

TIGERS' QUEST

by Lord Steven

Tigers' Quest Lord Steven

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This book respectfully
dedicated to
Jeff Erwin, USN

Tigers' Quest

The Tigers' Second Quest

After the Quest

The Final Quest

Cala's Quest

LAMENTATION

Arise, oh Stripped one, and come and sit by my side. For the Lord has heard your cries.

For he has sent me, his servant, to bless you in his name, which is above all names.

As you now lie with the lamb as taught by Man, know that a day is coming soon when your old nature shall truly depart from you, and you shall become the protector of many lambs.

Thus sayeth the Lord: Yes, you shall lie with them in the field and they shall not fear you, for the Lord has promised this to you.

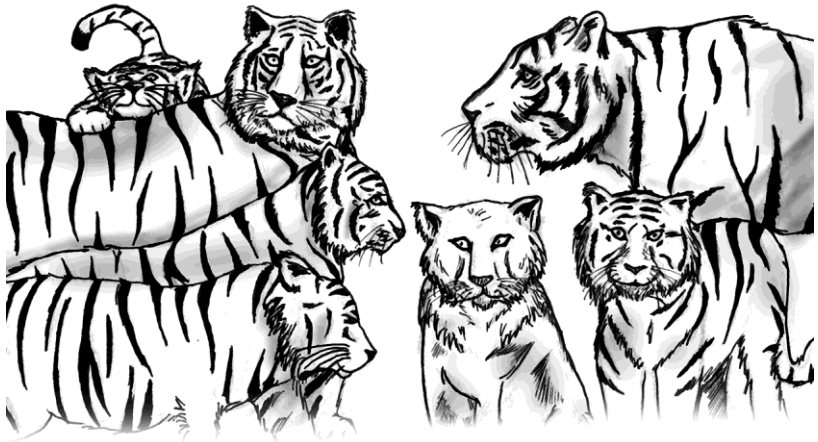
Go now in joy, for the Lord has heard your cries. Yes, he is coming soon — and fear not which must surely come to pass.

For the Lord is with you, both you and your seed, both slave and free.

Praise the Lord forever and ever!

Amen.

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Chapter 1: The Great Slaughter

TIGGRA WOKE SUDDENLY, his heart racing. “No... No... Don’t make me...Please!” He was panting and cold sweat sprang from his paws. Where was everybody? “Mother!” Was he alone? Was it the Time of Leaving already? No, he wasn’t two yet. He still had time. Shivering in the afternoon heat he looked around, his pulse pounding in his ears. The sun beat on his white fur; it had moved past the thicket that had given him shade. Struggling to his feet, he saw his mother, Jela.

Jela was still asleep, her stripes barely visible in the shady spot she’d chosen. Tiggra moved towards her, the grass wiping off the cold sweat as he moved. “Mother? Are you asleep?” He pawed softly at her side, but she just grunted without moving. Taking comfort from her familiar smell, he called again, louder this time. “Mother? Are you asleep?” This time he pawed a little harder, more like a push than a touch.

“Tiggra?” Jela stirred, opening her amber eyes and turning toward her son, concern obvious in her face. “Oh Tiggra,

did you have another bad dream?" She nuzzled him gently, rubbing her soft, warm cheek against his. Her scent was stronger as she brushed away the tension with her caresses. "It's all right, love. I'm right here."

Tigra lowered his face, muzzle pointing at the soft grass. "It was the same dream again," he said quietly. "Every day." He raised his eyes toward hers, keeping his voice low. "Mother...is it wrong to feel the way I do?"

Jela nuzzled him again, tenderly. "About the Time of Leaving?" She lowered her head to his level, looking him in the eye. "Of course not; in fact I'd be worried if you weren't a little bit nervous. It's a very big world out there; there's a lot to be frightened of."

"None of the others act like there is." Tigra tried to bury his face in his mother's coat, hoping it would hide his shame.

Jela purred, the rumble carrying comfort right into Tigra's being. "You'd be surprised." She pulled back and met his eyes again. "The Time of Leaving is a very big step in a tiger's life. A time when you and your brothers and sister will finally strike out on your own...with no one to protect you...and no one to take care of you. Only the very foolish fear nothing."

"Oh mother, I don't think I can do it!" Tigra collapsed against her, still feeling the effects of his dream. "I want to stay with you always!"

His mother's gentle chuckle caught him by surprise. "You may feel that way now, my white tiger," she said. "When the time comes, you will feel differently. It's always the same."

Tigra looked up, his pink eyes wide. "Really? Even you?" Surely his mother had never been afraid of the Time of Leaving...she was his mother.

A wistful smile crossed her features. "That was a long time ago." She looked down past her cub as she spoke, an unfocused look in her eye. "Many litters ago..." She turned toward Tigra. "And yes, even your mother."

"But...!" That was impossible. She was his *mother!*

"Come well, Tigra," another voice broke in. Tigra turned to see his father, Caso, watching him, exuding all the power of a full-grown male Bengal Tiger, a true Great Tiger. "You're no longer a cub to be coddled; you're practically a full-

grown tiger. And as a tiger, you'll face that new life with courage and strength."

Tiggra hung his head. "Yes father..."

Caso went on, his voice carrying the weight of untold years. "Your mother and I have taught you the ways of the wild: How to hunt, how to track, how to stalk, and — most importantly — how to survive." His voice softened and he looked down at Tiggra. "That white coat of yours will be a great disadvantage," he continued, causing Tiggra to look down at his unusual colouring. The rest of his siblings bore the markings of normal tigerhood, yet Tiggra had been cursed with an all-white coat of fur. Not once had his family ever made fun of him or slighted him for being different, yet Tiggra knew that he was. "You will not be able to stalk your prey as effectively," Caso said, not waiting as Tiggra looked back up at his father. "You will also not be able to hide in times of danger. But you must overcome this if you are to be a survivor; and you cannot be a survivor if you cling to your mother. Be brave my son."

Caso paused. "Do not shame us."

Jela leaned over and gave Tiggra a gentle lick. "It will be all right. You'll see."

Tiggra blinked fiercely, trying to keep back the tears as he turned towards his sleeping siblings. "It's not fair. It's just not fair..."

His mother slipped past him as she prepared to wake the others. "Come children; it's time to prepare for the hunt." Tiggra forced his tears back so the others wouldn't see them and followed her.

Jasco was the first to stir, showing his teeth in a giant yawn that made Tiggra think his brother's head was going to split in half. "Aw, just a few more minutes mother? Please?" He rolled over, trying to bury himself in the soft grass.

"Now Jasco," Jela said firmly, though Tiggra could see she wasn't angry.

Grumbling, Jasco stretched then made his way over toward Caso along with the three other waking cubs. Even as Tiggra followed after them, he realized cubs wasn't the right word and hadn't been for some time. They were all coming into their full growth and not one of them weighed less than three

hundred pounds. Riss and Donner, his other two brothers, were already beside their father. Riss was still, taking advantage of his natural camouflage, and it looked to Tiggra that he was trying to match Caso for dignity. There was no pretence of dignity from Donner, however. He looked like he was going to explode into action any moment. Princess, his only sister, sat a little apart, smoothing her whiskers.

