# WHAT ELEPHANTS KNOW

ERIC DINERSTEIN

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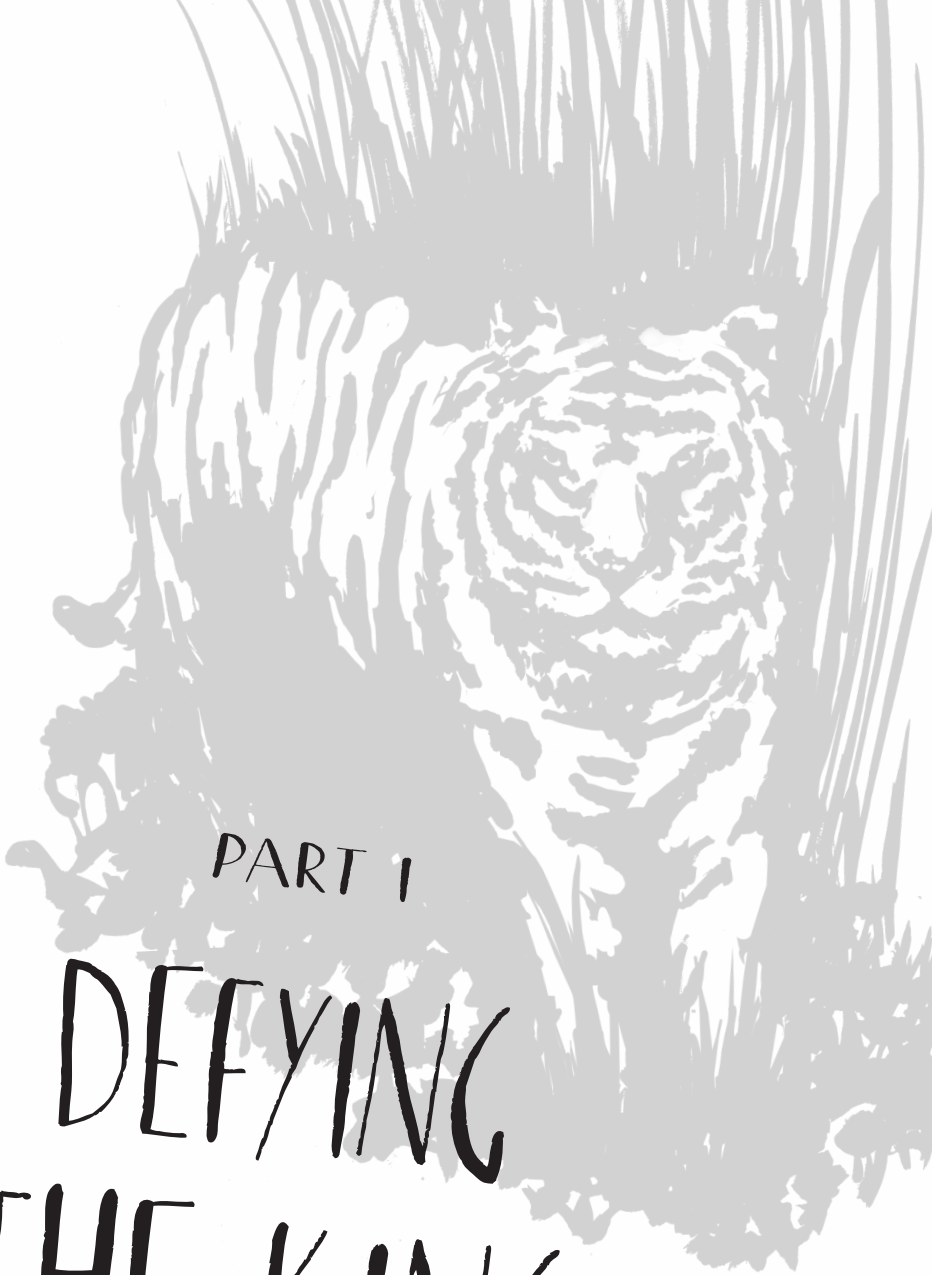
LOS ANGELES NEW YORK



# PART 1

# DEFYING THE KING

# ONE

My mother is an elephant and my father is an old man with one arm. Strange, I know, but true.

