



Slithering Serpents

Rich Keller hated India, its snakes and their worshippers, the Nagas - even though he was there to study them. Ruffling his short brown hair with his hand, he bit down on his thin lower lip as he watched the village of Pachmuda wake up to another day of hot, sandy breezes.

"Watcha looking at?" His cohort shattered the silence, tapping him on the shoulder and making him jump.

"Sherri!" He snapped, turning to stare down at her. "Don't startle me like that again!" Quickly, he surveyed the innocent face, the black hair so short it was hardly visible beneath her bright orange Kool-Aid cap. The bottom of a bulky Indian robe stuck out from under a faded blue t-shirt. "You dress like that everyday?"

Sherri set her square little jaw. "One, okay, I'm sorry. Two, yes, I dress like this every day and if you don't like it I'm sorry. I don't like being stuck out here in the middle of nowhere with you either, but I was assigned to you so I don't have a choice and neither do you. Does that make any sense? I hope so."

He held up his hand to cease the talking. "Stop. You're talking in circles." Calmly, he added, "What did you come out here for?"

"What do you want me to do with the body?"

Rich frowned. 'The body'. As though she were talking about a human being. "You haven't gotten rid of it yet?" He shuddered, remembering the earthen pot come sailing through the portal of his bedroom window, crack open on the dirt floor and remain there as it's contents slithered out: the largest King Cobra he'd ever seen, angry from having been captive in the pot, looking for prey and finding it right there. Him. Rich. Sitting up on a spread-out blanket.

If Sherri hadn't been there with the gun - and how had she known what was happening from her room on the other side of the adobe house, anyway? - he would have been dead.

She had been answering his question all the time he had been recalling last night. "...anyway it was dark outside and, besides, the Nagas were keeping vigil because of the ceremony today. You really think I was gonna march past them with the decapitated pulp of their Holy One? Get real - "

He held up his hand again to shut her up. "Just - bury it somewhere away from here, okay?"

She nodded at her orders. "Don't worry. I'll take it out back where you won't even have to look at it because it's starting to stink already in that room but you could have at least swept the floor, you know? Pottery doesn't do well under gunfire..."

"Whatever." He muttered, waiting until she was safely out of the house with the remains before going into the room, bag in hand, to clean up the earthen pot's many pieces.

Sherri was right, he thought, *it does stink in here*. There was some blood from the creature on some of the fragments. He'd seen snakes, held them, fed them a hundred times, maybe more than that - in a laboratory; but here, where they were treated as gods, they were different to him. Scary.

"If you don't have the stomach to clean *that* up, I can do it."

Rich jumped at her voice, as he had before, but he didn't yell this time. She might start talking in circles again. Instead, he came out with a statement. "These people don't want us here. Research will be difficult."

She bent down to pick up the pieces and put them in the bag. "Well, especially if they keep chucking serpents through the windows you know; we should get a mongoose. Like a watchdog."

"No way."

"Why not?"

His eyes had something in them that she hadn't seen before. "You didn't see that yesterday when they strung those poor things up by the necks in the square as a sacrifice to - whomever they were chanting about - Vishnu? The goddess with the blue skin? We get a mongoose to protect us, they find out about it and we'd really be asking for it. Pick your poison - be bitten or be sacrificed."

For the first time since she met him she had nothing to say.

"Am I right?"

Sherri began drawing on the dirt floor with the sharp point of a piece of pottery.

"Am I?" He insisted, interested to see if she would come up with a denial and an excuse - or two or three, the way she usually did.

She scribbled over the snake she'd drawn and threw it at the wall, listening to the chink sound it made before she burst out, "Why don't we just QUIT this stupid study and go home! What the heck is all this really worth?"

Actually, that was something he should have asked himself before he'd even thought of coming here, because now he hated the very things he'd dedicated his life's work to.

Suddenly, another pot came sailing through the window, and each knew instantly what was coming next.

Only this time, there wouldn't be time to react.

- Kristi Petersen

Golden-haired missionary Brenna Murry selectively stepped her way to the end of some loosely ~~tid~~ floating boards: a dock to the snake-worshippers that lived just over the hill. Oh, she was supposed to be converting them - yet they were stubborn, and she was just getting tired of fighting.

A light drizzle began to fall as she furrowed her brow to search the surface of India's great Ganges River for any sign of the boat which was supposed to arrive today; just as her gray eyes registered hopelessness, her demure lips parted: she saw the battered hulk of the New Delhi's Special emerge from the mists. Tiredly brushing her damp, darkened curls away from her face, she moved to the end of the dock and made ready to catch the noose Ian Forrester would throw her.

"Here!" He called to her, watching as she slipped it over the wooden head of a cobra idol protruding from the water's surface. When the boat had pulled into the boards close enough, Ian reached down and lifted one of the heavy crates of Bibles to pass it to her.

Brenna had only met him once before, and she could remember him being someone she didn't like: his sandy hair reminded her a little too much of home, and the odd green shade of his eyes unnerved her. Now, however, she was glad to have him here - he spoke her language, practiced her religion, and wouldn't give her a headache from chanting for a straight week. "You didn't, by chance, bring any aspirin, did you?" She asked, bit her lower lip.

"No, kid," he responded, heaving one of the crates up onto his shoulder as she had done not seconds before. "Not today, I'm afraid. Chanting getting to you?"

"Not really," she lied. Turning gracefully on one foot, she lifted the folds of her sarong skirt to climb the hill, the newly-built wooden church at the outskirts of the village towering over her.

Ian noticed that the chanting was getting louder as he followed the slight-framed girl up the hill: not the increase expected as one neared something - but as something neared one. Shaking off his sudden feeling of dread, he asked her a question

She hadn't heard any of it - only mumbles. "What?" She asked, stopping and

turning so she could better hear it and answer.

"I ~~said~~, how long is this festival supposed to continue?"

"Another week, I believe. They put a live snake up on a platform in the village square..."

He tuned out the rest of her explanation, his eyes fixed on the thickness of a coiled cobra just behind her, its sensory tongue darting from its mouth every few seconds.

Its hood was up.

"Brenna don't move." He interrupted her.

She stopped talking, cocking her head for a moment. "What?"

The chanting was getting too close; he didn't like it. At all.

He didn't move his head. "Don't. Stay still."

She swallowed, not asking the reason because she didn't want to know; yet she saw his hand go for the Wetherby strapped to his right leg; he was concentrating at something behind her, and as the chanting came still nearer, she knew.

"Ian, don't kill it it's-"

He squeezed off one shot, the snake becoming pulp in the one spot it had been hit.

At such close range, one bullet had been enough to kill it.

The villagers lined the top of the hill; they had stopped chanting, and the silence to Brenna seemed more deafening than anything she'd heard in the past month.

"Ian," she murmured, "you've just killed their god."