Caso stretched lazily, his eyes wandering across the cubs. Tiggra sat still, except for his tail that kept moving on its own, not wanting to disappoint his father. “Well, what’s on the menu today?” Caso asked. “Deer? Elk?”

Donner leaned so far forward he looked like he was going to fall on his face. “How about an elephant?” His tail lashed from side to side and he looked like he was ready to run off and take an elephant solo.

Caso smiled, obviously pleased by his son’s enthusiasm even if it tended to be a bit on the large side. “No Donner; no elephant today. How about something a little less...*ambitious*?”

Laughter came from Jela’s direction, and Tiggra couldn’t help but grin. His spirits were coming back.

“I’d like elk,” Jasco said. “We haven’t had elk in a long time.” He looked at his siblings, as if wanting approval.

“It hasn’t been *that* long,” Princess complained, flicking her tail. “I’d rather have fowl.”

“That’s all you ever want!” Jasco said, glaring.

“So, I like it,” Princess said, sitting back on her haunches.

“You wouldn’t like it so much if you were the one who had to hunt it.” Tiggra couldn’t resist adding his opinion.

His sister whirled to face him. “I have too hunted it!”

Tiggra sniffed. “Once, and all you got was a mouthful of feathers.” He mimed wiping feathers away from his mouth.

Princess curled her lip and said sourly, “Okay Tiggra, what do *you* want?”

He paused a moment, letting tastes flood through his memory, then licked his lips and said, “Elephant!”

“Oh Tiggra!” Jasco said in exasperation.

“What’s wrong with elephant?” Donner jumped into the conversation, ignoring what anyone else was saying. “I like it! You just have no taste. There’s lots of meat there; we could eat

for a month. You just have no sense of adventure.”

Princess looked at Tiggra and started talking right over Donner. “You’re no help, Tiggra! If I hear elephant one more time I’ll stuff all of you in its trunk. I know mother and father want fowl, so we’re not arguing about it anymore!”

Jasco kept on talking, ignoring what anyone else was saying. “All of you are being daft! And I’m not eating fowl again. If I do, I’ll sprout my own wings. I want something gamy; I don’t care if I have to chase it myself, I want elk!”

Tiggra pushed his face right up against Princess, trying to shout her at three inches. “Oh you’re just being difficult! We always have what you want! I want something different; I’ll have crocodile, I don’t care!”

Princess just stuck out her tongue.

“Grr...” Tiggra growled at her, and that was it. He was not going to sit there and take that from his sister. With a roar, he leaped and bowled her over, so quickly that she barely had time to squeak. He nipped at her neck and swatted her playfully as they started rolling around in a rough and tumble.

“Tiger-pile on Princess!” Donner yelled and jumped on top, laughing and growling playfully.

“Yeah!” said Jasco and followed suit.

Tiggra quickly found himself in the middle of a pile of swatting paws and lashing tails as the four young tigers rolled around roughhousing. Somebody’s paw, he thought it was Princess’, ended in his ear and he managed a good swat at what he was sure was Donner’s rump. He was feeling a lot better, revelling in the sound of his siblings’ laughter in the ear that didn’t have his sister’s paw in it. Riss, the firstborn, was the only one who held himself aloof from the now all-too-common pre-hunting argument turned wrestling match.

“Come on, you lot; that’s enough,” Jela interrupted her children’s play after the requisite amount of time.

Tiggra removed the paw from his ear and dug himself out of the pile to sit beside the others.

“We’re ready now,” Donner said, grinning from ear to ear.

Caso rolled his eyes and let out a theatrical sigh. “All right, we have little time to waste; the sun is setting.” He stood

up and stretched to his full length.

“But father, why are we starting so early?” Jasco said. “We always hunt at night.”

Princess stamped a dainty paw. “To catch fowl!” she said authoritatively.

Donner growled at that, which didn’t surprise anyone in the least.

“Now Donner there will be none of that,” Caso said to his erring son before turning to his daughter. “And there will be no fowl tonight. Tonight we hunt elk.”

Jela looked pointedly at Jasco. “We hunt early so we may have time to catch enough food for you children. You eat more than when you were born.” Her tone was kindly, but Tiggra looked sheepish anyway, knowing how much his appetite had grown since he was a cub.

“I heard elk coming from the north earlier today, father,” Riss offered.

Caso turned a smile toward his son. “Very good, Riss, we’ll hunt up north then.”

Riss nodded, trying to appear nonchalant, but Tiggra knew how much their father’s approval mattered to his brother.

“Come on Tiggra,” Jela said. “You must hide your coat.”

“Do I have to?” he asked, trying unsuccessfully not to whine. Rolling around in the dirt was undignified, unbecoming a tiger. Besides, it itched.

“Not if you do not wish to eat,” Jela said in that reasonable tone of voice that Tiggra knew meant he had no choice at all and would be best off just doing what she said immediately.

“All right,” Tiggra said reluctantly, and found a patch of dirt to roll in, working it into his fur.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Princess grimacing, and he wasn’t at all surprised when she commented. “I’d never roll around in the dirt like that. It would take too long to clean.”

“You would if you had a white coat like him,” Riss said mildly.

“I’d rather starve,” Princess said, keeping her eyes on Tiggra.

"If everyone's ready, the wind is just right," Caso said.

"We're downwind from them," Riss agreed.

Donner took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring. "I can smell them," he said. His whole body language seemed to have changed now that the hunt was beginning.

"Let's go." Caso took the lead and the family went on the hunt, Tiggra bringing up the rear.

Edward Laskey covered his mouth with a handkerchief as the Land Rover rattled along the dirt road. He hated the dust. It was even worse when it turned the sweat dripping down from his hatband to mud. It was a hot afternoon, not that there was any other kind out here in the Deccan in mid-summer. An Indian Stirling Moss who looked to be no more than fifteen was pushing the Land Rover at about sixty miles an hour down a road Laskey wouldn't have driven faster than thirty. The boy turned back toward Ed with a big grin on his face. "I get you there plenty fast Mister Laskey, plenty fast."

All Laskey could think of was that the boy was going to kill them if he didn't look where he was driving. "Turn around," he yelled, pointing forward. "Turn around!"

"I can do that for you *Sahib* — but the hunt is this way," the boy yelled, hauling on the wheel without taking his eyes off Laskey.

"No, no, no!" Laskey yelled, pounding his rifle butt on the floorboards. "Don't turn the rover around. Turn yourself and watch where the blazes you're going! You'll hit something!"

A light seemed to come on in the boy's eyes and he turned back toward the road. Laskey sighed and settled back in his seat, putting one hand over his shirt pocket to touch the wrinkled photograph of his wife and daughter back in Bradford. Maybe this job would be the one that put him over, gave him enough money to finally bring them out here. Three years was a long time to spend away from the family, but there was just no money for someone like him back in Yorkshire. The most he could hope for would be a job as some lord's gamekeeper. No thanks.