For a short time, I was under the care of *dhole*,* wild dogs that live in the jungle. Before the *dhole*, I had a different mother and father who tied a red string around my neck and left me alone in the world. They believed the red string would give me protection. I do not know what became of them or why they abandoned me.

My father is the head of an elephant stable in the southernmost part of Nepal. He is called *Subba-sahib*, a title of great respect that everyone uses, including me. The older drivers also call him Old One Arm, but never to his face. I also call him Father, but only inside my head.

For fifty years, our elephant stable has been maintained by order of the King of Nepal—all so that once a year the king and

his family can ride into the jungle on our elephants to hunt tigers. The stable exists in the Borderlands, a region far from Kathmandu, the capital city.

Our camp is at the edge of the forest, where tall trees and dense vines push right up to our stable. Our jungle is wild, beautiful, and dangerous, filled with rhinos, tigers, leopards, crocodiles, snakes, and every kind of bird.

I have learned to be wary of wild animals, but never afraid.

On the day of my first royal hunt, my life changed once again.

The October air was damp at dawn; it reminded me of the monsoon that had just ended. There would be no more downpours, no more mud between my bare toes, only blue skies and warm afternoons before winter set in. His Majesty the King was due to arrive at the stable in two hours. The king's astrologers could not have picked a finer day to be out in the jungle.

My father took me aside by the morning campfire. "Nandu, you have learned much about elephants," he said. "You are ready to join the royal hunt."

I nodded, watching the low orange flames bend on the short fits of air stirring about.

"This hunt is our most important duty, Nandu," my father said. "If the king and his brothers and uncles do not kill a tiger

this year, they may never hunt in the Borderlands again. So let us make the king and his family proud of us today."

I looked into my father's face, hard with worry even in the soft glow of the fire. I wanted to ask him if there was any other way the king might enjoy the jungle rather than to hunt a tiger. To shoot such an animal for sport seemed cruel to me.

"What do you say, Nandu?" my father asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"We will make them proud, *Subba-sahib*," I replied.

My father let his good arm rest on my shoulder and whispered to me so that none of the other drivers could hear. "During the hunt, you must be absolutely silent, Nandu. Remain in the back, and stay on your elephant. Do nothing but watch. You are the youngest stable hand ever to join a royal hunt. Remember your place."

He paused before continuing, "And when the king raises his rifle, shut your eyes."

I told myself the hunt was worth it, that if it was successful, the king might give more money to the stable. Every rupee we had went to the care of our twenty-five elephants. We often did not have enough to eat, and not one of our drivers owned a pair of shoes.

I finished my tea and ran to meet Ramji in the elephant tethering area. The sun had come up, but a chill hung in the air. I was panting when I arrived, my breath drifting like smoke.

Ramji is the lead elephant driver on my team. He was assigned to Devi Kali when he was young, nearly forty years ago. Now he is old and bald and short, with a serious look on his face almost always. He is quiet, too. When Ramji breaks into a rare laugh, he looks like a different person.

This morning I was taking the place of his *pachuwa*, the number two driver, who usually stands behind the saddle and acts as a spotter. The *pachuwa* was sick and *Subba-sahib* did not want him sneezing on the royal family, or worse, scaring off a tiger. I was not really a *pachuwa* or even a *mahout*, the number three driver, who was assigned to help the camp cook feed the visiting drivers.

I was a stable hand who swept up elephant dung and fetched firewood. Even my hand ax was only eight inches long—not a sharp one like a real driver carries.

Ramji did not give me any orders—he was quieter than usual, nervous, too—so I set to helping him saddle our elephant, Devi Kali. My mother.

I should explain. In nearly every way a mother cares for a child, Devi Kali is that to me. And in every way a child loves his mother, I am that to her. She is also very smart and usually figures out how to solve a problem before her driver, or anyone else for that matter, even realizes there is a problem.

