind demons to my will," she said. "I can bind you. Now bow before me."

The demon shook its head slowly. "I think not. Give me the diamond, little Alpha, or must I rip off your arm to get it?"

"Cinnamon, that wasn't the deal," the Doctor said. "You get the diamond when I'm done with it, not before."

"And why should I honour the deal now that we're here?" the demon - Cinnamon - asked.

"Because it amuses you to humour me," the Doctor replied, "and because I don't believe force is the answer. Jindan has forged a mental link with the stone. She needs to relinquish it by choice or it will be useless to either of us."

"How long will her mental link last once I've ripped out her throat?"

"No killing!" the Doctor insisted. "Honour the deal and everyone can get what they desire. You're all about people acting on their desires, aren't you, Cinnamon?"

"Have it your way, Doctor, but don't expect my patience to last forever."

Jindan turned her back on them, clutching the Koh-i-Noor to her breast.

"Neither of you can have the diamond," she said. "I need it to defend the kingdom."

"Haven't you already done that, your majesty?" the Doctor asked. "You've destroyed the only ones who could defy you, the *Khalsa*. You've got your revenge for your brother's murder."

"The *Akalis*, those seven sons of dogs who dealt the killing blow, they still live."

"Their bodies, perhaps," the Doctor replied, "but in all other respects, they've suffered more than you can possibly imagine. Your position is secure."

"What position is that? Vassal to the British Empire? I want my son to be ruler in his own name, not slave to another."

"And you know what it's like to be a slave," the Doctor said, moving to stand beside her.

"I clawed my way up by my fingernails," Jindan said, staring out into the middle-distance. "From *nautch* girl to Maharani."

"You should be proud of what you've accomplished," the Doctor said, his hands on the parapet as he leaned out over the battlement.

"I am proud, Doctor," Jindan said, "but I don't want my son to suffer as I suffered."

"That's what this has been all about, hasn't it. Securing a future for Dalip." The Doctor raised his voice. "Do you hear that, Cinnamon? Jindan is like a warped reflection of you. She's reached out and taken that which she most desires, but not for herself. *Her* greatest desires are altruistic."

"Hardly, Doctor," Cinnamon replied. "She's just ensuring the survival of her genes into the next generation. Selfishness by evolutionary imperative."

"Now who's applying logic to an emotional situation?" The Doctor returned his attention to the Maharani. "I admire your motives, Jindan," he said, "but not your methods. Look at what you've done to your city. Is this the kingdom you want your son to inherit?"

"It... was necessary." Jindan's voice shook.

"Necessary!" the Doctor shouted. "And where is Dalip now? Should we ask him whether he thinks all this is 'necessary'?"

"He was supposed to be far from here," Jindan said, "but we were forced to act sooner than planned."

"Who forced you? The Therianthropes? The demons? Who controls whom, Jindan?"

"I control them. They do what I tell them."

"I don't doubt it, but what else do they do while you're not watching? They resent you, Jindan. How far do you think they'll go to make you suffer?"

"Lal is with him. He'll protect Dalip."

"From a demon? You don't believe that any more than I do."

Jindan turned to face the Doctor. She was too proud to cry, but she was fighting a losing battle with her emotions. "What am I supposed to do? How can I save him?"

"It may already be too late for that," the Doctor said, "but I can end this before it gets any worse. Give me the diamond."

Jindan handed over the Koh-i-Noor without another word.

"Go to your son," the Doctor told her.

He leaned forward and whispered something in her ear. The Maharani nodded in understanding. As she hurried away, the Doctor sat down on the edge of the parapet, holding the diamond between the fingertips of both his hands.

"Now," he said, "let's see if I can drive this thing."

* * * * *

Lal had tipped the bed over onto its side and he and the Maharajah were hiding behind it while something hammered on the door, trying to get in. Dalip's knuckles were white where he clutched his sword. Holding the weapon gave the Maharajah a degree of confidence, but Lal knew that if the demons ever got close enough for Dalip to use it then the boy was already as good as dead.

The wood of the door splintered. Fur-covered hands forced their way through, tearing the door from its hinges.

"Jassa," Lal snapped, with an authority he did not feel, "you're supposed to be leading the assault on the British Residency."

"I prefer to do my hunting here," Jassa replied with menace.

Lal needed no further prompting. He scooped up his musket and shot Jassa in the chest. The bullet, alas, was lead, not silver. Lal and Dalip watched in horror as the wound closed before their eyes.

"That hurt," Jassa snarled.

He launched himself at them and Lal ducked down behind cover, dragging Dalip with him. Jassa struck the bed, knocking it back onto its legs, trapping his prey beneath it. Lal held Dalip close while Jassa leaned over the side of the bed, snaking his arms beneath it as he tried to reach them. Frustrated, Jassa simply punched straight through the bed, mattress and all. His claws shredded Lal's *puggaree*, parting his hair. Dalip began to cry and Lal held him all the tighter.

Then the lights went out.

It was as if someone had plucked the sun from the sky, plunging the room into darkness. But not quite darkness. A sliver of silvery moonlight snuck in through the window. Jassa screamed, a tortured howl that chilled Lal's blood. Steeling himself, he peered out from underneath the bed.