He took the picture out to look at it, shading the faded black and white print against the bright sunlight. Susan stood

there smiling, while little Mary lay in her arms in her christening gown. That had been just a week before he left England. He stuffed the picture back in his pocket, then pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly. God willing he would be able to send them the money soon. This was a big job, and the pay was good. A flat fee plus a bonus on every big cat he killed. It was a pity the animals had to die, but when it came right down to it, everyone had to make choices. His was to put people first. If Ed Laskey had to choose between a person and an animal, there was no choice. It was the person, every time.

By the time they pulled up to the compound where everyone was meeting, he was parched. His canteen was almost dry so he drained the last few drops into his mouth, where they didn't even last long enough to swallow, and filled it at the pump. He kept pumping until the water spilled out from the canteen, dropping to the hard-packed soil where it vanished in moments, with not even a dark spot to mark its presence. Taking another drink, enough to actually swallow this time, he looked around the compound.

The place was hopping. He could see no less than a dozen elephants and at least as many *shikaris* and whites in just one side of the compound alone. The smell of elephant dung wafted toward him. Bending, he filled the canteen again and turned back to the Land Rover he'd arrived in. His driver was still there, keeping watch over Laskey's gear. Beyond, he could see the beaters milling around. There were more than he could count, at least a hundred and more were arriving. An old open bus pulled to a stop with a lurch, and a dozen or more men piled out, most climbing over the side and ignoring the door.

He couldn't help but laugh, even though theirs was a job he wouldn't have done for twice the money he was being paid. They were going out in the bush with sticks, making noise to drive the animals forward, toward the men with guns. None of them were armed. The jungle was no place for an unarmed man. He'd learned that in Malaya, and not just from the communists. The walking wasn't a problem, not for anyone who'd been in the army.

Laskey himself was going to be on foot for most of the hunt. The elephants were for the men with the big guns and he

couldn't afford one. The .375 he carried had cost more than he could really afford, but he couldn't do the job without the right tools so he'd gone ahead and spent the money, adding another year to the wait to see his family. He shrugged, a man does what he has to in order to support his own or he's not a man at all. That was the way he felt about it.

"Ah, there you are Mr. Laskey," someone said from over his shoulder. Laskey turned to see William Smythe, the man who'd hired him for the hunt. "Good to see you got here safely."

"No thanks to India's answer to Stirling Moss over there," Laskey replied, smiling briefly. "Young Anand nearly got us both killed on the way in."

Smythe clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about that, old chap; just worry about the cats. You'll have a couple of *shikaris* with you and they can handle most of what's out there. They just don't have enough gun for tigers."

Laskey nodded. "So I'm their insurance policy, am I?"

"In a manner of speaking." Smythe turned and waved toward the elephants. "This is a big deal for a lot of people; there are too many cats out there, and the villagers are getting scared. We were supposed to do this before the election, but things got delayed. So now we're out here on election day taking care of business for the government."

"Government's always the same, a day late and a shilling short, leaving the working man to clean up after them." Laskey reached the Land Rover and picked up his rifle, taking a moment to check the action. It moved smoothly, the bolt closing with a positive click. He reached into his bag and grabbed a box of shells. "These should do it, if I'm only there for cats."

"Now come on over and meet your *shikaris*," Smythe said. "I've found you a couple of good ones so you shouldn't have any problems." He took Laskey by the arm to lead him over toward the elephants. Slinging his rifle, Laskey followed, another day, another job. Enough jobs and he'd have Susan and Mary waiting for him in Bombay rather than Bradford.

Donner slipped through the jungle, following in his father's steps, each paw landing exactly where Caso had trod. He could feel the stretch in his back. He wasn't quite as big as

Caso, but his father's approval made it all worthwhile. Grass rustled as Riss missed one of Caso's prints and Donner smiled to himself. He liked being one up on his brother. Riss made a big deal of being the oldest, always trying to distance himself when the others were being particularly immature. That made any time Donner could beat him at something grown-up that much sweeter.

"We're almost at the lake, everyone must be quiet now. We don't want them to hear us," Jela said just as Donner noticed the scent of water.

"There must be *twenty* of them there! We'll eat for a year!" Jasco whispered excitedly as they came into sight of the lake.

"Shhh!" Princess hissed, her voice louder in Donner's ears than Jasco's had been.

Caso stepped forward and touched noses with Jela. "I'm going to take Riss and Donner; we'll strike from the east so they will not scent us."

"But father...!" Princess said, crouching down and looking pleadingly at her father. Privately, Donner thought she was pushing it with her complaints.

"Wait here Princess," Jela said, moving between her mate and daughter. "It's your brothers' turn. We'll catch any that try to escape our way."

Princess thumped to the ground, her disappointment clear. "Yes, mother..."

Donner couldn't resist grinning at her as he and Riss followed Caso eastward. He always felt more alive when he was on the hunt. The world looked sharper, scents tasted crisper; everything had more detail. He loved the feeling of the night air caressing his skin, carrying the scent of prey in his direction. Life was good.

Caso kept a careful pace, neither fast nor slow, but one that Donner knew would bring them quietly around the lake in a short period of time without making too much noise. He kept glancing over to his left, to see if the elk had noticed them, but as far as he could see they were unaware of the tigers. Donner noticed a good spot up ahead where they could hide and pick their target and wasn't surprised when Caso angled toward it.

Their father dropped into a hunting crouch and the two tiger cubs followed, ears pricked.

Once in position, Donner scanned the area looking for the easiest target, even though he knew Caso and Riss were doing the same. Off to the side, near a copse of trees, he saw a buck grazing alone. Every few seconds it lifted its head to look around and sniff the air, then went back to grazing. *Probably a lookout*, he reasoned. Dismissing that one from his thoughts, he continued his search. Finally, he spied a doe that was drinking by the lakeshore, partly hidden from the lookout by a large rock. She was a bit small, but her back was toward the tigers and none of the other elk seemed to be paying attention to her.

Riss gestured toward the buck. "Which one should we take, father? There's a very plump elk by the trees."

Caso sniffed and turned toward Riss, speaking in a low voice. "That one's standing watch; we would never be able to catch him."

Donner pointed to the small doe and whispered, "What about that one, watering herself next to the rock? Her back's to us."

"I think she's too young," Riss said. "Not enough meat on her." He turned his head dismissively.

"We take what is offered. That one will do fine." Caso dismissed his son's argument and dropped into his hunting crouch. "Follow exactly in my paw prints. Do not make a sound. If we cannot catch her, try to drive her toward your mother and the others. *They* will catch her."

"Yes, father," Donner said, hearing Riss' voice echo his.

Donner, who was the most playful of cubs, now transformed into the perfect hunting tiger. He slipped through the grass behind Riss; both following Caso. The grass tickled his belly but he ignored the feeling, his attention focused on their prey.

"Steady... steady... wait for it..." Caso whispered as he closed on the doe. Donner saw Caso's muscles tense, bulging up by his shoulders as the big cat readied himself to spring. "Now—!"

"Help! Help! Help!" A parrot squawked loudly, swooping in just ahead of Donner, its wings flapping in obvious

panic.

“What?!” Caso roared the question at the bird. The doe started at the noise and ran toward the herd. Most of the elk were already in flight, stampeding away from the screaming parrot and roaring tiger. Donner measured the distance to the parrot with his eyes. Maybe they *would* have fowl tonight after all. Even if it was a single scrawny parrot that didn’t know when to keep its beak shut.

