

A muscular man with dark hair, shirtless, stands in a lush jungle. He is holding a large green leaf. A tiger is visible in the foreground on the right. In the background, a waterfall flows down a rocky ledge. The overall scene is vibrant and tropical.

TIGER, TIGER

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Tiger, Tiger

Mel Keegan

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TIGER, TIGER

I

Sonny Moran did not have to glance at the GPS to know where he was, down to the last ten meters. He had stepped out of the old-growth five minutes before and jogged up the east slope of an old plantation. On the shoulder of the hill, nothing grew. Century-old erosion had eaten the land down to bare rock and chalk, and from the open space there, Sonny could see the derelict pipeline, headed north from the lakes at Savage River which had once been open-pit iron mines, to the ghost town of Port Lattie on the coast, where the iron-ore slurry had once been processed before it was hauled out to Japan.

Two ridge lines west was Mount Frankland, more than four hundred meters tall and covered with military-rank plantation timber punctuated by a few small pockets of old-growth. Two ridge lines east was the Murchison Highway, headed like an arrow up to Bass Strait. And in between, stretching north and south in a shape like a crescent moon, was Cass Vandermeer's domain. The three thousand hectares of not-quite-virgin rainforest were Sonny Moran's territory — and the hunting grounds of the last wild tigers.

Not that the new Tasmanian tigers were genuinely wild, Sonny admitted as he slid green glasses onto his nose. He uncapped a water bottle and half-drained it as he surveyed the forest canopy. The last remnants of the Tarkine region — from the Arthur River on

its northern boundary to Waratah Road in the south, from the Frankland River in the west to the Murchison Highway in the east — were enclosed. Five meters of cyclone fencing and razor wire held out the rest of the world, with notices in five languages: 'Private property, Trespassers prosecuted.' In English, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish and French the notices carried a subtext: 'Beware: large carnivores.'

Carnivores? Sonny surveyed the forest with deep satisfaction. Twelve mature female tigers were at large in the Tarkine, with more than twenty cubs at various ages. Every tiger in the park was female; every animal was conceived in the lab. The greatest danger to a growing cub was a male tiger, and when the territory was the size of a handkerchief, and surrounded by fences, if males were loose in the Tarkine, the cubs would not last long.

So Cass Vandermeer's six male tigers were on the property down at Cradle Mountain. They roamed through forty hectares of paddocks, separated by cyclone fences to keep them from skirmishing; they were well fed, semi-wild, and their only duty was to contribute to the gene bank.

For the first time in fifteen minutes, Sonny looked down at the GPS. He knew exactly where he was, but he had spent the last four hours tracking Indhira, and the GPS knew where *she* was, down to the last meter. At two in the afternoon it was hot. He had been on foot since the copter deposited him on the west side of the Lyons River, and Indhira's range took him into forest which was still virtually inaccessible. A century ago, these valleys were the Savage River National Park; fifty years ago, they were the property of the Tasman Hardwoods Corporation.

And then leases expired and title passed back to Vandermeer. The logging trucks moved out, tigers moved in, and the war of words began. On one side were the supporters of the timber industry, who swore that the country's hardwood forests were 'sustainable.' On the other side were the wilderness ecologists, who had never been able to explain the difference between 'old-growth' virgin rainforest and a timber plantation in words the timber industry's dependent workers could understand. And caught between the two factions, oblivious to a war which was fought out in

arbitration courts across the world, were the new Tasmanian tigers. Forty animals, genetically sound, completely healthy, and living wild, so long as Cass Vandermeer could hold onto the last remnants of the Tarkine.

The radio crackled, and Sonny reached around to the curve of his back, where it was hooked to his pack. He was hot, tired, hungry. His shirt was off, tied around his hips, his hair lay in a single thick braid on his right shoulder, and his palms sweated in their leather gloves.

"Sonny, you there? Sonny, this is Overhead, where the hell are you?"

He gave the radio a glare. "I'm on the shoulder of E-24, and the GPS tells me Indhira's about three hundred meters away, in the valley. What's your hurry?"

"What's my hurry?" Alec Fisk demanded. "We were supposed to be going out tonight. You and me, brushed and polished, dinner in Launceston and then a club. We were going to go dancing at Blue Heaven, unless my memory's playing tricks on me."

