

Chapter 2: The White Tiger

THE DEER WALKED along the sun-baked path looking for anything edible, even a blade of grass or the stem of a flower, but saw nothing. Everything was either already gone or had been scorched beyond edibility by the sun that beat down on his back. The one stem he did find was baked so dry it turned to dust in his mouth. These were thin times. His sister and her fawn had already succumbed. He remembered the look in their eyes just before they died, lying in the dust with their tongues hanging out. The summer was always hot, but these last two years were different. He remembered the last monsoon season, the dark clouds filling the overcast sky, and the overwhelming humidity. He also remembered how the clouds never fulfilled their promise of life-giving rain to soak the ground to carry through the dry months. They had hung in the sky as a mirage, a false promise, then vanished as they had come, leaving only sun and drought in their wake.

He felt his jaw moving rhythmically the way it did when he chewed his cud, but nothing came. It didn't matter. He doubted he had the saliva for it anyway. It was bad enough that forage was hard enough to find to make starvation a real danger. What made it worse was that the weakness made deer easier prey for the Great Cats. It gave him scant comfort to know that the predators were having an even harder time of things than he was. That only meant they would be more desperate and determined if they did find him.

A faint breeze came up and the deer froze in his tracks. He tested the air for any scent of predator, pitting his nose in a race against theirs. He inhaled deeply, drawing in every smell; this was a flower, that a decaying corpse. He could smell birds, monkeys, and even a boar— nothing important. He continued along the trail, and another scent reached his nostrils. This one was different: There was a Lord Leopard in the area!

His first reaction was to bolt, but experience overruled that. He'd seen too many fools run straight to their deaths by fleeing before

they knew where the predator was. He froze, heart hammering in his chest. It was the safest thing to do. He was downwind; he was safe...unless there were two of them. But what were the chances of that? Cats hunt at night when deer normally forage. This cat had to be as hungry as he was to be out in the day.

Another breeze and some judicious deduction told him where the leopard had to be...about twenty-five yards dead ahead. A reasonably safe distance for the moment, he figured. He then bent his head down as if to eat a blade of grass, but he kept his eyes focused on the cluster of trees that hid the beast.

A twig snapped.

The deer looked up with wide eyes, pretending to be startled. After restlessly scanning the brush and sniffing the air, he returned to munching his pseudo-grass. He'd used the opportunity to brace himself for a quick getaway; hopefully the cat hadn't noticed the change in his stance. It would be soon now. The leopard was closing in.

A soft rustle of dry undergrowth told the deer just how close it was: too close. The deer looked up and the leopard sprang. The deer fled, with the leopard only a tail's length behind. Everything closed in on the deer as he focused every thought on running. This was it; his life depended on running faster than the leopard. Nothing else mattered.

Hunger and thirst had taken its toll on the deer, sapping his energy. Every bound was a strain, each breath he took burned in his lungs. His body felt heavy, each leap was an effort. He flashed his tail high in the air as he made a sharp turn to the denser jungle, but that effort took the last of his energy. His only hope was to lose his foe in the twisty maze of trees and brush.

It sounded like the leopard was either in better shape or more desperate than the deer had thought. He had heard the beast stumble twice and recover both times. Nothing seemed to slow him down. Frantically, the deer veered right, hoping to shake the leopard off his tail. Instead, he found himself staring straight into the jaws of the Lord's mate. Bile and terror rose in his throat, burning like he was going to vomit. She roared so loudly he was sure the trees were shaking. The roar spurred him back into action and before her mate could answer, the deer took off in a flash. He had no time to look back, but his ears told him they were both on his tail.

Now, with two leopards chasing him and one of them fresh, the deer's hope of survival fell. He was running more because he was too afraid to let them catch him now than any thought of actual escape. With the last of his strength, he leaped over a small tangle of vine on the ground, not wanting to take the chance his hoof would get caught in it. Moments later, he heard a loud *thwack* followed by a strange rustling sound and leopards screaming in terror.