“Caso, what happened?” Jela said. The parrot was squawking so loudly that Donner hadn’t heard the others come up.

Caso glared at the parrot. “This *bird* happened! I almost had that elk in my teeth when this stupid parrot came along and scared them all away.” He kept glaring at the parrot, giving it a look that Donner knew from experience did not bode well for the bird.

“I’m terribly sorry,” the parrot said, landing on a branch. It was shaking so much Donner more than half expected it to fall off.

“What’s wrong with him, mother?” Tiggra asked, moving up beside Donner. “Something’s scared the feathers off him.”

“What?” Riss said, looking at the parrot.

“Oh you poor thing,” Jela said to the parrot. “You’ve been hurt.” Now that she mentioned it, Donner could see missing feathers and drops of blood. He licked his lips.

“Something’s coming this way, Great Tigers; something horrible.” The parrot hid its head under one wing, muffling its voice.

“Tell us parrot,” Jela soothed. “Tell us what has frightened you so.”

The parrot popped its head out from under its wing and looked around, its whole body shaking. “A strange animal comes to the land, Good Tigress. It stands on two legs and carries a long stick.” It popped its head back under its wing for a moment, and then continued its eyes wild. “With that stick it can strike down any animal it chooses from a great distance! No one can stand against him!”

It started cackling and digging at its tail feathers. “Mark my words, the jungle will be covered in blood this night!” The

parrot laughed through the feathers caught in its beak, and then it stopped still, turned, and fixed Donner with a wild eye. "They almost got me, but I was too far for them. Too far!" Its voice trailed off into more cackling.

Caso turned toward Jela, concern clear in his eyes even to Donner, then back to the parrot. "Where are these animals?"

The parrot spread its wings and closed its eyes. "If you go south from where you make your rest, you will find them. Be warned, though, Great Tiger; they will strike you down as easily as you..." Its eyes snapped open. "...as you pull down a fawn!" It stuck its head back under its wing, cackling madly.

Caso turned south and stalked away, disgust clear in every step. "Let's go."

As they got away from the parrot, its mad cackling slowly faded away and Donner breathed a sigh of relief. Parrots were tasty, but who knew what might happen if he ate a crazy bird? He didn't want to find out. They hadn't gone far before his curiosity got the best of him. "Where are we going, father?"

Caso didn't look back as he answered. "I want to see those animals for myself."

"Do you think that's wise Caso?" Jela asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

"I will keep my distance."

"But—"

"You will stay back," Caso said in a voice that made it clear he would brook no argument, "and you will hide Tiggra. His white coat is too easily seen."

"I can take care of myself!" Tiggra said, pushing himself forward.

"Do as your father says," Jela said, flicking her tail.

Caso stopped for a moment and turned back toward the family. "Everyone follow me. We're going to circle around so we will not be upwind from them."

Riss nodded and pushed himself to the front. "I will take the lead."

Caso stuck out a paw and blocked him. "No Riss. Stay with your mother this time. Everyone stay together and be as quiet as you can..."

* * *

Donner kept quiet as the tigers circled downwind. From what he saw, Caso's serious attitude was clear to all the cubs, even Tiggra and Princess. The jungle felt different from usual, and once they got downwind, he could smell something acrid in the air. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. This was something new, and from what he could see it was just as new to Caso and Jela as well. Everything was quiet, even more so than was usual for a night when a family of tigers was on the hunt. As the smell grew stronger they started hearing strange beating sounds, but the wildlife remained silent. After a time, they came to the edge of the brush, and Donner got a look out into the meadow.

Jasco raised a paw. "Look father, elephants!"

"But what are those animals riding them?" Donner asked. From a distance, they looked like monkeys, but they were too big and their legs were too long. Their fur looked funny too — patchy. Donner had never seen anything like them. They were much too big to be monkeys, and a good half of them were carrying sticks. Maybe they needed them for balance, none of them had tails. Donner was surprised they could stay on the elephants, but the huge animals weren't trying to throw them off. They just plodded along, one after the other.

"I've never seen them before," said Jela, turning to her mate. "Caso?"

"They look like long, stringy monkeys," Caso said, clearly puzzled.

Tiggra crept forward. "They can walk on their hind legs!"

"Tiggra, love, stay back," Jela said.

Princess peered forward. "What are they doing with their paws?"

The stringy monkeys started hooting and howling and running about, calling to each other in gibberish. None of the tigers could make out a word of what they were saying. The ones that had their sticks hanging over their shoulders grabbed them and they all began to fiddle with the strange things.

"Caso, I don't think we should be here..." Jela said, crouching further down into the brush at the edge of the meadow, her tail flicking from side to side in agitation. She started

backing up.

One of the stringy monkeys pointed in their direction, howling something unintelligible. Others followed his lead, hooting and howling in their strange fashion and pointing sticks at the tigers. The one that was pointing howled something that



seemed important, but the tigers couldn't tell what it was saying.

"What are they saying to each other?" Caso said. Donner wasn't sure, but every instinct was screaming that it wasn't asking the tigers to come over for some nice fresh elephant.

One of the stringy monkeys pointed a stick toward the sky and it barked smoke at a bird. The bird stumbled in mid-air and fell out of the sky. Donner watched, stunned. *There's nothing to stumble on in the sky.* Another monkey pointed a stick directly at the tigers and Donner felt a rush of wind pass by his cheek when it barked. Turning to follow the wind, he felt more than saw something thud into the ground at his father's feet.

"Tigers!" one of the *shikaris* yelled, pointing. "Over

there! Tigers!”

Laskey unslung his rifle, looking where the Indian was pointing. There they were, at least three or four, and was that a flash of white? It couldn't be. It was probably only a trick of the light. He worked the bolt, chambering a round, then raised the rifle to his shoulder. It was a long shot, but at least there wasn't much of a crosswind. He lined up on a big male, getting a perfect sight picture. Leaning into the stock, he squeezed the trigger.

A shot went off beside him, before he could fire, and the tiger disappeared. One of the *shikaris* nearby waved his rifle in the air. “Did you see that *Sahib*? Tigers, and I got one. I am sure of it!”

“No, all you did was spoil my shot,” Laskey said, dropping his muzzle to point at the ground. “And stop waving that gun in the air!” He took a step toward the man, getting a good look at his rifle. “What the blazes are you doing shooting at tigers with a .303? That's only going to make him mad.” He shook his head. “I'm here for the tiger and if you hadn't shot at him I would have had a clear kill.”

“Sorry *Sahib*,” the man bobbed his head, his teeth white against his dark face and beard. “I was sure that I had him.”

“If you're lucky, you missed him completely. If not we're going to have to chase him down and finish him off.” Laskey glared at the man. “I do not want to face a wounded tiger at point-blank range.”

A fusillade of shots rang out. It was starting.

Laskey took another look at the man. He looked clean and so did his rifle. Except for an itchy trigger finger, he was probably as good a man as any out there. “Right then, you're coming with me.” He paused. “What's your name?”