Caught by the moon's rays, Jassa was burning.

* * * * *

The night was cool without the presence of the second sun. A light breeze danced through the Doctor's hair.

"Give me the diamond, Doctor," Cinnamon said, her red-brown fur starting to smoke and blacken in the moonlight. "It's time to honour your side of the bargain."

"It's all yours." The Doctor hopped down from the parapet and tossed the diamond underhand to Cinnamon. She caught it with casual ease.

"Goodbye, Doctor," Cinnamon said. "Maybe we'll do this dance again sometime." She loped over to the tower door. It refused to open.

"Sorry, probably should have mentioned that I asked Jindan to barricade that door when she left," the Doctor said. "You know, I think you're going to struggle to find shelter before the moon finishes barbecuing you."

A considerable amount of smoke was rising from Cinnamon now. In places, her fur had been completely burned away and the skin beneath was peeling and splitting, clear liquid oozing out from between the cracks.

"You think you're so clever, Doctor, but you've forgotten I have this now." Cinnamon brandished the diamond. "I'll just reignite the sun then not only will I survive, but the pack can finish devouring your human friends."

"You could do that, I suppose," the Doctor told her, "but I'm still psychically linked to the Koh-i-Noor. It won't respond to you."

Cinnamon waved a claw in his face. "Break the link! Break the link or I'll kill you!"

"Kill me if you like, but I'll just come back. I'm resilient like that and I'm stubborn enough to maintain the link even through the transition. Do you really have enough time to work through all my lives? You're not looking so great right now."

"This is what you wanted all along, isn't it, Doctor? To kill me?"

"I haven't killed you, Cinnamon. I'm offering you a way out." Cinnamon tilted her head quizzically. "There's still one place within reach you can flee to, one place the moon can't touch you."

"The diamond," Cinnamon realised.

"Of course, the way the facets are arranged, it will form a near-perfect psychic prison. Once you're in, you aren't getting back out."

"And in order to take advantage of your escape route, I have to vacate Val's body," Cinnamon said. "Very clever, Doctor, but what's to stop me staying where I am and forcing you to watch Val die. Once the physical body is destroyed, my spirit will simply return to where it came from."

"You're bluffing, Cinnamon," the Doctor said. "I'm betting that moonlight burns Therianthropes whether they're in a host body or not. I'm betting you can feel it roasting your spirit as we speak. You'll be psychic embers long before you can make it back home your way."

"Why are you doing this, Doctor?"

"Because you're a monster. Because you tortured my friends. Because you need to be stopped."

"No, I mean why are you giving me a chance to live?"

"Because I don't want to be the killer you think I am."

"A vain hope?"

"An ideal worth striving for," the Doctor replied. "Now get in the diamond while there's still time."

"You said the diamond was a *near*-perfect prison," Cinnamon said. "You do realise that means that, sooner or later, I'm going to find a way to escape."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Will you be there to stop me when I do?"

"Wouldn't miss it," the Doctor promised.

Val slumped forward, the light fading from her eyes. The Doctor caught her as she fell, taking the diamond from her hand before she dropped it. The Koh-i-Noor flared briefly before returning to normal.

"Doctor?" Val asked.

"Rest now, Val," the Doctor said. "There'll be time enough for questions later."

He threw the Koh-i-Noor up into the air and, where it caught the moonlight, he thought he saw the after-image of a feline eye. No doubt a trick of the light. He caught the diamond one-handed and pocketed it.

"Now all I need to do is figure out how to get down from here," he said.

* * * * *

Val was screaming. She was writhing on a hospital bed in the TARDIS sickbay, the Doctor standing over her. Tom hovered uselessly in the corner, wincing at her every cry of pain.

Tom had met the Doctor, Val cradled in his arms, on the road between the Fort and the Residency and the Doctor had insisted that they head straight back to the TARDIS.

"What, no goodbyes?" Tom had asked.

"After tonight, I doubt anyone would be particularly pleased to see us," had been the Doctor's reply.

Val's body had still been horribly deformed by the changes Cinnamon had wrought on it and once he had set the TARDIS in flight, the Doctor had shut himself up in the sickbay, with an array of technology both frighteningly primitive and so advanced Tom's mind tried to deny its existence. Tom had retreated to the console room, his headphones in and his music turned to maximum volume to drown out the sounds as the Doctor sculpted Val's body back into a more familiar shape. The machines could not do anything about Val's mind, however, or her memories.

"What's wrong with her?" Tom asked. Even on the loudest setting, his headphones could not keep out Val's screams and Tom had steeled himself to go and investigate.

"She's had a monster inside her," the Doctor said. "To all intents and purposes she *became* the monster. That leaves scars."

"But it happened to you before, right," Tom said, "and you got better?"

"I died, Brooker. That's not really an option in Val's case."

"But she will get better, won't she?"

"Given time, I'm sure she could come to terms with the experience," the Doctor said, "but as things stand, the trauma will have driven her insane long before then."

"So do something!"