The deer looked back in wonder, so surprised that he stopped dead in his tracks, his flanks heaving. *What's going on?* he thought, confused at the sight of two leopards held off the ground by a patch of vines, screaming and fighting to get out. *Has the forest saved me?* Then the branches and vines off to the side began to shake violently, the way they did when a rhino or elephant pushed its way through them. The deer didn't care. He just backed up and then bounded into the thick jungle, wanting to get away from all this and back to the important business of finding food and water.

The deer was six years old, and six years was a long time in the jungle. Long for almost any animal, especially for a deer, and in all that time he had never seen anything like that. Vines didn't attack Lord Leopards, it just didn't happen. And the smell that came with it. It was a smell of a smell, one of those smells that worried at the back of his mind. He should know it, but he couldn't place it.

Once he was sure he was far enough away from the leopards to be safe, the deer stopped to gather his breath. He inhaled deeply, trying to rid his system of that pungent scent. *Where had he come across it before?* It was on the tip of his tongue.

A blotch of gray against the brown caught his attention. It was a dead jackal. The sight of the corpse — the way its body had been torn open — and the smell told him everything. He knew what the scent was now; he knew what had happened to the leopards and who caused it. No animal could do such a thing; only one creature could.

Now the deer forgot all caution as he shrieked and darted off into the jungle. At the top of his voice he declared to all the world: "The Terror has returned!!"

"Cut them down, but carefully." Jeff Erwin's ears perked at Ed Laskey's words. The object of his words hung in a net suspended from a branch. The two unconscious leopards should give him a lot of information on how the local drought conditions were affecting the

wildlife. The man's presence was an annoyance, but the government had insisted that he couldn't visit this area without an experienced big game hunter; and if nothing else, Laskey was competent.

"Are you sure they're out, *Sahib*?" one of Jeff's assistants asked. Jeff didn't blame him in the least. Any leopard that thin would turn man-eater without a moment's hesitation.

"If they aren't now, Sandeep, I'll make sure they go out permanently," Laskey said.

Erwin watched the proceedings quietly. With the rope cut, all they had to do was lower the leopards to the ground without dropping them so hard that they would wake up. Sandeep was safer than he knew; keeping humans alive was one thing you could count on Laskey for every time. Erwin had never known him to take risks with his people. Still, this looked safe enough. Both leopards were clearly out, and with that amount of drug they weren't likely to be waking up soon, either. He'd measured the doses for a full-size leopard and this pair were a good twenty or thirty pounds underweight. Even underweight, they were handsome beasts, their coats helping them blend in even when everything was brown with drought.

Once the leopards were on the ground, Laskey supervised while the others made sure they were securely trussed. He didn't lower his rifle until after he had personally checked that the bonds were tight. "Go ahead, Jeff," Laskey said. "Get your data. We all want to be well out of here before they wake up."

"No need to belabour the obvious," Erwin said, biting back a snappier retort. He had spent as much or more time in the jungle as Laskey had, and there was no need to remind him of the danger these leopards posed. He knelt down beside one, running his hand over the animal's dry fur. He could feel bone and tendon outlined under the flesh, turning grace and power into a stick-figure caricature. If these leopards didn't eat soon they wouldn't have to worry about food ever again. Erwin sighed and got out his measuring tape.

As he wrote down the measurements, he began to consider exactly how thin the leopards were. He had been planning to tag and collar them to get an idea of their range, but if they weren't going to last the week would it be really worth it? He peeled back the male's upper lip and looked at his teeth. They were in good shape, no visible decay. The cat's breath wasn't so good, but its mouth was healthy.

"Teeth stro..." was all he managed to write before he broke the

pencil. He took another look at his notebook and realized he'd been pressing so hard he was surprised he hadn't ripped the paper. This study was important, and if he didn't get good data, the entire trip was going to be worthless.

