

THE LAST TIGER

MOHAMMAD SALMAN

Firework holograms lit the skies above Raisina Hill, bathing India's most powerful neighbourhood in a silent riot of smokeless colour. It was three days before Diwali, and a few stray walkers along Rajpath savoured the citrus fragrances of autumn, away from the maddening, festive markets of New Delhi.

The celebrations did little to lighten the mood in the prime minister's office just up the hill. A group of terrified civil servants huddled outside, too terrified to sit. The minister of state in the PMO was inside with the PM, the heavy teak door unable to mask the shouting inside. They exchanged nervous glances. This was going to be a long, humiliating evening.

'Can I help you, gentlemen?'

The national security adviser, a seasoned ex-superspy, let out a small yelp as the others turned to face the PM's principal secretary. The PM's temper was the terror of Raisina Hill, but his PS was unflappable. Amused by their terror, she walked past and knocked on the door. The shouting stopped immediately.

The door opened moments later, the balding, pasty-faced minister slunk out. The tufts of black hair on his ears failed to hide the red of his shame, and he walked past without acknowledging anyone, mumbling furiously as he went. '*Isteefa de doonga!* What is this nonsense? To hell with this cabinet position! Now he wants a new way to show off. Bloody disaster...'

The PS sighed. She had just saved him from more humiliation, but not so much as a 'thank you'. She motioned to the media adviser, a wiry, grey-haired man with a perpetually shifty expression, to join her. 'Come with me, sir. The PM has some ideas to run by you.'

They walked into the beautiful, wood-panelled office, lined on all sides with portraits of ex-PMs. The incumbent himself sat behind a beautiful

mahogany desk, a picture of Mahatma Gandhi peering benevolently at the room from behind him.

The PM cut a truly impressive figure, modelled on the Great Leader from the early 2000s, the only person to hold the PM's office for over 20 years. In his image, the current leader sported a short, clipped white beard, dressed in light pastels reminiscent of the Nehru jackets of the past, his deeply attentive eyes behind rimless glasses. Myths from decades past had encouraged him to work out every day, even when he was well into his sixties, and as a result, the PM was rather broad around the chest and shoulders.

He waved a powerful hand at his officers. 'Sit down,' he said irritably, 'I hope you two will earn your keep for the day, unlike that moron. Just one bloody portfolio, and yet he can't come up with ideas. Is this how we will become a world power? How can we have a global image if the PM isn't respected globally? Twenty years from now, when my ashes are in the sea, I must be more than a paragraph in the *Manorama Yearbook*, no?' The media adviser interrupted. 'Sir, for the polls next year...'

'Arre, chup karo yaar! You guys can't even give me an image booster during festivals, just how the hell am I to trust you in 2087? The people mocking me are more famous than I am. That Paki college kid's videos mimicking me have gone viral worldwide. Those spoofs are more popular than my actual speeches! At least ask one of our Internet superstars to mock their army chief the same way, but no! You have no ideas! Your best suggestion was a tough crackdown on the protests outside the army's new robot facility. Apparently, that was supposed to send a strong message!'

Media croaked again. 'Thank you, sir...'

'Quiet! Idiot. The strong message was to be about my decisive push forward with new technology, and instead the press is going to town on my reputation! They're saying having a robot army diminishes the soldiers and mocks their sacrifice. And they have a point. Who is going to be loyal to a machine?'

'Sir, sorry...'

'Bhai, what use is your apology? *Kuch milega, kya?* Listen, I have a plan and I need it done right. New tech isn't impressing people these days, so the image booster will have to be a return to our heritage. The roots of our great nation. I need to be seen as respectful of old values. Which I am.'

'Umm...'

'Don't make that stupid face, man. Come on, give me ideas!'

'Err...'

'Forget it. Listen to me. Let go of the 20th and 21st centuries. We need to dig deeper. Go way back into India's past. Revive traditions that no one's thought of reviving. I've given this some thought, and I have a superb idea.'