"So, it's two o'clock," Sonny said reasonably. "There's plenty of time."

"Not if you don't shift your ass," Fisk retorted. "You know where the cat is? Get moving!"

The three hundred meters' distance was not the problem. The difficulty was that most of them took Sonny down a slope which was little less sheer than a cliff. At the bottom was a runoff creek, and then the fringe of the old-growth forest on the other side. For some time he had been scouting for a safe way down. This whole area was still scarred with the last vestiges of the haul roads, where the THC trucks and dozers cut their way through the rainforest until the stroke of midnight on the day their lease expired.

By dawn, the access roads were blocked by labor protesters carrying placards: 'Jobs not woods,' 'Kids before cats,' 'What about our families?' Wilderness ecologists and tiger biologists alike answered these challenges as they had a thousand times before: Go back to school, qualify in something else, take work that does not depend on destroying the last rainforest on the planet to make woodchips. But it was in every way easier to picket the old THC

access roads, and the Tarkine was in the news for months.

Cass Vandermeer did not fight the protesters. The tigers came in by jetcopter, a few weeks after the wild boar and deer had been released into the timber plantation areas. These were the prey animals, and few ecologists argued against releasing them. They were free to roam only in the vast tracts of the plantations, where the native environment had already been destroyed. Little more damage could be done there, though the deer and pigs would thrive.

The haul roads had not been dozed or graded in thirty years now, and they were overgrown. The wilderness was recovering what had been stolen. It would be many centuries before the rain-forest returned, if it ever did; but diversity was slowly coming to the plantation. In the eight years Sonny had worked for Vandermeer, he had seen it happening.

"Can't find a road," he told Fisk. "I'm going to head on down ... and I'll be skating most of the way. You got a fix on me?"

"Kid, I've got you nailed," Fisk chuckled. "Not for the first time."

Nor even the first time today. Sonny's whole body recalled the morning, in the dawn light, when Fisk had woken early and hard. "Standby," he told his partner. "I'll call when I get to the bottom in one piece ... and if I don't —"

"I'll come rescue you," Fisk finished. "For the sixth time."

"Fifth," Sonny argued. "The time that big tennis player was hitting on me doesn't count. I was talking my way out before you showed up."

"Silver-tongued Sonny," Fisk said, and smacked his lips. "Don't I know it? Seriously, make it quick, Son. I've got those bloody lunatics ragging on me. I'm supposed to get them into the middle of the Keith River wilderness, and for them, the time matters. They lose the light, they can't shoot today. And they start losing the light when the gorges fill up with shadow. Damn it, why did Cass have to bring these bastards in?"

"Good publicity for the park," Sonny said philosophically. "Five minutes, Alec, and I'll be down one way or the other. Hold on."

"Hold onto what?" Fisk demanded with mock innocence. "I'll, uh, think of something."

"You do that." Sonny returned the radio to his pack.

He put on the shirt, buttoned it, tightened the gloves, and seated the glasses firmly. He was in hiking boots and denims, with a light fannypack, and he had set down his rifle to drink and check the GPS. The water bottle slid back into the fannypack's webbing and the pack slid around to the front. He slung the rifle over both shoulders and stooped to tuck the cuffs of his jeans into his socks to keep out gravel. A pair of velcro straps held them down tight. After a few hikes into this wilderness, a man learned to be prepared.

He was at the top of the decline. Behind him, the hillside was bare, showing chalk spots. Clear cutting and mining had reduced too much of the Tarkine to rock and vast lakes, where open pits had filled with rain. Before and below him, the slope was loose, unstable, treacherous. But Indhira was down there, and according to the GPS, she had not moved in thirty minutes.

She might be asleep, but Sonny doubted it. She had been hunting at noon in the old plantation areas, where Tasmanian Oak marched like soldiers in orderly ranks, and where the local razorbacks and imported sambar deer were thriving. After she made her kill, she would eat enough to take the edge off her appetite and then drag the carcass undercover and bring her cubs. But according to the GPS, the tigress had simply stopped, and Sonny was worried.

Had the prey turned on her? Razorbacks were damned dangerous. The wild pigs would stand and fight men or dogs, and their tusks were lethal. The tigress could be wounded. She could be dead, he thought grimly as he poised at the lip of the decline. She was radio tagged, but the chips sent back only locational data. Many times, Sonny had said to Cass that the chips should send basic telemetry. Respiration, temperature, heartbeat.