As soon as we were finished, Ramji and I led Devi Kali from the tethering area to her position in the hunting party with the

other elephants. Nearby, I could hear the crowing of the jungle fowl and the wailing of peacocks. I had to breathe deeply; I was shaking, from nerves or the temperature, I could not tell.

Soon, a hundred elephants would be lined up to take part in the king's hunt—the twenty-five from our stable and the rest from the other royal stable in Chitwan. Those elephants had walked one hundred and fifty miles to be here for the king's hunt, and today my father the *Subba-sahib* was in charge of all of them.

Finally, it was time to load up the royal passengers. *Subba-sahib* stood at the front of the line with His Majesty, the King of Nepal; members of his family; and several ministers. They had all replaced the black suits they wore at their arrival with green jackets and pants to blend into the jungle.

We had never had so many royals at our little stable at one time. They almost outnumbered the drivers at our barracks. There are seventy-five men to look after our elephants. Each elephant has a team of three men—a *phanit*, a *pachuwa*, and a *mahout*. For the royal hunt, the drivers wore uniforms, the only ones they had, used just for this special day.

Walking toward us, my father announced, "Ramji and Nandu, you will have the honor of carrying the forest conservator-*sahib* from Nepalganj."

I was not expecting to carry someone of such high rank on our elephant, and even though Ramji didn't look at me, I could feel he was thinking the same thing.

It turned out the forest conservator-*sahib* was not expecting to ride with us, either. He was known as a "*thulo manche*," a big man, not because of his large belly—which was easily the size of a watermelon—but because of his high position as minister of His Majesty's Forest Department, in charge of all the forests of western Nepal.

"*Subba-sahib*, why do you put me on such a slow elephant?" he asked. "She is so old she might die during the hunt. Give me a younger one. I should be carried on a tusker."

"Devi Kali knows what to do, Conservator-*sahib*," my father replied. "She has lived long and taken part in many royal hunts. She is brave and unafraid of tigers. You will appreciate her courage."

"And who is this child who stands up behind the saddle? There is no place for a boy on my elephant."

My face became hot. I wanted tell this Watermelon Belly that I had been riding elephants since I was six, but I knew the one thing I must do at all times today: keep silent. One of the king's party called for my father to return to the front of the line, so he had no choice but to turn away, leaving Watermelon Belly's words hanging in the air.

Ramji spoke for me and for Devi Kali. "Conservator-*sahib*, do not be fooled by his young age. Nandu is eleven years old but already more skilled than many of the drivers you see here today. And we have only two tuskers at our stable. His Majesty is riding one and the prince the other. Both males are old, though,

too old to even breed our females. You will see, they move not much faster than Devi Kali."

Watermelon Belly did not respond, as if speaking to a driver was beneath him. I wished I could tell him that he was not worthy to ride Devi Kali, who was wiser, stronger, and more courageous than most men.

# TWO

The sight of one hundred elephants gathered together, trumpeting, rumbling, and snorting to each other, filled everyone with excitement. To ride elephants and hunt tigers with the king—for many, today would be the most adventurous day of their lives.

At last, the trail of elephants began to move. We crossed the Belgadi River by the stable and headed off into the jungle. It would be a half-hour's march west toward the Great Sand Bar River to reach the western edge of the Borderlands.

The familiar swaying movement of my body riding Devi Kali and the sound of branches breaking under her feet calmed my nerves. When you ride an elephant, you are a king, no matter your rank in the world.

I was deep in thought when a monkey screeched above us, making Watermelon Belly jump. I looked up into the tall fig

tree, trying to keep from making a sound. A trio of monkeys sat together, eating figs, watching us march under their world.

We soon left the forest and entered the grasslands, where the thicket was so tall it swallowed up our elephants. I stood on the saddle to see over the tips of the towering grass, holding on to the towrope to keep my balance. The heavy morning dew flew onto us, like a gentle rain, as we brushed past.

We entered a large open area in the jungle, and I leaned over to look for tiger tracks in the sand. The sun had climbed higher in the sky, and its warmth felt good on my wet shoulders.

