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Forest of the Pygmies

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CHAPTER ONE

The Market Fortune-teller



At an order from the guide, Michael Mushaha, the elephant caravan came to a stop. The suffocating heat of midday was beginning, when the creatures of the vast nature preserve rested. Life paused for a few hours as the African earth became an inferno of burning lava, and even hyenas and vultures sought the shade. Alexander Cold and Nadia Santos were riding a willful bull elephant named Kobi. The animal had taken a liking to Nadia, because during their time together she had made an effort to learn the basics of the elephant's language in order to communicate with him. During their long treks, she told him about her country, Brazil, a distant land that had no creature as large as he, other than some ancient, legendary beasts hidden deep in the heart of South America's mountains. Kobi appreciated Nadia as much as he detested Alexander, and he never lost an opportunity to demonstrate both sentiments.

Kobi's five tons of muscle and fat shivered to a halt in a small oasis beneath dusty trees kept alive by a pool

of water the color of milky tea. Alexander had developed his own style of jumping to the ground from his nine-foot-high perch without mauling himself too badly, since in the five days of their safari he still had not gained the animal's cooperation. He was not aware that this time Kobi had positioned himself in such a way that when Alex jumped down, he landed in a puddle of water up to his knees. Borobá, Nadia's small black monkey, then jumped on top of him. As Alex struggled to pry the monkey off his head, he lost his balance and plopped down on his seat. He cursed to himself, shook off Borobá, and only with difficulty regained his footing because he couldn't see through his glasses, which were dripping filthy water. As he was looking for a clean corner of his T-shirt to wipe the lenses, the elephant thumped him on the back with his trunk, a blow that propelled him face first into the puddle. Kobi waited for Alex to pull himself up, then turned his monumental rear end and unleashed a Pantagruelian blast in his face. The other members of the safari greeted the prank with a chorus of guffaws.

Nadia was in no hurry to get down; she waited for Kobi to help her dismount in a more dignified manner. She stepped upon the knee he offered her, steadied herself on his trunk, and then leaped to the ground

with the grace of a ballerina. The elephant was not that considerate with anyone else, not even Mushaha, for whom he had respect but not affection. Kobi was an elephant with clear principles. It was one thing to transport tourists on his back, a job like any other, for which he was rewarded with excellent food and mud baths. It was something entirely different to perform circus tricks for a handful of peanuts. He liked peanuts, he couldn't deny that, but he received much more pleasure from tormenting people like Alexander. Why did the American get under his skin? The animal wasn't sure, it was a matter of chemistry. He didn't like the fact that Alex was always hanging around Nadia. There were thirteen elephants in the caravan, but he had to ride with the girl. It was very inconsiderate of Alex to get between Nadia and him that way. Didn't he realize that they needed privacy for their conversations? A good whack with the trunk and occasionally breaking wind in Alex's face were just what that young man deserved. Kobi trumpeted loudly once Nadia was down and had thanked him by planting a big kiss on his trunk. The girl had good manners; she would never humiliate him by offering him peanuts.

"That elephant is infatuated with Nadia," joked Alexander's grandmother, Kate Cold.

Borobá didn't like the turn Kobi's relationship with his mistress had taken. He had observed them with some worry. Nadia's interest in learning the language of the pachyderms could have dangerous consequences for him. She couldn't be thinking of getting a different pet, could she? Perhaps the moment had come for him to feign some illness in order to gain his mistress's total attention, but he was afraid she would leave him in camp and he would miss the wonderful outings around the preserve. This was his only chance to see the wild animals and, in addition, he wanted to keep a close eye on his rival. He installed himself on Nadia's shoulder, claiming that position as his right, and from there shook his fist at the elephant.

"And this silly monkey is jealous," Kate added.

She was used to Borobá's shift of moods, because she had lived under the same roof with him for nearly two years. It was like having a freakish, furry little man in her apartment. And it had been that way from the beginning, because Nadia had agreed to come to New York to study and live with Kate only if she could bring Borobá. They were never apart. They were so inseparable that they had obtained special permission for the monkey to go to school with her. Borobá was the only monkey in the history of the city's education system to

attend classes regularly. It wouldn't have surprised Kate to learn that the creature knew how to read. She had nightmares in which Borobá, sitting on the sofa wearing glasses and sipping a glass of brandy, was reading the financial section of the *Times*.