A hot wind skipped over the bald hillside. He sucked in a breath, flexed his knees, and let the loose slope carry him down. It was a lot like skating, and muscles he had not used in years began to respond. A ridiculous amount of his youth had been spent on a skateboard; his parents had called those hours wasted, but Sonny was grateful for them now.

A pall of beige dust rose about him as he went down, hopping from one stable patch to another and trying to control his speed. He

was too fast, and he knew it. He angled his feet, taking the gravel on the thick soles of the boots, using them to brake while he still had balance and command. Gravity and the loose surface were his enemies, but after so many years of experience they were familiar demons.

Halfway down, he was still on his feet. Black cockatoos harangued him from the tops of myrtle in the old-growth forest, which was racing toward him, and crows laughed hoarsely as they wafted out of the creek bed, right below. Sweat trickled between his shoulders as he skipped from a boulder here to a patch of button grass there, controlling the descent until the last ten meters.

Then the surface fell out from beneath his boots, loose sand avalanched away into the creek, and he was down. Sheer luck turned a headlong roll into a skid, and he would not feel the bruises for hours. He gave a whoop as he slithered into the shallows of the runoff creek, and picked himself up before the radio, GPS and rifle were inundated.

“Overhead, this is Sonny. You still there, Alec?”

Fisk had left the channel open. “I heard you yell. You broke your neck?”

“Piece of cake,” Sonny told him. “That was fun — why was I looking for a haul road?” He was studying the GPS again, and his tone sobered. “She still isn’t moving. I’m liking this less and less. Is Liz there yet?”

“She’s somewhere in the lab. I called her.” Fisk paused. “Let me call her again ... you think you’ve got trouble?”

“I don’t know. It could be nothing.” Sonny was already moving, heading northwest, through the ankle-deep creek water and into the old-growth on the other bank. “Find Liz, tell her to grab her gear,” he added tersely. “I’ll call it in when I find the cat.”

“Will do,” Fisk responded.

The transition from the timber plantation to the old-growth always raised a prickle along Sonny’s arms. The temperature dropped as the canopy thickened; forty kinds of trees and plants surrounded him rather than the monoculture of the plantation, and the forest was quiet with an almost cathedral hush. The rainbow hues of fungi and lichens were dazzling in any patch of filtered

sunlight, and green parrots dove like missiles over his head.

The eucalypts and deep red myrtle were ancient and massive. The forest seemed to be as old as time. Following the radio tag signal, Sonny made his way soundlessly across carpets of lichens, under Sassafras and Pandani Palms. Fifty meters into the old-growth, the Tarkine seemed so primordial, he would hardly have been surprised to see a dinosaur lift its head from the wide rainwater pools.

The radio signal was strong, and from the frequency he knew which tiger it was. He walked south for fifty meters to skirt a vast pool and came up on a glade where the arch of the trees showed an open way back to the plantation. Between the vast trunks of seventy meter giants which were three and four centuries old, he saw the serried ranks of the 'timber farm,' where no tree was older than seventy or eighty years.

And tire tracks cut a double line directly into the abandoned plantation. A 4x4 had been through here in the last day — someone knew exactly where the old THC haul road was, and that a clearing was maintained for jetcopters, not two kilometers away.

"Damn," Sonny murmured. It would not be the first time shooters had got into the park, but they were rare since Vandermeer had beefed up the surveillance system with a remote camera mounted on a blimp.

According to the radio tag, he was on top of the tiger, and now he used his eyes. She was Bengal, *Panthera tigris tigris*, purebred, designed by evolution to flourish in jungles which no longer existed. Fifty thoroughbreds of every subspecies, from the Siberian to the Sumatran, were still found in zoos and animal parks around the world, but by no contortion of the imagination could they be called wild.

If one stretched the point just a little, Vandermeer's Tasmanian tigers were wild. They lived within fences, but the cyclone wire was kilometers apart; they were radio tagged, tracked at every moment, but they were at liberty to roam at will through some of the last virgin rainforest in the world. They were cared for by veterinarians who had invested decades in the study of tigers, but they hunted for themselves; their cubs were conceived in the lab, but born in the

wild. They were precious beyond measure.