We were ten elephants behind the king, who rode on *Subba-sahib*'s lead elephant, the great tusker named Bhim Prashad. Every time the elephant turned his head, his huge ivory tusks glowed like crescent moons in the morning sun. I looked back to see the long ribbon of elephants following. It struck me then how lucky I was to be the only eleven-year-old boy in Nepal, perhaps the only eleven-year-old boy ever, to ride in the hunting party of the king.

When we reached the river's main channel, we crossed over to the islands, where the tall, thin rosewood trees stood staring at us. My father turned to me. His look told me that he had picked up a sign. I stood on Devi Kali again and saw the fresh track of a tiger in the sand along the beach. I could clearly make out its great footprints; if you rested a man's hat on one, the print would barely be covered.

*Subba-sahib* nodded to us and pointed to where he thought the tiger was hiding. He steered Bhim Prashad to position His Majesty for his shot and signaled Ramji to move Devi Kali just behind them. I saw Watermelon Belly smile for the first time that morning, pleased to be stationed so close to the king.

We were near enough that I could hear my father whisper, "The tiger's tracks lead into that patch of grass. We will wait here. When I give the signal, my team will drive the tiger out. You will need to take your shot quickly, Your Majesty."

King Birendra nodded. My father waved his arm, and seventy elephants with their riders quietly fanned out to encircle the tiger's hiding place. Watermelon Belly licked his lips and kept his eyes on the clearing, as if he were the one readying to take his shot.

*Subba-sahib* handed the king his rifle. I silently prayed to the jungle gods that His Majesty would miss.

My father whistled, signaling for the elephants and drivers to start shouting and banging sticks to drive the tiger from its hiding spot. The tops of the tall grasses swayed back and forth—from the breeze or the moving elephants or the moving tiger, we could not tell. The grass hid even the heads of the spotters standing on the backs of their elephants.

A sudden roar sent two of the younger elephants squealing in panic into the forest, their drivers and riders bouncing helplessly on their backs. I wanted to tell old Watermelon Belly that he was lucky to be on my Devi Kali, who never flinched. But I kept silent.

Suddenly, a tiger of at least three-hundred pounds leaped into the open area and stopped. The king hesitated and then raised his rifle. The animal turned, and right away I recognized the one we called Chuchi.

Instead of shutting my eyes, as my father had told me, I leaped up and hurled my small hand ax straight at the tigress and shouted at the top of my voice. "Run, Chuchi, run!"

In a flash, Chuchi bounded gracefully away just as the king pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the ground where she had been standing. The words I had yelled echoed inside my head, but I could not hide the smile on my face. She was safe.

"You idiot! You spoiled the king's shot!" The forest conservator-*sahib* turned around in the saddle, his face red. I was afraid he would choke me. I knew I should sit down, but I could not move.

The king sat still and said nothing while his people murmured around him. The drivers and their royal passengers all looked at me and then at the place where the tigress had stood.

"Nandu, come here!" *Subba-sahib* called. "What did I tell you?"

The king held up his hand for silence.

I slid down from Devi Kali, walked to the king's elephant, and bowed low before him. My eyes rested on my dirty, bare feet.

The king spoke in a quiet voice. "Who gave you permission to scare away my tiger?"

"Your Majesty, I ask you to show mercy. Not on me, but on the tiger." My voice was steady, and I no longer felt afraid. I

continued to stare at the ground. No one of my rank may ever look the king in the eye.

"Please forgive me, Your Majesty, but you were about to shoot a tigress, a mother to three young cubs. They would starve to death without her."

"How did you know it was a tigress with cubs?"

"Your Majesty, her name is Chuchi and I recognize her from the double-stripe across her shoulders. I have been to this spot with the *mahouts* to cut grass for the elephants. This is her territory."

"Your Majesty, the child is a storyteller," Watermelon Belly cried.

"Your Majesty," my father cut in, pointing to the trail between the tall grasses. Walking swiftly away from us was Chuchi, followed by three cubs close on her heels.

There was a long silence before the king spoke again. I did not care what he would say. He could put me in prison if he wanted to. Chuchi and her cubs were safe.