"Sandeep, how many tins of ham do we have left?" Erwin's voice surprised himself.

"I don't know, Doctor Jeff," Sandeep replied. "Quite a few anyway."

"Good, go dig half a dozen out for me, the big ones."

"Yes Doctor Jeff."

"What are you doing?" Laskey said in a cold voice. Erwin turned to see the hunter glaring at him, his lip curled in a sneer.

"I'm making sure this trip is worth the money it cost."

"By feeding these leopards?" Laskey looked incredulous. "Giving them just enough food to hang on another few days and up the chance they turn into man-eaters?"

"By keeping the subjects of the study alive long enough that we can actually get some results from it." Erwin got up and turned toward the younger man. "I'm supposed to be tagging and collaring these animals and a radio tracking collar does no good if it's wrapped around the neck of a skeleton. Skeletons won't tell us anything about their range either, they just lie there."

"So instead you're going to put people at risk by giving starving leopards just enough to live long enough to turn man-eater." Laskey spat and fumbled for a cigarette. "That's the most ivory-tower idea I've ever heard." He waved the pack around. "Live in the real world why don't you? These animals are predators, and they've no hesitation in feeding on man if they have to."

"There are no people here, Ed." Erwin pointed with his pen. "This part of the jungle is surrounded by a thicket so dense they don't have to worry about people and we don't have to worry about them. This is a perfect opportunity for study and I'll not have you waste it with your fears about man-eaters."

"Just because there are no people here now doesn't mean there won't be, Jeff." Laskey lit his cigarette, then closed his Zippo with a hard snap. "Their day is done. The animals have to make room for Man, and this is just doing them a false kindness." He exhaled, smoke dribbling out his nostrils. "Look, if you want to do something for these poor beasts, let me put a bullet in their heads. They won't feel a

thing, it saves them from starving to death, and makes sure they never go man-eater.”

“That’s your solution to everything, a bullet.” Erwin glared at Laskey. “It doesn’t matter to you that there’ll be two less leopards in the world and they’re already an endangered species.”

“Nope.” Laskey smiled and spat on the ground. “I’d trade every last one of them for a single child and do it in a heartbeat.”

“You just don’t get it.” Erwin shrugged and turned back to the leopards, and just then Sandeep came up with several tins of ham.

“Here you are Doctor Jeff,” he said, a worried look in his brown eyes. “Are you really going to feed the leopards?”

“Yes, I really am. We’re here to study them, and that doesn’t work if they’re dead.”

“If you say so Doctor Jeff.” Sandeep then set the tins on the ground and started digging around in his pockets for a tin opener. “Do you want them opened now?”

“Go ahead. We’re almost done here.”

“Doctor Jeff, I think I have forgotten the tin opener, let me go back to get it.” Sandeep rose, looking nervously toward the leopards.

“We don’t have time. The drugs are about to wear off.” Erwin closed his notebook, snapping the elastic over to hold it. “Why didn’t you get the tin opener when you were there?”

“Here, there’s one on my knife.” Erwin turned to see Laskey toss a Swiss army knife to Sandeep. “Clean it off before you give it back.”

“Yes *Sahib*.” Sandeep didn’t sound enthusiastic, but he set to work on the tins with a will.

Erwin walked over to where Laskey was standing, his eyes scanning the area. “Why’d you do that, Ed? You could have just left it in your pocket and the problem would have solved itself — at least from your point of view.”

Laskey took his cigarette from his mouth and casually flicked his ash. “I could, but that’s not why I’m here. My job is to keep you alive while you do your job, not to stop you from making foolish decisions. Comes right down to it, this is your show. You want them fed, they get fed.” He worked the action on his rifle. “Besides, if it comes to that, a bullet doesn’t care whether their stomach’s full or empty.”