And Indhira was down. Sonny's gut clenched as he saw her at last. She was so well camouflaged, he had not made her out for minutes. At once he saw that she was still breathing, but she was ominously still. At five years old she was a fully-mature female; she was close to three meters long from nose to tail and weighed 150 kilos. She had hidden two cubs somewhere not far away, and Sonny worried for them, too.

"Alec, you still with me?" he said to the radio as he made his way through the tall grass.

"Right here." Fisk was no longer bantering.

"Did you find Liz? The tiger's down."

"Christ. Hang on." Fisk paused, and then was back: "Liz! Get in here, will you, right bloody now. She's down. That's all I know."

Sonny was a ranger, not a veterinarian. His skills extended as far as those of the paramedic, and he approached the tiger cautiously as he waited for Liz Taggart. He saw no blood. She was lying on her side, and the ribs heaved in a slow, steady cadence, but not even a whisker twitched. He crept closer and laid a hand on her, ready to jump back if he had startled her. Indhira knew him well enough to be friendly; she would not let him — or anyone else — approach her cubs, but she had no reason to maul him. She had been born in the Tarkine, the fourth generation of tigers to be born in this wilderness. She had no fear of humans.

She did not respond to his hand on her shoulder. He leaned closer and sniffed her breath, but it was fresh. If she were sick, he would have smelt something acid, sour or rank. He lifted an eyelid and saw the eye rolled up. The eerily human pupil was vastly dilated, and he swore. He was reaching for the radio when Liz Taggart came on the air, flustered and breathless.

"Sorry about that, Sonny, I was in the lab." She spoke with the telltale Sydney twang. "What's this about Indhira? Not more bloody hunters —?"

"Of a kind," Sonny said grimly. "She's been tranked. I can't find the dart in her, but she's down, out cold, pupils are dilated. And I saw 4x4 tracks when I made it in here. And whoever they are, they know tigers. There's plenty of undergrowth, tall grass, good graze

for deer ... and I hear water nearby. Damnit, where the hell are the cubs?"

He heard the anger in his own voice and was not surprised when Liz said loudly, "Chill, Sonny. Stay with her. We'll be there in fifteen minutes. The cubs'll be all right till then."

"If the cubs are still here," Sonny said bleakly. "I'm looking at 4x4 tracks, Liz, and you have to know what I'm thinking."

She skipped a beat. "If they're taking the cubs out, we'll find them faster, easier, from the air. Fifteen minutes. Just *stay put*."

"Ten," Fisk corrected. "The copter's already powered up, Son, and we know where you are. Liz, grab your gear. We're moving. And for godsakes, *somebody* let Cass know!" he added into the open radio channel.

At least six others would be listening in. Stewart Franco, the mechanic, monitored the radio constantly. Joel, the assistant vet, was in the field, but he would certainly be listening. Chloe Brandtner, the PR officer should be picking up a cell even now, to inform the boss, and Sonny would not be surprised to know Caspar Vandermeer himself was already listening in. The day-hire guys would be working — fences, firebreaks surveillance systems, cameras, running supplies — but each of them carried radio, plus the big shortwaves on the vehicles, and the radios should be open.

As he waited through the ten interminable minutes, Sonny listened to his own. Franco had come in from the copter hangar and was retasking the remote camera, but the blimp was on the other side of the park, down toward the southeast boundary. It would be half an hour before it could be over the old dirt road which headed up to the clearing where jetcopters often landed, and by then the intruders could be gone.

"Get your damned priorities in order," Sonny muttered to himself as he examined the tiger to the limits of the paramedic's knowledge. He had been working with tigers for nine years. He had done two years in the field with animal rescue in Myanmar, where the last wild tigers were recovered when the Hukawng Valley was reassigned to agriculture.

The tragedy still stung him, but he saw the truth as clearly as did anyone. With almost ten billion mouths to be fed on the planet,



Jade, 2006

Sonny

there was no space left in Asia for wilderness, and as the government of Myanmar rightly said, the tiger was no longer an endangered species. More than a quarter million of them were living pampered lives from Mumbai to Montreal.