The PS and the media adviser leaned forward. The PM chuckled. 'You really want to know, eh? Look, I read somewhere that during Diwali, people used to sacrifice owls to bring prosperity to their households. If I can do this in 2086, it could be a big win with the trading community. I'm thinking - let's get 36 owls, one for each state and union territory. And on the day of the festival, we get a butcher, preferably Muslim for the secular...'

'Sir, no!'

The PM stopped with all the grace of a man striding into an open door only to realize that it is closed and the glass is really clean. 'What did you say?' His eyes glinted, his rage barely suppressed.

The PS held her ground. 'Sir, you cannot do this. This was a cruel practice and if no one does it any more, good riddance! You will be drawn and quartered by the animal welfare community and pretty much everyone else. If the media adviser here hadn't lost use of his tongue right now, he'd tell you how the press would punch you left and right as well.'

The PM looked at her closely. 'I've rather taken a fancy to owls, and you have to get them. If cruelty is the issue, we won't kill them. We'll innovate a bit. Set them free, like people do with doves. Now go find me those owls. Go!'

There was clearly no room for negotiation. The PS got up and walked to the door, the stunned media adviser following close behind.

'And another thing,' said the PM. 'Get me 37 owls. 29 for the states, seven for the union territories and a big one for the country.'

The PS looked at the staff waiting outside. Of all the things they hadn't signed up for, this had to be the worst.



Supriya KT looked back at the village of Danapur as the matt green, fuel-cell-powered Maruti Suzuki Gypsy made its way into the forest. The houses

glowed with twinkling fairy lights of every colour, while silent fireworks projections shot into the overcast night sky.

Diwali. The best time of year to be anywhere in India. Records from before 2030 spoke about how the festival had become an ecological horror over time, with billions of fireworks triggering week-long spikes in air and noise pollution. She thanked her stars for living in a time when it had once again become a festival of lights.

The Gypsy powered on noiselessly through the soft dirt track, its occupants encased in a glass dome that allowed them unfettered views all round but could also double up as an extended computer screen. Driving the tough little vehicle was Kadheer, her trusty assistant of 12 years. A conservationist with the WWF, her job was to protect and track leopards along the banks of the Kapila River deep in the forests of Karnataka. With wild tigers declared extinct in India in 2075, hundreds of experts like her were assisting the government in protecting the next line of endangered big cats.

Seated in the back, she checked the equipment on board. She was going on a week-long expedition to the Lone Mountain, a solitary, thickly forested hill deep in the core area to confirm rumours of a black panther sighting. She pulled a tablet out of a recess behind the driver's seat and touched the centre to switch it on. Navigating through the controls, she accessed footage from the 20 camera traps hidden in locations on and around the hill. The banks of the Kapila had not seen a black panther for over three years, the last one having most likely migrated out to another park towards the south. It couldn't be tracked efficiently because a massively underfunded wildlife programme meant that neighbouring areas lacked the kind of sophisticated equipment Supriya worked with.

They drove silently for two hours, Kadheer concentrating on the road while Supriya scanned data and made notes. There was a sharp beep from the car's dashboard. Kadheer brought his foot down hard on the brakes, bringing the Gypsy to a stop. The first loud beep was followed by a series of softer ones. The word 'SCANNING' appeared on the car's central console.

Supriya jumped into the front passenger seat.

'What do you think it could be, madam?' Kadheer said. 'Elephant?'

'Not likely. The sensors on this car are very precise. The alarm is

programmed to be softer in case of an elephant or any large herbivore. This one's a big cat less than a kilometre from us.'

'It could also be a sloth bear.'

Supriya sighed. 'Kadheer, my friend, allow me some optimism. Let's pray this is the black panther we've come for. We'll have work for a week instead of the usual aimless waiting.'

The animal moved in the direction of the car, the screen showing what looked like a child's attempt at moulding a clay four-legged animal. Supriya and Kadheer did not move their eyes from the screen as the image slowly grew clearer. The sensors also picked up the increasingly panicked movements of small animals away from the approaching cat.

'Tail's long. Not a bear then...'

'No long snout either...'

'It's just 200 metres away now. Can we get a visual?'

'The animal is huge!'