"Young man, it is the right and privilege of the Shah kings to shoot adult male tigers. But one must never shoot a mother tigress. You prevented a crime against nature. That is how I view it."

I continued to stare at my feet, hoping my relief did not show.

"Come, gentlemen," the king said. "We have had enough action for one day. Let us return to Thakurdwara. *Subba-sahib*,

your son did right and deserves to drive his own elephant, or at least to carry a real hand ax." Everyone laughed at the king's joke, even Watermelon Belly, but his was an empty laugh.

I was relieved that Chuchi was safe, but when we returned to camp, I had a great shock. The king had forgiven me, but it was clear the elephant drivers had not. The older drivers would not look at me. It was as if I no longer existed. Every year there were rumors that the king could no longer keep two large elephant stables. One would have to close, and it would surely be the one where he had failed to get his kill. The drivers could not survive without the stable.

When we left that morning, I had felt like I truly belonged among the *mahouts*. Now I was the outsider again. As I had always been. If I were not the *Subba-sahib*'s adopted son, they would have sent me away.

I tried to loosen the ropes of Devi Kali's saddle, but my hands fumbled with the knots. Snorts of air burst through Devi Kali's trunk, which she twisted back toward me. I pressed my cheek against her rough wrinkled skin. I am sure she sniffed my tears. She rumbled softly, ruffling the top of my hair with her short breaths. To make myself feel better, I thought of Chuchi and her cubs being safe in the jungle. I had saved them, like my father, years ago, had saved me.

# THREE

Elephants know things about the jungle that not even *Subba-sahib* knows. I would never say so, but what we know is like a few drops of tea in the bottom of a cup in comparison.

A few days after the royal hunt, after the king and his men had left, I was riding on Devi Kali with my father. I treasured my time alone with him, away from the other drivers. Even more so now that most of the drivers had turned against me.

Just yesterday, I asked Ramji if he wanted me to take his turn cutting grass for Devi Kali, so he could keep his seat in the poker game he was playing with the *mahouts*. He barely looked at me and spit on the ground. The other drivers glared in my direction and said nothing. Without my friend Dilly, I would have no one to talk to among the drivers. At least I still had Devi Kali and my father.

Devi Kali's happy rumble checked my gloom. "*Subba-sahib*,

tell me the story of how Devi Kali found me and I came to live in the elephant stable." I liked to hear him tell it, in the way only he could.

"Nandu, I have told you that story at least a hundred times over."

"Yes, and I am ready to hear it again." I leaned back and looked at him from my perch on Devi Kali's neck.

"All right. I was out with Ramji and a couple of *mahouts*, teaching them where to gather *babiyo* grass. We had driven the elephants to Clear Lake to get a drink of water. Just before entering the lake, Devi Kali stopped and whacked her trunk against the ground. Then all four of the elephants brought their trunks down together, like a battle cry."

No matter how much time you spend around elephants, this sound always makes your heart race and your head prickle. The chances are good that something dangerous is nearby—a tiger, a sloth bear, or, worst of all, a king cobra rising from the ground, with its neck fanned and enough venom in its fangs to drop a tusker.

"The elephants knew something," my father continued. "Devi Kali raised her trunk over her head, sniffing the air. The others followed her lead. There was a sound of something moving toward us. Devi Kali stepped into the grass, gently pushing away the canes. There, sitting in a small clearing, was a little boy."

"Then what happened?" I asked. Devi Kali was holding her ears so still that I knew she was listening, too.

"I scrambled off my elephant and scooped you up, before you might be carried off by a leopard. It was a miracle you were still alive.

"Then the drivers made a wide arc to turn back to camp, looking for your parents. In a nearby area of grass, they found a large bare spot with the crisscrossing pawprints of a pack of wild dogs. *Dhole*, with their bright red coats and noses nearly as sharp as their teeth.

"Now, Nandu," my father said, resting his hand on my shoulder, "you know the *dhole* never sleep in the short grass; it is too open. These wild dogs had spent the night on guard, protecting you while you slept from all that could have easily killed you."

I nodded.