But not in the wild, Sonny thought bitterly. A quarter million tigers had been genetically redesigned, bred as exotic pets, but not one remained wild in Asia. Only in Tasmania did a few dozen live in the primordial forest for which they had evolved. In Los Angeles and London they were commonplace, engineered to the size of a medium-large dog, subject to the leash laws, with breeding discouraged except in the lab — which had not stopped private ‘backyard’ breeders. Somewhere beyond the Maine Coon and the Ococat, with the dimensions and tenacity of a Rottweiler, was the domestic tiger. Longhair, shorthair, white, *altaica*; designed by computer, bred and born to domesticity.

Part of Sonny Moran wanted to grieve, but the realist in him would not grant him the right, because those domestic tigers were the guardians of a legacy so precious, the breeding program should be applauded. Their genes had been tweaked to reduce their size, make them the perfect exotic pet; but those genes could be tweaked back again, at whim. And the gene pool was now a quarter million strong and still growing. Tigers were chic, and as they became less rare, they were more affordable. Twenty years ago, they were a status symbol; now, there would be five padding at the ends of leashes in any park on any Sunday morning.

But not in the wild. Not the thoroughbred Himalayan or Burmese, Bengal or Siberian. Save for a handful in zoos, they were utterly extinct, while their habitat had been reassigned for rice, wheat, silage. The ancient rainforests were almost gone. Only British Columbia and Tasmania preserved islands of old-growth, like Noah’s arks adrift in a world of humans and their agriculture. Voles, bats, owls, hung on stubbornly while the world changed, and changed again; but a wild tiger might range fifteen or twenty kilometers in search of prey, and nowhere was there enough forest to support a breeding population.

He heard the jetcopter long before the scarlet hull popped over the ridge line from the southeast. The Bell 840-C was long-range,

with a big carrying capacity. If Liz Taggart wanted to treat Indhira back at the hospital, she would be loaded aboard. It would be the first time since the cubs were conceived that she had been transported — and Sonny's immediate concern was for those cubs.

He stood in the open, where the rainforest gave way to the plantation, and waved both arms, but Fisk had already seen him. The copter fell toward him fast, but he knew it would be airborne again in moments. Fisk was hunting, and from the air he could not fail to see the 4x4 tracks which cut a swathe through the grass toward the old haul road.

The skids barely touched the grass as Liz jumped out. She pulled a backpack over one shoulder, doubled up to get away from the rotor storm, and Fisk was off again at once. Sonny held the radio against his ear, to hear over the engine noise.

"I'll recce the whole area and get some video," Alec was saying. "It won't take long, Son. I'll be right back."

And if he saw the intruders, he would disable the vehicle and call Launceston for a police pickup team. The copter was armed, and Fisk had the experience. The stories he told of bushfire wars in Asia and Africa soured the belly. Sonny often wondered how Alec Fisk ever slept.

"Take your time, Alec," he said to the radio. "We're not going anywhere."

Liz Taggart was fifty, with stringy muscles, a walnut-brown tan, and sun-damaged skin. Her whole life had been lived in places like the Tarkine and the Hukawng Valley. She was twenty years older than Sonny, and what she did not know about tigers was not there to be known. He took the backpack from her and laid it out beside the cat while Liz went to work. She was small, with dark brown hair which was still growing back from a bad cut, and the big-knuckled hands of a person who has done hard physical work for many years.

"You're right," she was saying as she checked the tigress. "She's been tranked up to her eyeballs, even if I'm not seeing the dart."

"Overdosed?" Sonny prompted. It had happened before. Hunters were sometimes so wary of the big cat, they put in a second dart,

or a third, to make sure she did not get up too soon.

"I don't think so." Liz was listening to Indhira's heart. "Slow pulse, slow respiration, but I'm sure she'll be all right."

"How long?" Sonny looked up over the tops of the young Tasmanian Oak as the copter reappeared.

"An hour, could be two," Liz guessed. "We'll stay with her, be sure." She angled a glance up at Sonny. "Find the cubs, if you can. They won't be far away."

"If they're still here," Sonny added.