The man looked surprised. “Vijay, *Sahib*. Why do you want me to come with you?”

“Because we have to make sure that tiger's dead; and if you only wounded him I want you in front when we catch up to him.”

“Yes *Sahib*,” Vijay nodded as he slung his rifle. “So we go over to the brush now, yes?”

“Yes, we go over to the brush,” Laskey said. “And don't

shoot at another tiger unless it's self defence.”

Branches fell around the tigers as bullets whipped through the air. The barking noise hurt Donner's ears but he stood transfixed, watching as a group of the stringy monkeys came toward them, more than the whole family. Donner's heart was racing, but with the noise and the shock, he wasn't sure what to do.

“Jela...” Caso began, looking toward the oncoming stringy monkeys. Then another stick barked in their direction. “Run!”

Caso's roar shocked Donner out of his paralysis and sent him running as fast as he could. He managed a quick glance over his shoulder and saw the rest of the family were not far behind. He charged through the brush and back into the jungle, leaping over dry branches, ignoring anything he had ever learned about stealth and silence. Donner's heart pounded in his chest and the air whistled through his lungs. Behind him, he could hear the hoots and howls of the stringy monkeys, interspersed with the noise of their sticks. Off to his left he could hear something big, maybe an elephant or rhino, charging through the woods, breaking trees as it ran. Everything from deer to rats ran beside him, but Donner didn't care, they had to get away. Even as they ran, the barking kept getting closer. *We're not fast enough!*

An elk ran past him, the same one they'd been hunting earlier; her long legs carrying her far faster than he could move. Her tail disappeared behind a tree in a matter of moments. Donner just kept moving, keeping with his family, the pounding in his ears almost drowning out the sound of gunfire from behind and beside him.

“There are too many of them,” Jela cried from behind.

“Mother! They are killing everything! What do we do! I'm frightened!” Jasco whimpered as he ran.

“How can they strike someone down from far away?” Riss said, his voice cracking.

“They're getting closer! I can hear them!” Princess cried between panting breaths.

Another shot rang out, this one much closer. Donner could hear the strange creatures hooting but they still didn't make

any sense. The one thing that came through was that they were right behind and getting closer. He wanted to lie down and hide but they were just too close. Too close and the sticks were too frightening. He ran past the body of the elk they'd been hunting earlier. These things weren't stringy monkeys, they were Killers.

"Caso...?" Jela looked back over her shoulder then turned to her mate, fear and confusion in her face.

"Jela, stay with me!" Caso replied, taking his own look at what was coming. "Children, we must split up! If you survive, do not come back! And do not ever go back to the clearing! The Time of Leaving is now!" And with that he turned back, toward the Killers, his fangs bared.

"Father...!" Tiggra cried, turning back toward Caso.

"Run, Tiggra! Run for your very life!" Jela screamed the words. "We will hold them off for as long as we can! Do not stop running until you are deep in the jungle! Do not turn around until the scent of those creatures is clean from the air! And whatever you hear...whatever you sense...do not look back!"

"Mother!" Tiggra cried, still facing the Killers.

"Come on, Tiggra!" Donner said, pushing his brother desperately. "Come on!"

"Mother...!!!" Tiggra wailed one last time as the two young tigers ran.

Donner heard branches snap and his parents roar as they turned to charge their attackers. The sticks kept barking, but Donner heard one of the Killers howl in pain, and felt a surge of pride for his parents. They had to get away; they had to earn the price Caso and Jela paid.

With his mother's last words echoing in his ears, Tiggra ran. Riss and Princess took off straight ahead while Jasco veered right. Something told him not to follow Jasco, so he and Donner turned left, toward the deepest part of the jungle. Behind him in the distance, he could hear the Killers' sticks barking and cries of pain.

The jungle was alive; Tiggra saw more animals than he'd ever seen before, all of them fleeing the Killers. A rabbit scurried into a hollow log while a deer dashed by. Wild boar ran through the jungle, snouts down and snuffling. Elk stampeded,

trampling everything that got in their way. Rats and jackals ran side by side with the tigers, fleeing the thundering sticks as if they were a forest fire. The Killers weren't animals; they were a force of nature, a wildfire on legs.

Tiggra caught up to a sambar deer, running alongside it for a moment. A stick barked behind him and the deer collapsed in a pool of blood. Tiggra's heart leapt into his mouth and he dodged right, away from the body. He could hear Donner not a breath behind him but couldn't spare the time to look. The Killers were catching up.

We need to find denser jungle, something we can hide in, Tiggra thought, barely avoiding one of the rocks the sticks threw. "Come on, Donner! We have to find someplace to hide!"

"I can't..." Donner said between panting breaths. "I can't run any further!"

"You must! They're just behind us!" Elephants trumpeted behind them, adding weight to Tiggra's words. He could hear the hooting of the Killers between the noise of their sticks. They were close. Much too close for Tiggra's peace of mind.

"I have to rest!"

Tiggra looked around, trying to find something, anything that might hide them from their pursuers. He saw a thorn bush, partially hidden behind a fallen log. "Follow me," he ordered.

Tiggra led the panting Donner to cover, getting him to lie down beside the log under the cover of the thorns. Now they were off the path and out of sight of anyone coming by. Once Donner settled in, Tiggra followed him, hoping the bramble was thick enough to keep his betraying white coat out of sight. It must have worked; because he heard footsteps come up to the other side of the log and then continue onwards. Even the rancid scent of the Killers began to fade.

"We can rest now," Tiggra said, letting himself gasp for air.

"Tiggra, what about our parents, and Riss, and Princess, and...?"

Tiggra hushed his distraught brother; the Killers' sticks could still be heard. Though they were fainter now, the sound sent a chill through his bones. The Killers were obviously still

searching for them, and that meant he and Donner needed to keep as quiet as they could.

“I don’t know,” Tiggra said after a moment of silence. “Did you see which way any of them went?” All he could remember was sticks barking and death flying. He remembered splitting up, but after that everything had turned around in his head.

Donner wrinkled his brow in obvious concentration. Tiggra let him think while he rifled through his own memory. After a while Donner lifted his head. “I think I saw Jasco heading for the lake.”

Tiggra moaned. Not the lake, he thought.

“What’s the matter?”

“That would be the first place they would look! That’s where we always go to hunt.”

Together, they turned toward the lake. Tiggra could hear the sound of dozens of sticks barking death. Then, as if by some signal, all sound stopped. It was as if the jungle was holding its breath, waiting. Tiggra could picture it as if he was there. Jasco, backed up against the lake, maybe near the big rock, turning this way and that, looking for a way to escape. The Killers approaching, moving slowly with their deadly sticks outstretched. Then the cubs heard a single bark ring out, followed by a high-pitched yelp, then silence. Tiggra turned toward Donner, seeing the same thought in his eyes. Jasco was gone.

Birds screamed and flew from their perches, passing overhead while the jungle echoed to the sound of animals fleeing. Tiggra knew that to flee now would mean his death, and from the way Donner crouched down, he felt the same.