'Of course it is. We're looking for a full-grown leopard.'

'No, no! It's bigger than that, Kadheer. I don't understand, unless...'

Wide-eyed, they looked away from the screen and at each other.

'It can't be, Supriya. They're extinct!'

'The computer can't make this up. Look at the screen. The shape of the ears. Its gait as it moves. It's just a hundred metres away now. Put the cloaking system on.'

They sat in silence, listening to the forest. The image of the approaching animal left little to the imagination, but they had to see it for themselves. Supriya switched on the colour-resolution cameras, which would project a perfect colour image of the animal on the windscreen regardless of how dark it was outside. Their eyes bored into the instruments. They were shaken out of their trance as a low, powerful roar sounded a few yards away from them.

'Oh dear God! That was *not* a leopard.'

The bushes finally parted and an animal no Indian had seen in the wild for over a decade walked on to the path. Its yellow eyes looked directly at the camera as it contemplated the strange metal beast trespassing in its territory. It bared its fangs and growled. The colour sensors captured its orange fur and black stripes in beautiful detail as the tiger turned away and walked across the path into the forest.

After what seemed like an eternity, Kadheer turned to Supriya, tears in his eyes. 'This is a miracle. There's a TIGER near the hill! We need better protection in the area!'

Supriya stared wordlessly at the 3D rendering of the tiger rotating slowly on car's dashboard screen. She laughed softly as the tears came freely. 'Unbelievable. An adult male tiger! They may have eluded our eyes all these years, but the tigers still seem to have a stronghold in India's forests. I never thought I'd see one again in the wild.'

'What next?' said Kadheer, 'Do we head to camp as planned, or do you want to go to Bengaluru to share this with the office?'

'We head to camp. We've all the connectivity we need over there to let the bosses know. Let's go.'



The PM banged his fist on his desk. 'Damn you! Can't any of you do anything right? Because of your incompetence, I've become a laughing stock on Diwali. The Opposition and their news guys are having the time of their lives at my expense.'

The PM's officials stood in absolute silence as he ranted. Speaking could be fatal today. After his prayers on Diwali morning, the PM had happily surged downstairs to an emptied-out parking lot with his entire cabinet and top bureaucrats for his owl-freeing ceremony with national and international news teams in attendance. There were a few diplomats as well. The Opposition had boycotted the event, protesting against cruelty to the captured birds.

Five bird catchers had done a fine job of getting 36 little owlets and one big barn owl to the ceremony. Managing the birds while they waited for the PM, though, had turned out to be harder. The birds fidgeted and fought, crowded on three perches.

As the PM walked out, the cameras began to click furiously. The flashing lights drove the owls wild. The barn owl broke the string tying it to the perch, freeing a few of the smaller birds in the process. They attacked the PM, pecking him on the face and arms and defecating on his spotless white clothes. One zealous guard fired at the birds and missed. The bullet ricocheted off the brass PMO plaque and caught the Pakistani

high commissioner in the foot. The offending guard was dragged away as the bird catchers scrambled in to restore order.

The only uninterrupted part of the ceremony was the photography and the video recordings, played on loop on national and global networks, and even reaching the off-world UN base on the moon. 'Owl's Not Well with the Indian PM', 'Diwali a Hoot at the Indian PMO', 'A Parliament of Owls Craps on India's PM', said some of the prominent papers.

It was a PR disaster and quite a diplomatic incident, and the media adviser fortuitously felt some pain in his chest and was rushed off to the hospital along with the PM and the Pakistan envoy. The PM got his scratches and cuts attended to, inquired after the high commissioner's health, ignored the media adviser completely and rushed back to summon a cabinet meeting.

'I have lost faith in all of you,' he said to his officials as they waited for the cabinet to assemble. 'There are going to be changes in the bureaucracy too when I do the next cabinet reshuffle. Let's hope my new ministers have better ideas than you lot.'

The cabinet ministers sat around the table, watching the PM walk in a few minutes later. They were absolutely still, no one wishing to draw the PM's attention. The PM took his seat, his officers standing behind him. 'Does anyone want to tell me about what happened?'