With a storm of engine noise the copter dropped in, where the forest met the plantation, and this time Fisk settled the machine and shut it down. Sonny watched him putting engines and electricals into idle mode, and then Alec lifted off the helmet and waved through the canopy. He was out a moment later, and jogging through the knee-high grass. He was tall, rangy, with big shoulders, and the khaki shirt and bluejeans of the Tarkine ranger looked good on him. He had the red hair of his Scottish mother, which he wore very short, and the freckles of his Danish grandfather. Alec never tanned, but his fair skin — so different from Sonny's own dusky complexion — grew the most amazing crops of freckles.

They slapped hands as Fisk came to rest. "Nothing," he said disgustedly. "I'll tell you this much, Son, the 4x4 didn't head too far up the old logging road, and it sure as hell didn't rendezvous with any aircraft. There's no sign of anything having been in the area in the last couple of hours, and we know it's been this recent because she's still out cold." He frowned down at the tigress. "What's the story, Doc?"

Liz was taking blood. The backpack lay open in the grass, and the hematoscan was already set up. "Just what it looks like. She was hunting, she was tranked. One dart, I'm sure. They were quick. Which means she'll be awake in an hour or so."

"It also means she might not be the target," Fisk added. He lifted a brow at Sonny, "You thinking what I am?"

"Cubs." Sonny gave the surrounding forest a glare. "Help me look. It won't take long, and we'll know what to tell Cass. Somebody called him —?"

"He's listening in." Fisk gestured at the copter. "I sent him the

video ... zip, zero, nothing to see. And you gotta hate the sound of that."

Because it meant the 4x4 was still in the Tarkine, Sonny thought grimly. And since none of the fences were damaged, the vehicle must have been here for some considerable time. "Still," he muttered as he and Fisk made their way into the underbrush, where a tigress might hide her cubs while she hunted, "if the 4x4's still here, so are the cubs."

"Point," Fisk agreed. "I'll take right, you go left. Whistle if you find something."

"Whistle?" Sonny echoed, setting up the old joke.

"Put your lips together and blow," Alec suggested. "And while you're at it —" He reached for belt and zipper, then seemed to think better of it and winked one blue eye. "Can I hold that thought for later?"

"You can hold that thought," Sonny assured him.

Fisk would not be serious the day he died. Sonny was sure he used humor the way the bomb squad used kevlar. It was a suit of armor which neatly deflected pain, developed as a runaway kid on the streets of Sydney and perfected in the Forces, where compassion was in short supply and any emotion a man might feel was frowned on as a weakness. Only in the small hours of the morning did Sonny see through Fisk's armor to the human being beneath, and he counted himself privileged. Alec allowed few people to glimpse the man inside, and too often the armor deflected human contact as well as the pain other people could inflict.

When a tiger was hunting, she placed her cubs in a hide. A million generations of evolution had instilled this wisdom in them, and though the Tarkine had no male tigers to endanger the cubs, mothers like Indhira would still hide them, and the cubs would not wander. There were no natural predators in the Tarkine to endanger them, unless a razorback found cubs who were too small, too young, to run.

And men? Sonny wondered as he and Alec fanned out through the tall grass. Men were the only predator the Tarkine's tigers needed to fear, and none of them knew it yet. They were all born here. Even the oldest had never learned to fear humans, and often

curiosity would bring them to the sound of one of the park's four-wheel-drives or the copter.

Very seldom did humans intrude on their world, though every tiger was radio tagged and they were continuously video monitored. Humans in the Tarkine were almost always rangers like Sonny Moran, vets like Liz Taggart, or perhaps a team of documentarians.

But three times in the last six months intruders had made it in, and out, avoiding the cameras, evading rangers and drones, and Cass Vandermeer was as furious as Sonny. Humans invaded the Tarkine for two reasons, each worse than the other.

A low whistle called from Alec's direction, and Sonny brought the radio to his ear. Fisk spoke in a bare murmur against the mic: "I'm seeing tracks, a couple of hours old. Make your way over here. I'll wait."

"On my way," Sonny whispered, and threaded around the rotted remains of a massive fallen log.

A giant had died decades ago; the wood was so covered with lichens and fungi of every color in the paintbox, it was hardly recognizable as a log. A hundred meters along its body, Sonny swung back toward Fisk's position, and came up on him from the blind side of a stand of grasses which had colonized the banks of a five-meter rainwater pool. Fisk was sitting on his heels, waiting. As Sonny approached he straightened, and held a finger to his lips to signal for quiet. He cupped a hand to his ear and pointed into the bushes.