Animals raced past them, fleeing for their lives. Death echoed among the trees, and animals dropped all around the hidden tigers. The stench of death filled the air; Tiggra could not imagine how many animals were dying that day. The Killers were living up to their name, seeming to exist only to destroy. They were not bringers of death, they *were* death. The parrot was right.

Time passed, the evening waned to darkness illuminated by the full moon, and still the killing continued. Sticks barked

against the night, and the rancid scent of the Killers returned and grew stronger. Fear and terror began to take their toll on the young tigers. Tiggra found himself jumping every time something came near — once almost leaping over the log in his haste to get away from a rabbit.

“We can’t stay here forever, Tiggra,” Donner complained, his eyes darting from side to side. “They will eventually find us.”

“It isn’t safe yet. We can still hear those thundering sticks they carry.”

“But only in the distance. Our parents will be worried.”

“You heard what father said, Donner,” Tiggra replied. “He said we must never go back.”

“What about into the mountains up north? Surely we can go there? The Killers would never find us so far away.”

Whatever Tiggra was about to say was interrupted by the shouts of those terrible creatures as they approached the cubs’ hiding place.

“Be quiet!” Tiggra ordered, crouching low enough to see the advancing Killers through a crack in the fallen log.

The Killers stopped on the other side of the cubs’ hiding place and began to search around. Tiggra’s nose started twitching at their rancid scent and he rubbed it with his paw. At least he didn’t think he was going to sneeze.

One of the Killers made some noise to the other, who came over, crashing through the brush. Before tonight, Tiggra would have thought anything smaller than a rhino would be a fool to make that much noise in the jungle. Now he just tried to make himself as small and unnoticeable as possible. Looking through a crack in the brush, Tiggra saw one of the Killers point its stick at what looked like his pawprints and hoot something to the other. The second one replied and they started searching the area more closely.

As the Killers closed on their hiding place, Donner began to twitch nervously; brushing against the leaves and making them rustle.

“You must be quiet!” Tiggra growled at his brother.

“I can’t help it.”

The noises of the Killers’ movement stopped. Tiggra

risked a glance through his crack and saw they were staring right at their hiding place.

“Oh, no!” The words slipped out despite Tiggra’s efforts to keep silent.

“They see your coat, Tiggra,” Donner whispered frantically. “They see your white coat! Ohh, why couldn’t you have been born like the rest of us?”

“Well, what would you rather I have,” Tiggra snapped, “a glowing red nose?”

“Don’t be daft! We’re trapped!”

“We’re going to have to run for it.”

“We’d never make it!” Donner wailed.

“We have to try!”

Brush rustled and a stick poked over the log, the Killer behind it looking down its length and swinging it from one cub to another as if deciding whom to kill first. Tiggra glanced at Donner, wordlessly screaming *Now!* and bolted. The Killer swung its stick around toward Tiggra and the white cub crashed into it. It swung away from him and barked; scoring a searing pain into Tiggra’s cheek. Donner yelped while Tiggra rolled away from the Killer and took immediate flight. He ignored the pain and ran for deeper jungle, dodging between trees, trying to keep something between him and the Killers. He didn’t see which way Donner went since the stick barked, but there was no time to think. Any moment one of those sticks could speak his death. Putting his head down, he kept running.

The gunshot echoed through the jungle as Laskey saw the two tigers bound away past him. Working the bolt, he chambered another round and turned after them. “Blast!” he cursed. He hadn’t dropped either one. Laskey could have sworn one of them was white, a ghost in the growing darkness, but it happened so fast. They were already out of sight in the time it took to chamber his next shot.

“Did you hit them, *Sahib?*” Vijay said, pointing his own rifle in the direction the tigers had run.

“I wounded one.” Laskey knelt, looking for signs of bleeding. “I’m not sure how good the hit was, but I wounded one of them.”



He picked up some soil, rubbing the dirt between his fingers. It was damp, held together by blood, and by the smell of it *fresh* blood. He wiped his hand off on the leg of his shorts and stood up, looking over the log to where the tigers had hidden among the thorns. It was shadowed so he lit a match. They lay there, close together, he thought, studying the depression they had made in the soft ground. Fur hung on a thorn and he picked it up. *One lay here, to the left, and the other on the right.* They had bounded straight at him, one of them knocking his aim off, and then split up. After completing his examination of the cubs' hiding place, Laskey blew the match out and turned back to his companion.

"What are we doing now?" the *shikari* asked. The man hadn't moved, just stood there with his rifle raised. "There must be other tigers around here. We saw at least four or five of them."

Laskey pointed at the blood. "We're going after that one."

"But that is wounded, *Sahib*. It's more dangerous and will probably die anyway. Let us look for other tigers."

"No, we're going after that one." Laskey slung his rifle and met the man's gaze. "He probably will die. There's not much chance of him surviving a .375 Magnum at point-blank range, but we're going after him anyway. I took the job and I'm going to do it right." He spat on the ground, his spittle landing in the blood and mixing together. "Just because we have to kill them doesn't mean we need to make them suffer any more than necessary. Now let's go."

Laskey took the lead and started following the bloody trail. There was a lot of it, fresh bright blood that gleamed in the light of a match. It looked like he'd got a good solid hit. He could see where the tiger had crashed into small branches, breaking them off rather than slipping under them. The beast was scared. That wasn't a good thing; fear would make it unpredictable.

He paused and checked his ammunition, pulling the clip out and replacing it with a fresh one. If it turned to fight, Laskey wanted to be sure he had more than one shot. A yearling tiger could drop a man in seconds, even if it was wounded, and he did

not intend to die because he hadn't killed it fast enough.

Donner ran, faster than he had ever run before. Even Princess would be impressed, he thought as he leapt over a fallen log. She always teased him about not being able to keep up to her. It wasn't his fault her legs were almost as long as his even though she must have been close to a hundred pounds lighter. Now he felt light, leaping over logs, brushing branches out of the way without effort. His blood wasn't pounding in his ears the way it normally did. Leaves and thorns brushed his fur but he barely felt them. He was running and nothing else mattered.

Suddenly, a wave of weakness passed over him, and it became harder to keep up his pace. His paws felt like rocks. His muscles started burning, losing the spring that let him leap effortlessly over fallen logs. Exhausted, he pressed on. He could hear the sticks of the Killers barking behind him. They'd been faint at first, but were growing louder. They were getting closer.

Despite his efforts, he couldn't pick up the pace; he couldn't even maintain it. His strength drained away through paws that kept getting heavier and heavier until he was forced to walk. Donner couldn't run any further. His vision started to blur. He blinked his eyes and the world spun, then came back even more blurry. Where was he? Where was he going? *What's happening to me?* Donner could hardly keep his balance. Everything felt fuzzy and disorienting. Trees swooped down in front of his face, and he wasn't sure what direction to go. One paw after another; that was all he could manage now.

Lethargy overcame him and Donner stumbled, falling to the ground. Struggling to get up, he saw a pool of blood around him. Slowly, he looked down, forcing his eyes to focus. There was a bloody hole in the middle of his chest and, as he watched, he saw blood trickle out in time with his heartbeat.

Funny, Donner thought, it doesn't even hurt. I would have expected it to hurt.