The minister to the PMO, skilled at attempted suicide, spoke. 'Pradhan Mantri-ji...'

'Not you,' the PM seethed. 'Not today. My own minister of state, ladies and gentlemen,' he said as he waved around the room, 'is the perfect example of a person so devoted to the cushiness of his job, he forgets what he's supposed to do to *keep it*. There's a reshuffle due next month, and one thing you all will be evaluated on is your role in building our image.'

'At this point, suffice to say that none of you have done the government's image any good. And after today, we've taken quite a beating. Now, I only have one hour to give you before we all adjourn for Diwali with our families. In that time, someone come up with an idea, or so help me God.'

'Since this latest disaster has branded me an enemy of the environment, we need to reverse that. What natural symbol would help us best?'

Sensing an opening, some of the ministers chimed in. 'Elephant,' said the Minister for North-East Affairs.

'No. It's already a symbol for the Opposition. Appropriating it is not worth the effort.'

'Peacock,' said the foreign minister.

'No birds after today's incident.'

'Rhino,' said the home minister.

'Extinct. Read a little, man!'

'Camel,' said the railways minister.

'Ugly.'

'Eagle,' said the textiles minister.

'No birds! Who else has an idea?'

'Snake,' said the PS in a whisper only the PM could hear. He turned to her with a look of pure venom, and then resumed glaring at the cabinet. 'Come on! This planet is full of every kind of creature. How can you not come up with one?'

'Lion?' the sports minister ventured.

'Can't. Those animals are thick as thieves with the CM of Gujarat. We'll only confuse the public. Think hard – all of you. Close your eyes and think since we are like a classful of primary students right now. Is there a problem, Environment Minister?'

The Minister for Environment and Forests, seated three places away to the PM's left, had been fidgeting with her phone and had knocked a glass of water over. Shocked at being called out, she cobbled together a reply. 'Sir,' she croaked. 'Sir. I was looking at my phone because important, uh, urgent, uh, message...'

'Be clear. Quick.'

She set her glass right, poured some water and took a sip. 'Sir, a wild tiger has been sighted in Karnataka!'

The room received this news with stunned silence.

'Wow. I thought they were extinct. Now that is a symbol I would be proud to be associated with. So,' he looked at the rest of the room, 'how do we spin this to our advantage?'

The minister for industry spoke. 'Sir, we could build on your "friend of the environment" image. What better proof of your commitment than tigers coming back into our forests?'

The defence minister followed. 'We could use some great lines, sir. The tiger is the sentinel of our forests, just like you are the sentinel of our great nation.'

'This isn't a First Family government, Defence Minister. Stop the sycophancy.'

The PM clasped his palms together, elbows on his desk. He closed his eyes for a few seconds as the room waited. He opened them a minute later, suddenly happier. 'I have an idea. Republic Day is coming up, and the parade has honestly become a bit of a bore. I really cannot stand it. Why don't we do a green parade down in Karnataka and get the tiger for a photo-op? Isn't that a great idea, Environment?'

It wasn't, but no one was going to say that. 'Of course, sir. Brilliant idea. I'll get in touch with the ground team and get this done.'

'You won't do it alone,' said the PM, turning towards his PS. 'Work closely with my office to see that everything happens smoothly.'

The PS seemed to be under great strain. She could hold it in no longer. 'With all due respect, sir, you *can't* have it on the day of the parade. Preparations are on, tickets sold and the German chancellor has confirmed his participation. There can only be trouble.'

The PM stood up. He would not be defied in front of his cabinet. 'I want to make one thing very clear. This place works like a democracy on the day of the polls. Not before and not after. You'll do as you're told. You'll all do as you're told. It is the *only* way you remain safe. Now go.'



'An invite to the PMO? Supriya, this is quite something!' The joint secretary for forests pushed the letter of invitation towards the young biologist.

'Thank you, sir. I hope I can get the PM to give us the funds we need. This tiger is young, born at least a couple of years after they had been declared extinct. There could be more where this one came from!'