The ground sloped up toward the northeast. In a hundred meters it would begin to climb steeply, but they were in the bottom of a broad gorge here, where erosion had worn a wide, level area. Thirty meters away, a thicket of wattles surrounded the entrance to an old wombat burrow, and as Sonny began to listen in that direction he heard the sounds Alec had already heard.

Indhira's cubs were four or five months old. Their voices were becoming gruff as they grew, and every day they were getting much more bold. They had all the cat's natural curiosity, and though they had not strayed far from the hide where they had been left, they were not about to sit still for so long. They were investigating the

wombat burrow, and as he saw them, Sonny relaxed.

Since intruders had first made it into the park, everyone who worked in the Tarkine feared that cubs would be stolen. The markets in China and South America were so lucrative, a cub might literally be worth its weight in gold.

Not this time. Sonny leaned both shoulders against the tree where Fisk had stopped, and held the radio to his lips again. "Liz, you there?"

"Right here, Son. She's doing all right," Taggart told him.

"She'll be doing a whole lot better soon ... we found the cubs." Sonny gave Fisk a crooked grin. "They're right where she left them."

"So the bastards weren't here to steal," Fisk added quietly. "And they didn't come to hunt. If they did, Indhira would be dead."

"Smugglers," Liz said disgustedly. "Leave the cubs there, guys. She'll be coming around soon enough, but I do want to stay with her. You want to take the copter up, see if you can spot our intruders?"

"No point." Fisk glared at the forest, which was tall as a cathedral and dense as only old-growth could be. "They didn't head up the haul road. I already checked. They looped around and headed back in. From the air, I can follow the tracks as far as the treeline, but if you want the buggers tracked from there, we'll be on foot. And I'll tell you, Liz, it's a waste of time. They'd be gone ... however in hell they're doing it! ... before we were anywhere near 'em."

"What he said," Sonny added. "We're coming back down, Liz. Anything you need from the copter?"

"No. Take five," Taggart suggested. "Leave the radio open. I'll give you a 'hoy' when she's awake."

"She's not dangerous," Sonny said quickly. "She knows me so well, she ate my lunch one time."

Still, Indhira had cubs now, he thought, and one did not take liberties with 150 kilos of tigress. Sweat trickled between his shoulder blades and he drew his forearm across his face. The temperature was not as high as one might have guessed, but the humidity was intense and no breeze stirred in the bottom of the gorge.

Fisk had already turned back toward the edge of the old-growth, and Sonny followed. The cubs were so intent on the bur-

row, they would never know they had been found. "You want a beer?" Alec wondered. "I have a couple of Lights on the copter."

"You're an angel," Sonny informed him, and slid an arm around his waist. "Cass is going to be furious."

"I keep telling him, we need more security." Fisk's arm went over Sonny's shoulder.

They stopped in a patch of green-gold, filtered sunlight. Alec wanted to kiss while they had the chance, and the privacy, and Sonny was far from reluctant. With a video crew in camp, 'downtime' was at a premium, and everyone on the Vandermeer payroll was on his or her best behavior. You could never tell, Sonny thought as a hand worked its way into his jeans, when a lens was aimed at you.

"I'm hearing water," Fisk said as he released Sonny's lips. "Running water ... that way."

"There's a pool." Sonny stepped back and swiped off his shirt. As tempting as an embrace was, in this humidity it was going to be quick. He pulled the cotton over his face and tied the shirt around his hips. "We had enough rain last week, the cascade's running."

The pilot's pale blue eyes glittered. They were nested in sun-creases as he looked Sonny up and down with a grin. "I'd kill for a shower."

"You promised me a beer," Sonny reminded.

"So I'll grab a couple of Lights out of the copter." Fisk gave him a push. "Hoof it, before the tiger's waking up."

"We can take a shower back at camp," Sonny began.

Fisk angled a look of reproach at him. "The shit's going to be hitting the fan by the time we get back, *and* there's a freakin' vid-crew in camp. You want a beer and a swim, and maybe a quickie in the water, grab the chance while you've got it."