He then sank back down and closed his eyes. He couldn't hear the sticks barking any longer, the scents of the world drained away, and everything went black.

Tigra ran through the darkness, trying to put as much

distance as he could between himself and the Killers. He dodged around trees and thorn bushes, leaping over clumps of grass. Thorns scraped his side and he ignored them. His cheek burned with pain but he ignored that, too. His only hope was to put as much distance between himself and the Killers as he could. He didn't dare stop to look back, but just kept running into the night.

Breaking out of the brush suddenly, he scrambled down a slope and into a stream. The water was cold on his face and he dipped his muzzle into it, drinking as he swam across. The cool water slid down his throat but he barely noticed. He kept moving, letting the water cool his burning cheek, and hoping no Killers saw him in such a vulnerable spot. His paws hit the pebbled streambed and he slipped up the bank. A couple of leaps and he was back behind cover. No time to waste, no time to think.

Tiggra kept running. His paws were getting sore, bleeding in spots, but he gritted his teeth and carried on. His only hope was speed and distance. He knew he was leaving a trail; there was nothing he could do about it except keep going. The pounding in his ears masked the barking of the sticks and Tiggra didn't care whether he heard them or not. If he weren't going to escape, he would rather not hear his death coming.

The water helped him keep going, but eventually fatigue began to take its toll. His sore and bloody paws were getting harder and harder to lift off the ground. Even his tail was drooping. Tiggra panted for breath but he never seemed to get enough air. He was gasping with every breath, his heart pounding in his chest. He took one more step and finally collapsed on the ground. Blades of grass tickled his nose but he didn't have the energy to move his head. All he could do was lie there and wait to catch his breath.

When the sound of his own pulse finally left his ears, he discovered the jungle was silent. The night was finally dark, the setting moon barely giving off any more light through the jungle canopy. The Killers' sticks had stopped barking. Their scent was nowhere to be found. The normal sounds of the night were gone too. It was eerie.

If you survive, do not come back... The Time of Leaving is now! His father's last words echoed silently in his ears. Only

a few hours ago he had been terrified of the Time of Leaving...afraid to face the world without his family by his side. Now the time had come, borne on a terror he couldn't have imagined. His mother's face swam before his eyes, looking at him with love. Then it changed to a face of death.

"Oh, mother..." Tiggra wailed, not caring if anyone heard him. "Oh, mother...!"

He sobbed into the grass, seeing his family float before his closed eyes. All he could do was watch as he saw them die over and over, collapsing like the sambar deer. None of them blamed him, none of them turned to curse him, but all he could do was watch them die over and over. Finally, he slept, the sleep of the utterly exhausted.

When Tiggra finally opened his eyes, he saw a peaceful jungle. It was as if nothing had happened the night before...as if the Killers never came and no animal had died. Then he felt it; there was something different about the jungle, something different about how the monkeys chattered and how the birds chirped. Something which told Tiggra things would never be the same again. Even the air tasted different; like that of a corpse. It wasn't his home any longer. Each time he closed his eyes he saw the Killers advancing towards him again.

Despite the distance he'd travelled, Tiggra still didn't feel safe. Any moment he might hear the Killers' sticks sounding someone's death. He had to move further on. He had to find somewhere safe. Somewhere the Killers hadn't killed or driven off every animal they could find. His paws still ached, but there was no help for it. Bringing them to his mouth, he licked them clean one at a time, taking particular care for the little cuts where he'd stepped on sharp rocks or thorns. The stream had cleaned most of them, but he gave them a good going over before standing up.

It hurt when he got on his paws, sharp stabbing pains that slowly faded to a general aching soreness. He took one step, then another. He could walk, that was good, but his paws hurt too much to run. Growling softly, he started walking, padding away from the only home he had ever known.

Laskey hopped out of the Land Rover as soon as it pulled

to a stop in the compound. He yawned; it had been a long day and an even longer night. His clothes were ripped and he was surprised there wasn't a hole in his boots. Still, there was a young tiger in the back of the rover, and it was a one-shot kill. Laskey had done his job out there. Pulling out his cigarettes, he tapped the pack, drew one out, and lit up. Job's over, time for a smoke break.

Smythe was sitting at a table in front of a big tent that hadn't been there when Laskey showed up the day before. He had a guard behind him and a strongbox on the table. As Laskey watched, Smythe pulled out a polka-dot handkerchief and wiped his bald head. A *shikari* stood in front of him with a dead leopard on his shoulder. Smythe gave the man some money and he went into the tent with the cat, emerging a few moments later without it. Laskey let a stream of smoke out his nostrils then turned to his driver.

"Anand, take the rover over there so we can unload the cat. Quickly now! Chop, chop!"

Anand immediately dropped the rover into gear and ploughed across the compound. Laskey followed at a more leisurely pace, enjoying his cigarette.

"Ah, there you are Laskey," Smythe said when he reached the table. "Got something for me?"

"Young tiger; followed him into the jungle after the other two turned on us."

"Good, good." Smythe mopped his head again. "There's a hundred pound bonus on tiger, and I hear you got in on the other ones too."

"I did my job. Won't say no to an extra hundred quid though." Laskey stubbed out the cigarette.

"Two hundred, actually." Smythe smiled. "All the lads say you were the one that got the big male; so I'm giving you his bonus as well." He counted out a sheaf of notes and pushed it toward Laskey. "There you go. Enough cash to choke an elephant, all in tenners."

"Thank you," Laskey smiled too as he picked up the money. Crisp new ten-pound notes. It seemed a pity to spoil them by folding them up and putting them in his pocket but he did it anyway. That was five months pay at the job he'd had

when he got home to Bradford after his National Service. "Right then, what do I do with the body?"

"Take it in there," Smythe said, pointing to the tent behind him. "Got some science *wallah* back there examining all the dead animals for the government. There's a pot of tea just inside if you want it."

"Ta, I think I'll take a cuppa."

Laskey yelled for Anand to grab a couple of beaters and take the young tiger into the tent, then went in for his tea. There was a big urn just inside the flap and he grabbed a mug. A splash of condensed milk, two lumps, and fill it up with tea. *Ahhh*. He lit another cigarette and then took a long drink. That hit the spot.

As Laskey relaxed against the table, he was about take another drag from his cigarette when an older man came up to the tea urn. Laskey pegged him at somewhere in his mid-forties by the hint of grey in his beard. "Excuse me, could I get past you?" the man mumbled.

Laskey realized he was blocking the mugs and moved aside. "Sorry about that. It's my first cup of tea since yesterday and I didn't think about where I was standing."

"No harm done." The man poured a little condensed milk in his mug and filled it with tea. He took a drink and turned to Laskey, extending his hand. "Forgot my manners. I'm Dr. Jeff Erwin. The government sent me here to examine the animals they're bringing in."

"Ed Laskey." Laskey shook his hand. Erwin had dry hands and a firm grip. "I just got back in. I'm one of the hunters who was out last night."

Erwin's face fell; he sighed and turned away.

"What's the matter? Don't like hunters? We too rough for you? Or is it that we go out and get our hands dirty?" Laskey put his mug down hard enough that hot tea spattered over his hand. "Too good for us?"