The JS looked at Supriya over his half-moon smart glasses. 'One step at a time, Supriya. I hate to disappoint you, but there will be a political angle to all of this, and it will be thrust on you whether you like it or not.'

'What do you mean, a political angle? I can't have *netas* using this huge moment for a photo-op!'

'Play the long game, Supriya. You're young, there may be more than one tiger in the wild, and there's a lot you can do for them. The environment ministry in New Delhi has no money to help you, nor do we

at the Karnataka forest ministry. The PM's your only hope, and he'll want something in return. Think about that before you speak at the PMO.'



Supriya fiddled with her collar in the slightly stuffy, under-airconditioned office of the PS at the PMO. The bureaucrat sat with her fingertips arched together, cordless earplugs relaying the contents of Supriya's proposal. The file took three minutes to play, after which the PS pulled the earplugs out, reached for a glass of water (offering none to her visitor), downed it in a gulp and started talking.

'I like your proposal. It has promise. It looks like you'll build on this big discovery and turn it into the biggest conservation story of our time.'

'I would be honoured to have your support, madam.'

'And you shall. You shall. But...' the PS rummaged through some papers, 'we need to be practical about this. The PM's Special Projects Fund is not as big as people think. See, Supriya, from where the PM sits, there is a limited amount of resources and countless people and causes begging for his support.'

'I am not beg -'

'I know, I know. Just a manner of speaking. It falls on the PM, with some support from me, to decide where to spend this money. So, while wild tigers returning from extinction is big news, and your project is very visionary, what's in it for the PM?'

'Well, I intend to make it very clear that it is the PM's support that turned a chance tiger sighting into a new conservation project. We could name it after him if you like.'

'That won't do. I think this is a chance to do something bigger. You know how politics is today. The right move for one's image can guarantee more terms in power. More, er, opportunities to serve, as it were.'

'I wouldn't know, ma'am. I don't really understand politics very well.'

'Allow me to guide you then. What is our situation? We have a PM surrounded by a hostile media, an army of detractors mocking his every move. His attempts at image building haven't really worked. And that's what makes your help important. If the PM were to go public with the tiger, be seen with it, now that would be something.'

'What do you mean, "seen" with the tiger? It's a wild animal and needs to be studied, undisturbed. I cannot allow this to happen.'

The PS leaned forward. 'Let me be very clear. I don't care about this tiger of yours, any more than I care about anything you conservationists become a pain in the ass for. But it helps the national image to know that the national animal is not extinct, and it really helps that you discovered this in the present PM's tenure. I am offering you two choices: comply, and let us do the announcement of the tiger's return at a parade in the park in Karnataka. A day's trouble, after which you will have the time, resources and freedom to pursue this project as you will. If this is indeed the last tiger, we will milk every last drop of publicity out of it.'

'The other option is that you continue to be difficult. In which case we shut you down and find a biologist more willing to cooperate with us. The government's universities are overrun with scientists who wouldn't mind the sudden fame.'

She looked at her watch and then back at Supriya. 'I have to walk across to the PM in two minutes. That's all the time you have.'

Supriya looked at the bureaucrat with pure loathing.

In the tense, short-lived silence, the PS put a few letters in a file, readying them for the PM. She looked up at the sound of a snuffle.

Supriya fought back tears and heard herself say, 'Yes.'

~*~

On New Year's Eve, Supriya and Kadheer sat in a treehouse overlooking the Kapila River. Kadheer brewed tea in a kettle while Supriya watched footage from eight spy drones silently scanning the area. Three of them sent back images of the tiger walking towards the bank.

The two of them stared at the footage, lost for words. Every day over the past two months, they had managed at least an hour's worth of tiger sightings. They hoped the animal would cross the park boundaries and lead them to a mother or a mate or even a male rival fighting for territory. But the tiger stayed within the park, content in its new home.

The kettle whistled sharply. Supriya swore while Kadheer hurriedly switched it off. On the screens, the tiger, about a kilometre away, stopped walking and stuck its neck out at the sound. Supriya and Kadheer sat motionless. A minute later, the tiger resumed walking towards the river.