He was right, as usual. Sonny did not need to be seduced. Through green shadows and heavy air smelling of eucalypt and myrtle, they jogged back to the treeline where Indhira had been darted. Taggart was busy with the laptop. He saw at a glance, she was online, trading data with both the compound and the property at Cradle Mountain. He stopped to stroke both hands through the tigress's gorgeous gold and black pelt and asked,

"Cass has been told?"

"Oh, he's pissed," Liz said darkly. "I keep telling him, rage is not healthy for a man of his age. He should calm down, quit drinking schnapps, give up the deep-fried Chinese food, get some acupuncture or something. But he'd rather light a cheroot and send out for pizza. I'd say he was going to shorten his life, but God knows, he's a hundred and eight. Even in this day and age, that's pretty good."

"What's pretty good?" Fisk wanted to know as he jogged back in from the copter. He carried a can of Cascade in each hand, and lobbed one to Sonny. "How long before the cat's awake, Liz?"

"Forty, fifty minutes," she guessed cautiously. "She's okay. I've run the data through the mainframe at the lab. But she was seriously tranked. Goddamn! If I could get my hands on the bastards —"

"Their gonads would be golfballs," Fisk chuckled. "There's a pool back there, Liz. We're going to take a dip to cool off while we're grounded."

"Just leave the radio open," she called after them.

"Now, would we turn you off?" Fisk demanded, which was a sweet tease, because Taggart made no secret of the fact she had no time for guys like Fisk. Not that she had no time for men in general; she had been married to one for eleven years. She had also been married to a concert flautist who was very much a woman for another fourteen years. But guys like Alec Fisk — 'a big kid,' as she called him, 'to whom the whole world appeared to be one huge joke' — were not her type.

She was wrong about Fisk, but only Sonny knew it. When midnight lay over the Tarkine like a cool, silver-blue mantle, Alec tossed in his sleep, spoke disjointedly out of his dreams; and Sonny knew the truth. Fisk had seen things, done things, no one should have to live through. Taggart was too absorbed in her work to have time for a partner of either gender, and Sonny was not sorry. Alec was tall, well-built, with long, lean muscles and chiseled good looks. He was a Viking, down to his bone marrow, and if Taggart had cared to investigate, Sonny might have lost the competition.

The Viking had already drained his beer when they found the pool, and he stripped to the skin while Sonny was still drinking. The

small lake was twenty meters long, fifteen wide, and fed by runoff which cascaded into the basin. Opportunistic palms and ferns had grown up around the banks, stabilizing them; deer, wild pigs and the tigers themselves had worn paths to the water's edge in several places, and save for the two months after Christmas, the height of the 'dry' season, the pool would be a reliable waterhole.

The beer went down smoothly, and the water looked almost as seductive as his partner's fair limbs. Almost. Fisk slid into the pool with a curse as sun-hot skin met cold water. Sonny was still heeling off his boots as Alec duck-dived and came up gasping. With both feet he flicked water at Sonny, and then went under again. Sonny dropped his jeans fast and dove after him before he came up.

The sudden chill was exhilarating. The surface layer was hot, but a meter down the water was icy. It was clear as glass until they stirred up sediments from the bottom. It tasted acid on Sonny's tongue, rich with tannins, like a dry wine aged in the wood.

Arms went about him from behind, pulled him into an embrace, and he surrendered with a groan. This was the only peace they were likely to find for some time, and Alec was determined to enjoy it. With the vidcrew in camp and intruders in the Tarkine, Vandermeer would kick the whole park onto alert. It would be long hours, stress and short tempers until the old man was satisfied with security, and someone was in custody.

Alec was hungry for it, as if they had not made love in the early morning. He ate at Sonny with biting kisses, and his hands were hard. One long leg was between Sonny's thighs, rubbing there, encouraging, exhorting. Sonny backed off and angled an odd look at him. "What's gotten into you, man?"

"Into me? Nothing lately." Alec ducked and left a bite-brand on the line of Sonny's ribs. "You keep putting me on top, damnit."

"Making you do the hard work," Sonny snorted. "I'm just lazy."

"Maybe. But you're way too beautiful to resist." Alec caught him, dumped him into the water, and they floated on the surface.

Beautiful? Sonny looked at his own body, which was tangled with Alec's. He was as brown as his mother, who had headed south from Mumbai's vast Pakistani community before Sonny was born. He was as lean as his father, who was an Australian engineer. They

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