The rays of the setting sun slipped below the canopy that gave the den cover and caught Tiggra in his half-open eye. It was at times like these that he missed his family most; when he was caught between waking and sleeping, and the angle of the sun reminded him of where his family had rested that last day. Still, that was the past — years ago — and not the present; the rumbling in his stomach was the present. He was hungry, and the feeling in his belly told him there was no point in trying to nap any longer. Even though his memories dulled his appetite, there was only so much they could do. Giving in to the inevitable, he stretched and yawned, feeling his jaws crack, then rolled over to look at Clairese, his mate.

She stirred a little in her sleep, the picture of tigerish beauty. Unlike Tiggra, she bore a coat of rich brown gold with delicate stripes, a perfect counterpoint to his white coat. She looked to be sleeping without a care in the world, and Tiggra felt a sudden pang of jealousy. Why was she able to sleep so peacefully when he faced haunted dreams? But how would she know, it wasn't like she could see inside his head. He yawned again, rubbing his eyes. It was definitely time for both of them to wake up. He gave her a soft nudge with his nose, enjoying her scent. "Clairese..."

She sighed in her sleep but didn't move, so he nudged her again, harder this time. "Clairese."

Clairese rolled over and opened one eye about halfway. "Tiggra?" Her voice was heavy with sleep.

"Did I wake you?" he asked solicitously.

She yawned wide enough to swallow his head in one go before replying. "No. I was just about to swat you anyway." She smiled and nuzzled him affectionately.

"Think you're that quick, eh?" Tiggra said. "Feel like a hunt?"

Clairese rolled onto her belly and rested her chin on her paws. "Now? It's still the afternoon," she protested. From her expression, it was clear she wasn't really thinking of moving quite yet. She proved it by lying all the way back down. "No one is about. It's too hot," she said with an air of finality.

"I was thinking we might find someone watering themselves by the lake," Tiggra suggested, nudging her again.

"Oh, all right," Clairese said, slowly getting to her feet then stretching as long as she could. Tiggra watched appreciatively, knowing that once she had stretched she was up. "If you're up to it, I

am, too. If nothing else, I wouldn't mind a little swim."

"Good. I'm so hungry, I could eat an elephant." Tiggra's stomach growled in sympathy with his words. He grinned sheepishly, embarrassed at the noise, but despite the embarrassment he knew the way he was feeling he could actually eat an elephant, maybe two.

Clairese laughed. "Sounds like it, too."

"You're all heart."

"And you're all stomach. So I guess we'd better go and fill it before you start gnawing at the trees like some silly deer." Clairese had a smile on her face but that didn't stop Tiggra from taking a quick glance at the trees that shaded their resting place. He didn't want to try eating them, but if he got hungry enough he would.

He pulled his attention away from the trees and toward the lake. In the past, in better days when there was no drought, it had been good hunting ground. But now prey was becoming harder to find, and a hint of doubt was crawling up Tiggra's spine. "I hope we're able to catch something today." His stomach seconded that hope; they hadn't eaten in a week.

"Don't worry, Tiggra. I'm sure we'll be lucky this time," Clairese said, but Tiggra could tell her optimism was forced. He could already see her ribs beginning to show, their shadows duplicating her stripes as hunger took its toll. He knew the loss of weight was bothering her, feeding her fear that she was barren, a fear that worried at her more and more each time she came into season and did not quicken. But that was an issue for another day.

"If only the rains would come..." Tiggra said wistfully.

"We've gone longer without food before," Clairese said brightly.

"Even if we did catch something, the only game left are the sick and scrawny. Not exactly a good meal for two tigers." Gone were the days of plenty of plump deer around the lake. The drought had driven off most of their prey, and what was left was barely enough to get by on.

"Then we'll just have to catch more of them."

Tiggra shook his head. Nothing he could say seemed to be affecting her optimism; he only wished he could share it. "I don't know, Clairese. I'd almost say we should look for new territory, but I wouldn't know where. When there was no monsoon two years ago, all the animals came here because of the lake. But now with no monsoon

again, even that is drying out.” The last drought had been much easier than this one. The lake had drawn so many animals to it that Tiggra had gained weight, none of this not eating for a week.