"You know, Brooker, that never would have occurred to me if you weren't here to point out the obvious. If you want miracles, keep out of my way." The Doctor wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "I'm sorry, Miss Rossi," he said softly, "but I need to take your dreams away."

He bent over her supine form as if intending to kiss her. Instead, he pressed his thumb against a point in the middle of forehead.

"Forget," he whispered.

The screaming stopped. It was as if, Tom thought, someone had pulled the plug on Val. He pushed past the Doctor.

"Val?"

"Tom?" Val's voice was weak. She blinked her eyes against the light in the sickbay.

He glanced at the Doctor, realised he might never have another chance to ask what was preying on his mind. "Val, you remember what I said in the tomb? I asked you a question, but you never told me your answer. Do you..."

The Doctor grabbed Tom by the shoulder and yanked him away.

"Tomb? What tomb?" Val asked, her voice rising with concern bordering on panic.

"What do you think you're playing at, Brooker?" the Doctor hissed. "I went to a lot of trouble to spare Miss Rossi some painful memories. If you're any kind of friend to her, you won't force her to relive them."

Tom did not, *could* not reply. He felt numb.

"Everything's fine, Miss Rossi," the Doctor was saying. "I'm here."

"Doctor." Val smiled. "I had the strangest dream."

"Really? What was it about?"

Val frown in concentration. "You know, I can't remember." She shrugged, swung her legs down from the bed and stood up. "So, where are we pitching up next?"

"Oh, I thought we could all do with some rest and relaxation," the Doctor said. "How does Florana grab you? The seas are like warm milk, the sand soft as swan's down and the air... ah, the air... Of course, it's all gone a bit touristy now, but the advantage of having a time machine is that we can get there before everyone else nicks the sun-loungers."

"A holiday? That's not like you." Val put her hand on the Doctor's forehead, pretending to take his temperature. "Are you sure you're feeling all right, Doctor? Maybe you need the sickbay more than I do."

"We can always give Florana a miss," the Doctor said gruffly. "I'm sure I can find us a nice war or natural disaster if you'd prefer."

"Florana sounds heavenly, Doctor," Val said. "What do you think, Tom? I'm sure there'll be plenty of blue-skinned bikini babes for you to ogle. Who knows, maybe one of them will take pity on you and let you buy her a drink. If she's short-sighted enough."

"Har-de-har, very funny," Tom managed in a monotone.

"Well I'm off to hunt down a swimsuit and some suntan lotion," Val said, heading off down the corridor. "See you boys later."

"All's well the ends well, eh, Brooker?" the Doctor said before marching off in the direction of the console-room. "No need to thank me."

"Yeah, thanks for nothing, Doctor." Tom sat down dejectedly on the edge of the hospital bed. "I guess we're never going to have that talk after all, are we, Dea?"

* * * * *

This much is true:

In 1847, Henry Lawrence returned to England due to ill health. His heart remained in India, however, and he and his wife subsequently returned there, founding three schools for the education of the children of British soldiers. Honoria died of rheumatic fever in 1854 and Henry was never the same afterwards. Having been appointed Chief Commissioner of Oudh in 1857, he was killed by a shell just four days into the Siege of Lucknow, but part of him had died long before.

Meanwhile, the Koh-i-Noor diamond passed into the care of Henry's brother, John and, in 1850, it was sent to England on board the HMS *Medea* and was presented to Queen Victoria in the name of the then thirteen year-old Maharajah Dalip. Dalip himself saw the Queen wearing it when he was brought to England three years later. Neither was aware of the danger the diamond held within.

Before he left Lahore, Henry Lawrence had Maharani Jindan exiled for conspiring against the British. She was taken from Lahore - dragged out by the hair, in her own words - and confined Sheikhpura. In 1849 she escaped, leaving a note behind for her British captors. "You put me in the cage and locked me up. For all your locks and your sentries, I got out by my magic... but don't think I ran away." She found sanctuary in Nepal for a time, but ten years later she set out for England, following her son, following the Koh-i-Noor, following the creature trapped inside...

But that is another story.

The Doctor, Tom and Val
Return in December 2011
in
Stromboli's Comet

Lahore, 1846. In the aftermath of the Battle of Sobraon, the Sikh army has been decimated and the British have appointed a new Resident to the area, one Colonel Henry Lawrence. Nevertheless, Maharani Jindan, acting as Regent to her eight year-old son, still clings resolutely to power. From within the palace, she plots her revenge against those who murdered her brother, and she is not above making deals with devils to achieve her aims.

The Doctor is in Lahore for reasons of his own. He is on the trail of a predator, one he encountered before with tragic consequences. This time, he intends to track them down and stop them before the death count rises, but is he really the hunter or the hunted?

Val and Tom, still dealing with the trauma of recent events, have been left in the care of the Lawrences. Out of the way. Safe. Or so the Doctor believes. An old enemy has singled out the Doctor for her special attention and she is about to claim one of his traveling companions as her next victim.

As the situation spirals out of control, relationships will be challenged, loyalties tested and the Doctor will face an impossible dilemma: to save his friends, he will have to kill them.

This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring The Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meyer

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