"You, Nandu, have a connection with the *dhole*. They are meant to look after you."

Devi Kali snorted.

"*Subba-sahib*, I think that the *dhole* are not the only animals looking out for me. I have Devi Kali, too." I reached down and hugged her neck. She rumbled back. "But keep going. The story is not over yet."

"All of us wondered why such a small child was left alone in the jungle. There was no trace of where you had come from,

except for the necklace of red thread. It is worn by Buddhists, and this remains the only clue I have to this day about your first parents.

"The drivers thought you were a gift from the gods, maybe Ganesh, whose face took the form of an elephant. But they soon found out you were just a normal two-year-old, running all over the place and always underfoot," my father said.

The drivers were forced to put up with my antics, though, because soon after, *Subba-sahib* adopted me. What my father did not say was something I learned only years later: the only thing stranger than finding a child from north of the Himalayas abandoned in a lowland jungle, was for an old Tharu man to adopt a Tibetan child. Such lines were never crossed. My father never mentions this.

It was time for Devi Kali to bathe in the river. She bent one of her hind legs so my father and I could dismount. Then we watched her stride into the water, her trunk happily swinging from side to side, stopping for a moment to sniff the heavy air. Once she was chest-high, she dipped her trunk in the water, then lifted it in a great curl, spraying water on her forehead and back.

I swear, when she does this, I can see her smiling.

"Come, Nandu, let us sit on this fallen tree," my father said. I knew his gout must be bothering him again.

I leaned against my father as we sat watching Devi Kali. It was he who taught me that even though the elephants seem to serve

us, we are truly the lesser beings. You see, my father is not only a *Subba-sahib*. He is from a family of *jhankri*—healers who can see into the future. He is a medicine man for humans and elephants and a *shaman*.

*Subba-sahib* can cast a spell or lift one.

When I was young, he taught me a prayer to honor an elephant. "Nandu," he said, "you must always first touch the elephant's skin, then touch your fingers to your forehead. It is a gesture of respect to a god humble enough to be our servant."

I have done this every day since.

In return, the elephants respected me, too. Quickly, I became known for having a special way with them. By the time I was six years old, I was appointed as a stable hand, whose job it is to sweep dung from the stable. A stable hand does not drive the elephants, but I soon became an exception. At age eight, *Subba-sahib* assigned me to learn how to drive Ramji's elephant, Devi Kali.

"Ramji, you must watch him closely," my father said. Ramji nodded and bowed. I was so happy, I jumped up and down, hugging first my father, then Ramji. When I went to hug Devi Kali, she wrapped her trunk around me and pressed me gently against her leg. I felt a comfort that I had never felt before, at least not that I could remember, not even with my father.

I felt, for a moment, that I was at home.

When Devi Kali was finished bathing, she climbed back up into the grass to graze and dry off in the late-afternoon sun. Finally, my father rose. It was time to head back.

"Let us stop in the village, Nandu."

"Yes, *Subba-sahib*. Perhaps we can get some sweets."

"Ha, we will see," he said, which is my father's way of saying yes.

Thakurdwara is a mile from our camp and like all Tharu villages in the Borderlands, is a cluster of houses made of wooden logs and elephant grass coated with mud.

We got down from Devi Kali, and I followed my father to the tea stall. He paid for a package of nuts and a paper wrapped full of strong-smelling cloves. He opened them and popped some in his mouth.

"Try some, Nandu. Cloves are good for the digestion."

I put two in my mouth and tried not to show how horrible they tasted. When he was not looking, I spit them out. I followed him back to Devi Kali, his bow-legged gait slower than usual. I hoped his gout would not worsen. Sometimes he must stay in bed for a week, and when he is ill I worry that I will lose him.

My father is not young. By the time he found me in the jungle, he was already over forty, which is old for a Tharu. Now, he is over fifty. But like many of his people, and like me, an orphan, he is not sure of his exact birth date.

He was married once to a young village girl from east of Thakurdwara. She died just before giving birth to their first

child. After her death, my father devoted his life to running the stable. He never married again, and until I came along twenty years later, he lived alone in his tiny brick bungalow.