'Poor guy,' Kadheer said. 'He has no clue of the horror that awaits him three weeks from now.'

Supriya glared at the footage from drones flying over the Republic Day event zone chosen by the PM. 'There's scaffolding going up at the edge of the forest. Scaffolding! One old, vain bastard's insecurity ruining acres of good forest. For a *parade*!'

Right at the edge of the forest, the PM's office had ordered three acres of land cleared to make a pen for the tiger. On Republic Day, the animal would be driven into the pen by drum-beaters, where the PM and the chancellor of Germany would pose for an image with the tiger in the background. High-definition 3D holograms would render an accurate copy of the proceedings to billions of holoboxes across the world, while millions would 3D-print the likenesses for souvenirs. It would be an unorthodox Republic Day with (as the PM saw it) immense symbolic power. An end to his recent run of humiliations. As every official and staffer fell in line behind the PM's orders, Supriya watched with bitter resentment.

Later that night, keeping watch while Kadheer was sleeping, she pulled out a diary and scribbled her daily account. Pen and paper were off the grid and anything she wrote in there would be safe. Poking out of her bag was a small book called *Editorial Hotline: A List of the Globe's Biggest News Networks*. She had a big expose ready, implicating everyone responsible for this brazen disregard of the environment to feed the spiralling insecurities of one man.

Let him have his parade, she thought. Let's see how he feels after my story hits the news.

~*~

On the evening of 25 January 2086, the PM leaned back in his chair and surveyed his chief officer. 'So,' he said in what he hoped was a confident, prime ministerial voice, 'I hear everything is ready for tomorrow. Madam PS, am I to be assured on this front?'

'Yes, sir,' said the PS. 'All preparations are in order. The German chancellor and his retinue are at the seven-star property next to the wildlife reserve. The national and international media have their top reporters on the ground, covering the run-up to Republic Day. We've sold a thousand

He threw his phone down as his breathing grew ragged. He ran across the room to the medicine box by his bed. Falling halfway, he crawled to the nightstand, took out a pill and forced it down with a glass of water. He leaned against the bed as the panic attack subsided. Media management, they had said! He would have the bloody adviser's head once this was over. He got to his feet, gingerly, and walked over to the bathroom. 'Be strong, Narsingha. This is your moment. Your time. It will all be fine.'

He heard a knock on the door and the mask was on again.

'Breakfast, sir!'

'Coming.'



The tiger walked eastwards, away from the noise. His sleep had been disturbed before dawn by a constant BOOM, BOOM accompanied by the sound of humans shouting. There were too many of them, and the racket they made was unbearable. The noise had also driven little animals into the tiger's path, but no sooner did he settle down to eat a freshly killed rabbit or deer than the humans grew closer and drove him away. He snarled at the direction of the sound to no effect.

Let me find one of them alone, the tiger thought. That will be the end of it.



Hariya turned to his band of drum-beaters. 'The tiger is getting angrier. We should be patient and let him finish at least one of his kills.'

'We can't, *da*,' his brother Sessa responded. 'We have eight kilometres to go and only two hours until the function.'

'Good thing they sent 20 of us then. But I am surprised we didn't see any elephants or buffaloes.'

'The department is looking after that, *da*. There is a huge circle, 10 kilometres across, that they have kept the big beasts out of it for the past three days.'

'I don't know how the PM thinks this will help him. But 20,000 rupees each is generous. I am content to do as I am told.'



Supriya sat at her desk, making a furious diary entry.

'I have been placed under house arrest. I have no access to the Internet. There are cops stationed outside the apartment. They are kind and empathetic in their fashion. They don't mind getting me groceries and surprisingly, they have not asked me for tea or meals even once. It's been three days and I have to endure this for one day more. The bastards have driven the elephants and bison to the edges of the forest, away from the event. There is a media blackout with independent local reporters detained in the same manner as myself. What havoc the big beasts have caused in the buffer-zone villages will only be known in a few days' time, when the dead or injured start reaching the district hospital.'