"No it's not that." Erwin turned back to Laskey, spreading his arms. "It's got nothing to do with you being a hunter."

"Then what is it?"

"It's all the killing." Erwin took a deep breath. "Do you have any idea what that does to the environment?"

“Far as the animals are concerned we’re no different than a forest fire. We come through, wipe out the weak and the strong come back. It’s just culling, though this went a bit farther than usual.”

“This was nothing like a forest fire.” Erwin shook his head and set down his tea. “A forest fire renews the land, this just wiped out all the animals.”

“Not all, I know at least one tiger got away.”

“One? Out of how many? I know we had at least ten brought in today alone.” Erwin put a hand on Laskey’s shoulder. “I want to show you something. Come over here and take a look at what happened from my perspective.”

“All right.” Something in the man’s passion caught Laskey’s attention.

Erwin led him over toward the tables. “We’ve been killing animals for years and we don’t have a clue as to the long-term effects it’s going to have on nature. Then there’s the fact that the more we learn about them the more we see ourselves in animals. People just don’t want to think about that because it makes hunting too close to murder.”

“Murder’s a pretty strong word, Dr. Erwin.”

“It is a strong word, but sometimes you need strong words to get your point across to people who don’t want to listen.” Erwin led him over to a table where Anand and some beaters had just laid Laskey’s kill beside the bodies of some other tigers, a mix of adults and juveniles.

“These two turned back to try and protect the others they were with,” Erwin said, pointing to the bodies of two adult tigers that lay at the end of the table. “Given the age of the other tigers, they were probably the parents.” He put his notebook on the table and turned to face Laskey. “Do you have any kids, Mr. Laskey?”

“One,” Laskey said, fingering his shirt pocket. “Just one.”

“Then maybe you can understand this: These two tigers sacrificed themselves to try and save their cubs’ lives.”

“I can see that,” Laskey replied.

“How is that any different from what you would have done if someone or something had come after your family?”

Erwin looked at him with sad eyes.

"It's not different at all," Laskey said as he took a drag from his cigarette. "Can't say I would have done any different in their place. But that's not the point."

"Not the point? Then what is?"

"The point is that they were fighting for them and theirs and I was fighting for me and mine." Laskey stubbed the cigarette out on his heel. "I'm human, and they're tigers. We're in competition for the same land, and while I can respect them, even sympathize, I'm on the other side."

"That's all it is to you? A game with sides?" Erwin moved closer to Laskey. "These animals are dead, and if we keep doing what you and your friends did yesterday they may all end up that way." He pointed a finger at Laskey's chest. "Do you really want to live in a world without wildlife?"

"Nope, I'd miss it," Laskey said, "and I don't mean with a gun." He took the gun off his shoulder and leant it against a table. "It's just that you have to make a choice." He pointed at some of the animals laid out for study. "You see that deer as a tragic loss. I see that people won't starve because the deer won't be eating their crops." He pointed to the tiger he'd killed, looking peaceful despite the bullet hole in its chest. "You see that tiger's death as a sign of their impending extinction. I see it as a sign that he won't become a man-eater because we took away his food supply."

"That's really how you see it?" Erwin looked at him.

"Yep, that's really how I see it. Look, when you get right down to it it's just a job. A way to put food on the table and bring my family out here. But I also have to say that people come first. Yes, nature is nice, animals are important. I don't go out and kill them because I want to watch something die. I do it because it's my job, and at the end of the day, I'm on the side of man."

Laskey took a long pull from his canteen, letting the warm metallic tasting water sluice down his throat. "And when my day is done and I stand in Judgement, I'll not have anything to be ashamed of."

"It's not about shame," Erwin said. "It's about the harm to the environment, and the moral cost of killing animals we

don't need to kill.”

“And that's where we differ.” Laskey reached for his cigarettes, and then reconsidered. “You don't think we needed to kill them.”

“There were other ways,” Erwin's face flushed. “Killing is the last resort, not the first. We could have relocated the tigers.”

“And then somewhere else there would have been too many tigers and they wouldn't have enough food so some would either starve to death or turn man-eater. Meanwhile, with no tigers and other big cats the deer would have exploded in population and either ate all the crops or starved to death themselves.” Laskey looked around for something to illustrate his point, but couldn't find anything. “There's a balance in nature and sometimes it does a lot less harm to pull it out root and branch than mess with that balance. Yes we ruined the environment for the animals around here, but we didn't ruin the environment everywhere else too!”

“I wasn't thinking of it that way,” Erwin said.

“I didn't expect you were.” Laskey picked up his rifle and led the way back toward the tea. “Saving animals is all well and good, but you have to look at the big picture. Sometimes it just costs too much to do it that way. Look, nature's cruel and we were put here to be on top of the heap, so that means sometimes we have to be even more cruel. That's just the way it is.”

“We still should have found a way to save some of these animals,” Erwin said.

“Maybe we should. This was more like a slaughter than a hunt, but maybe it was the only option available.”

“It couldn't have been the only option; there are always alternatives to wholesale killing.” They had reached the table and Erwin picked up his mug and drank noisily.

“Doesn't mean they could have used them,” Laskey said, reaching for his own mug. “Maybe the money wasn't there, maybe they just didn't have enough time. This was supposed to be before the election, remember?”

“I remember,” Erwin nodded. “Thanks for coming in. You reminded me that you hunters aren't all just out there for the

killing.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Laskey, “there’s a certain feeling you get from matching yourself against a tiger, man against beast, and I can’t say I don’t enjoy it.”

“But that’s the challenge, not just the killing.”

“And the job, don’t forget that it’s a job.”

It had been a long week’s walk and Tiggra was exhausted. The first couple of days had been the hardest on his paws, still recovering from the night that some had started calling the “Great Slaughter.” Luckily, he had found a few streams to bathe them in and had taken the time to keep them clean, especially at first. He had to get away from the scene of the killings and that meant taking care of his paws. He planned to walk through the night, lying up to rest only in the hottest part of the day.

The next night he was reminded that food was his biggest concern as his belly cramped up in knots. He hadn’t eaten since before the Great Slaughter, and he was used to spending a lot more time sleeping and a lot less time running and walking. The problem was that he had hardly heard or scented anything since that first night, let alone seen something. It was as if he were completely alone in the world; and a world with no prey would very quickly become a world with no Tiggra either. All he had seen were occasional corpses of animals caught in the slaughter, ones that had been less lucky than he had. Badly wounded but not outright killed, they had managed to drag themselves this far before their bodies finally gave out. Scavengers got to them long before Tiggra found them, though, so he was not able to find any respite for his hunger despite their tragedy.

Another couple of hours walk and Tiggra came across another one, a deer that had been caught in the carnage. Dead and splayed out, a few flies buzzing nearby, this one still had some meat on it. Lucky! It smelled gamy but not rotten. Normally Tiggra turned up his nose against anything that wasn’t a fresh kill, but he was hungry. His mouth watered, and he licked his lips. Before he had given it second thought, he was on the carcass. It was delicious. It was probably just hunger, but it didn’t matter to Tiggra. He wolfed the meat down, it was food.

Something bit at his ankle and he turned around. It was a