We rode back to the stable in silence. I watched the yellow ball of sun move lower toward the horizon, the long rays slanting across Devi Kali's head. I loved seeing the world from there, feeling the rough skin of her ears as she flapped them against my legs.

I think what I feel when I am with Devi Kali is what other children sense when their mothers hug them. When Devi Kali looks at me, I see love in her eyes.

# FOUR

In the riverbank forest along the Belgadi the climbing rattan palm spreads out its fronds like fingers reaching for the figs in the trees above.

"Look, Nandu," my father whispered. A great hornbill flew into the trees. The giant bill, like a big yellow helmet worn backward, seemed to glow in the light. Two more landed in the figs, their black-and-white wings beating loudly. In the soft dirt track below, my father and I were searching for paw prints.

"Nandu, people in Kathmandu and Nepalganj read the morning paper to find out the day's events. Here in the jungle, we read tracks in the mud and sand to get the news important to us." *Subba-sahib* may have had trouble reading the printed page, but he was a master at piecing together the stories the tracks offered.

I walked ahead of my father, wanting to show him how much I had already learned. "Here, this looks like a young male

tiger, leaving the area where he was born," I said proudly, pointing to an impression in the soil.

"Close, Nandu, but the track is a bit too small. Do you see clearly the round pad and four rounded toes? That is from a large male leopard."

I nodded, disappointed in my mistake.

"Now look again. See the grains around the toe marks and these narrow paired hooves? I would say a few days ago, our leopard walked here, maybe stalking a barking deer. My guess is the barking deer was waiting for the hornbills to drop down some ripe figs. The leopard was waiting, too."

We moved up a few feet. "Ah, look. Now we can compare. Do you see on top of the leopard tracks these footprints? They are from a wild dog. The *dhole* always leaves behind claw marks, but the leopard leaves none. The cats can retract their claws, that is how you separate their footprints from wild dog or jackals."

We were still stooped over the prints when the peacocks began wailing around the bend—*Meyaw! Meyaw! Meyaw!* My father motioned for me to get down and crawl to a hiding spot. Up ahead was something I had never seen before—two male peafowl dancing on the dirt tracks, their four-foot-long plumes spread into giant, shimmering blue-green fans.

They lifted and spread out their plumes with the big eyespots at the ends, trying to impress the females. Then they shook all over, making every feather vibrate and glint in the sun. "This

is their ritual, Nandu," whispered my father. "They will dance like this in a trance until dusk."

Suddenly, before I even knew what was happening, a yellow-and-black spotted cat pounced on one of the dancing males. The others scattered up in the air, as the leopard slipped away, dinner in his jaws. I grabbed on to my father. I had no idea a leopard could be so close. They usually avoid us.

My father rose quickly and pulled me in the opposite direction, gripping my arm hard. He was still gripping it, in fact, even when we were safely outside the jungle. When he realized this, he dropped my arm, and we looked at each other, took a deep breath, and laughed in relief.

We cut through another village, Gobrela, which means "dung beetle" in Tharu. The villagers worked as hard as dung beetles, the men pitching hay and the women grinding grain in the courtyards. The Tharus grow wheat, lentils, mustard, and rice—lots of rice—and also graze their livestock in the jungle.

The villagers shouted greetings to my father and me as we passed, *"Ram, Ram, Subba-sahib."* They are proud that someone from their own caste is head of the king's elephant stable. Even the *Budghar*, the headman of the village, looks up to my father. There are few such positions open to Tharus, who are mostly illiterate farmers. Their children stay home, to help with the crops and livestock, even those of the *Budghar*, who is rich and has many kids.

Twenty minutes later my father and I were back in front of the campfire at the stable, holding mugs of steaming tea. My mind was still fixed on the dancing peacock that had been killed in an instant and then dragged away to be eaten.

"Why was the peacock not more careful?" I asked. "Did he know the leopard was watching him?"

"Nandu, sometimes in our lives we are like that peacock," my father said. "We must commit ourselves to do what is most important to us, without worrying about our fate."