'I am told the PM is beside himself at the prospect of seeing a wild tiger. A vain, unscrupulous autocrat seeking validation through an animal which is a marvel of nature. The tiger is all the more marvellous for having hidden in the wild when we all thought his kind extinct. This diary will go to press very soon, and I am going to bring this man down if it's the last thing I do. I hope I am not the only one who is trying to do this today.'



The dignitaries settled down after the playing of national anthems and after the PM, via hologram, gave obeisance to the Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate in New Delhi. They sat on an elevated platform at the edge of the forest, safe behind a bulletproof force field. To their left, bathed in soft sunlight after a rainy night, was the three-acre meadow that had been cleared for the tiger. To their right sat an assortment of dignitaries, celebrities, some schoolchildren and the media. Further back, in their thousands, were the orange-clad 'supporters' of the PM's, brought in from all over the district on the promises of a great spectacle and the chance to see the PM up close. And a small credit of 10,000 rupees into their accounts.

The PM turned to the German chancellor. 'Your Excellency, I hope you are enjoying this rather unorthodox celebration.'

'I would be, Mr Prime Minister, if your actions had not led to a PR disaster for me at home.'

'What?'

'Against all sound judgement, you have denuded a patch of forest for an event that is essentially about conservation. Then you have been harassing

what is possibly the last wild tiger in India. If that were not enough, 20 villagers have disappeared, allegedly in another one of your famously brutal reactions to dissent. I should walk off this dais.'

'You could. But you won't, will you? Not with all the agreements we have to sign, the bulk of which will benefit your people? And you do realize that I am the only world leader of any consequence supporting German businessmen by letting half your manufacturing sector translocate to India? I would suggest you swallow your pride and go through the motions with me. Ah, the sound of drums. The tiger comes close.'

He got up and walked down the steps to the ground. His security detail rushed to surround him. The PS and media adviser ran to his side.

'Sir, you're exposed,' the media adviser said. 'This is not a great idea.' 'Shut up! When this is done, we are going to speak about your keeping the news from me.' He turned to the PS. 'Have my security staff on full alert. I am going to stand at the fence of the enclosure. Make sure the cameras capture that when the tiger comes out.'

The PS opened her mouth to protest but thought better of it. *Let him have this day as he likes*, she thought. She saw the cameras follow the PM as he moved, and the Doordarshan and ANI drones circled the meadow searching for the tiger. A giant screen showed aerial footage of the forest, the tiger expected in sight at any moment.

The PM walked to the audio console and picked up a microphone. His appearance on the screens led to deafening cheers from the back. He waited for the noise to subside and spoke. 'Friends, I welcome you all to this most unique of all Republic Day celebrations. Today, we are here to celebrate the rediscovery, nay rebirth, of one of our greatest national icons. You have heard the mischievous ones say that India is no closer to being a superpower than it was a century ago. They said our development agenda has failed. They said the environment is in tatters. But tell me, what does the animal we are here to see represent?'

There was muffled cheering from the crowd. The PM looked around, letting his gaze rest on each dignitary behind the force field.

'We are here to see the last tiger. The sole remnant of a kind of majesty, grace, power and respect seen no longer in this world. That tiger is us. Read what you will in the news, but remember this — it is the people of India who are the world's most enduring civilization. It is we who have retained our gods, our culture, our traditions and *sanskara* while others

have fallen by the wayside. Just like the tiger, who now approaches. His ancestors migrated from the east many thousands of years ago at a time when India's jungles were home to lions. The tigers were the underdogs in that war, but they were clever. Over thousands of years, they picked each lion one by one, pushing them further and further west until the only lions we had were confined to the forest of Gir in Gujarat, and ultimately died there.