“As long as the feeding stream doesn’t empty, the animals have to come here,” Clairese said, reinforcing her point. “We’ll find them, don’t worry.”

“I know we will,” Tiggra said with a smile. “Let me hide my coat, then we’ll head out to the lake.”

Tiggra led the way to their customary hunting spot. As usual, he hid among some light coloured rocks that overlooked the lake, which gave him some concealment despite his white coat. Clairese had padded off to a little copse of trees a distance away where she could take advantage of her more common camouflage. He slipped into his position and settled down to wait.

His location gave him a perfect view of the almost dry lakebed in front of him. Tiggra bellied down into the dust, hoping the sounds of his stomach wouldn’t give him away. He didn’t scent anything, but that was to be expected on a day like today. The wind was fitful and there was not an animal in sight. The lakebed was cracked and dry, with more of a large puddle at its centre than a lake. The setting sun turned the sky a deep purple with trees outlined in black. Usually a day like this was sure to end in a kill. Tiggra had been working with Clairese so long their coordination was near-perfect. He would stalk the prey, driving those he could not catch down onto her claws. In the past, they’d brought down deer, water buffalo, and once even an elephant.

Tiggra smiled at the recollection of the elephant; Donner would have loved it. They had caught the beast completely by surprise while it was drinking. Tiggra had managed to blind it in one eye; then while he drew its attention, Clairese had come in from its blind side. They had eaten well for weeks. Tiggra relished in the memory of the good meal when a cramp from his stomach brought him back to the present.

The jungle was quiet, much quieter than he was used to. He couldn’t hear a single bird. What he could hear were monkeys, but even they were quieter than usual. Tiggra had to focus to hear their chattering where usually it took all his attention to screen it out.

Night fell and the moon rose, replacing the sun with its soft light. It was full tonight, and for once he was glad of the dirt on his

coat. Even with the itch, it kept him from standing out in the moonlight the way he did when clean. Reflexively he scratched his back with one hind leg, then rolled over in the dust to replace the dirt he'd scratched away.

Then he heard a noise; nothing loud, just a soft rustle like the crushing of a dead leaf. He raised his head and took a deep sniff: Nothing. There was something there, he could hear it, he just couldn't smell it. Another sniff told him why, the wind had changed. The spot he was in was fine during the day, but the winds changed at night and he usually moved to match them. Tonight he hadn't and now he was the one upwind of his potential prey.

He berated himself silently. There was no use moving, sound always carried better downwind and he'd make as much noise as if he'd roared. Anything other than hunching down and staying perfectly still would be the same as announcing himself to whatever was coming toward him. All he could do was stay still and hope something masked his scent until it was too late.

Clairese's mind wasn't on the hunt anymore. She had spent the night waiting as patiently as she could, but had seen nothing, not even a field mouse. All she'd done was listen to the monkey chorus fade away and worry. Worry about the future...her future. A future she began to see more and more without cubs. She wanted them with all her heart, but she'd never had any, never even felt herself get heavy with young and lose them. The thought of never being able to give life was more than she could bear at times. Clairese was about to let out a private sigh, but she suddenly heard the rustling, too. At the sound she froze. There was something upwind of her, but the scent was too faint. She couldn't tell what it was. All she knew was that it was something moving through the brush between her and Tiggra.

Even with the wind on her side, it was all up to her mate. She was too far away; and there was no easy way to close the distance without alerting the other animal. Her hiding place was chosen so she could get out quickly, not quietly. The stalk was Tiggra's job, hers was to come charging down like thunder on the animal he had already spooked. She was just going to have to wait for his signal.

Grumbling silently, she gathered herself ready to spring and returned to waiting.

There was another rustle, followed by the snapping of saplings.