'The victorious tiger could not enjoy this supremacy for long. Man took over and until a decade ago, he all but destroyed this beautiful, awe-inspiring animal. The fact that one survived is a lesson in resilience, and that is what I am here to share with you. Enough with the parades, with the state floats! This is a new India, 140 years into our independence! We will fuse the old and the new, being loyal to our ancient symbols as we forge a new path into the future. Let us now witness the return of our national animal! *Bharat Mata ki Jai!*'

He walked to the fence as the chants of *Bharat Mata ki Jai!* hit the skies. *This is a great start*, the PM thought. *Something is finally going my way.*

He slipped on a fresh buffalo turd and narrowly avoided a fall, clutching at a commando who was shadowing him. He looked up and saw the chancellor smirk. He didn't dare look at the cameras for fear of another panic attack. Disregarding the shit that squelched in his leather sandals or the stain it left on his clothes, the PM walked with slow dignity to the fence, leaning casually against it once he got there. He ordered his commandos to go stand near the dais, a hundred yards away. 'Friends, the drums come closer. The tiger is nearly with us!'

The drums finally stopped. The crowd was suddenly struck into silence. Out of the trees and into everyone's line of sight, there in the meadow and on millions of screens around the world, the tiger walked out. He was a majestic, full-grown animal, the winter sun making his coat glow in an orange bright enough to make the beholder weep. The tiger snarled back at the forest, his displeasure at the drum-beaters evident.

A low boom reverberated across the park as the tiger roared. More booms as he roared again and again. The crowd and the PM watched in stunned silence. Whether they cared about wildlife or not, the only living wild Royal Bengal Tiger was a sight to remember. Even the thought of how great this would be for his PR was only a trickle at the back of the PM's brain.

Soon, though, reality beckoned. This was his show, and the tiger was

second to him. He lifted the mike and turned to the cameras. 'Here it is, my friends! The tiger has returned!'

The skies were rent with another deafening cheer. The tiger sank to the ground at the noise, covering its ears with its front paws. Opening its eyes, he spied the lone man standing at the edge of the fence, only a few bounds away. The men near him were too far to be of any help against a charging tiger. He roared again and leapt.

The PM's customary waves to the cameras were interrupted when he saw his commandoes run towards him, guns raised. He heard the snarl and realized what that meant. He turned back to see the tiger gaining upon him.

The tiger cleared the fence in one leap, the PM staring at him open-mouthed. He heard gunshots as the commandoes fired in a panic and saw the animal collapse before hitting him. The tiger hit a rock to the PM's left, and lay there. He stood transfixed looking at the beast in its death throes.

Plew.

Another snarl and the tiger rose again, claws ready to swipe. Ten commandoes fired 10 bullets. One of them ricocheted off the rock and the PM felt fire in his leg, his vision blurred as he heard his bone crack.

The cameras continued to roll.

A NIGHT WITH THE JOKING CLOWN

RIMI B. CHATTERJEE

'Hey Rayne!' my boss yelled. 'How's the robot army coming along?' They all laughed. Mr Salman Vaghela, CEO of Ramdhun Corporation, begins every meeting with his departmental heads with this question, and all the other bastards laugh. But I'm used to it now. They're just putting the Orbison in his place. Fucking Dynamics, so proud of having a daddy backing them up. Lineage is so important yada, yada, yada - as though the fact their daddies shot their mummies full of cum is part of God's great plan or something. Just because I was made from a prefabricated embryo implanted in the womb of some slag who must have been *sooo* grateful to be on contract with human resources, they think they're better than me. How straight of them to make an Orbison their head of tech, everyone should admire their broad-mindedness and give the morons a big fucking prize. So, I said what I always say: 'It's coming along well. I'll send along a prototype for you to look at soon.' He doesn't care about the prototype. Everybody knows the robot wars can't begin until all the space hotels are up and running, because when we finally destroy earth and all life upon it, the top guys want a seven-star gallery in the sky to watch it from. Bastards.

The meeting began, and I resisted the urge to watch darknet videos on my BlackTab under the table because the boss has replaced all our old tables with glass ones. He's afraid someone will pull a concealed weapon on him, shoot him when he least expects it. Like what happened to Jasper Edgemont, who was Ramdhun Corporation's guy in the Tarim Basin till a month ago. Times are tough. I suppose that's why the other heads didn't waste much time on pleasantries, thank fuck.

There were 12 of us in our black Samsa suits, our helmets resting on the table beside us. Samsa suits keep us clean, compensate for our