Kate had observed the strange trio formed of Alexander, Nadia, and Borobá for some time. The monkey, who was jealous of anyone who came too near his mistress, had at first accepted Alexander as an inevitable evil, but with time had become fond of the young man. Perhaps he realized that in this instance it was not a good idea for him to offer Nadia the ultimatum of "it's him or me," as he usually did. Who knows which of the two she would have chosen? Kate realized that both young people had changed a lot during the past year. Nadia would soon be fifteen and her grandson eighteen; they already had the physical appearance and seriousness of adults.

Nadia and Alexander were themselves aware of the changes. During their forced separation, they communicated by e-mail with demented persistence. They whiled their lives away in front of their computers, typing an endless dialogue in which they shared everything from the most boring details of their routines to philosophical questions regarding the torment of

growing up. They frequently sent photographs, but that had not prepared them for the surprise they experienced when they saw each other in the flesh and verified how much they had grown. Alexander had shot up like a colt, and now was as tall as his father. His features had become well defined, and during recent months he had had to shave every day. As for Nadia, she was no longer the thin little creature with parrot feathers tucked behind one ear whom Alexander had met in the Amazon some years before; he could glimpse the woman she would soon become.

So now the grandmother and the two young people were in the heart of Africa, on the first elephant safari ever conceived for tourists in this region. The idea of the safari was the brainchild of Michael Mushaha, an African naturalist who had graduated from a London university. It had occurred to him that elephants would be the best conveyance for humans who wanted to get as close as possible to the wildlife of the area. In his publicity brochure, he explained: "The elephants are part of the surroundings, and their presence does not drive away the other beasts; they do not need gasoline or a road, they do not pollute the air, and they do not attract attention."

Alexander and Nadia had been with Kate in

Tunkhala, the capital of the Kingdom of the Golden Dragon, when she was commissioned to write an article on Mushaha's operation. They were there at the invitation of King Dil Bahadur and his wife, Pema, to celebrate the birth of their first son and to attend the inauguration of a new statue of the dragon. The original, which had been destroyed in an explosion, had been replaced by an identical copy fashioned by a jeweler friend of Kate's.

For the first time, the people of this Himalayan kingdom had an opportunity to see the mysterious object of legend that in the past only the crowned monarch was privileged to view. Dil Bahadur had decided to exhibit the statue of gold and precious stones in a large hall in the royal palace, where people could file through to admire it and leave their offerings of flowers and incense. It was a magnificent spectacle. The dragon was mounted on a base of polychrome wood and lighted by a hundred lamps. Guarding the statue were four soldiers outfitted in the dress uniform of past centuries: plumed leather hats and token lances. Dil Bahadur would not allow his people to be offended by a show of security measures.

The official unveiling of the statue had just ended when Kate was advised that there was a call for her

from the United States. The telephone system of the kingdom was antiquated, and international communications were a nightmare, but after much shouting and repetition, the editor of *International Geographic* was successful in making the writer understand the nature of her next assignment. She was to leave immediately for Africa.

"I will have to take my grandson and his friend Nadia; they're here with me," she explained.

"The magazine is not paying their expenses, Kate!" the editor yelled.

"Then I'm not going!" she screamed in return.

And so it was that a few days later she arrived in Africa with Alexander and Nadia. There they were joined by the two photographers who always worked with her, the Englishman Timothy Bruce and the Latin American Joel González. The writer had promised herself never to travel again with her grandson and Nadia because they had caused her so much trouble on their two earlier trips. She felt sure, however, that a simple sojourn for tourists in Africa would not present any danger.

One of Mushaha's employees met the members of the group when they landed in Nairobi, the capital of

Kenya. He welcomed them and took them to a hotel to rest, because the trip had been a killer: They had taken four airplanes, crossed three continents, and flown thousands of miles.

The next morning they got up early in order to take a tour of the city and visit a museum and the market before setting off in the small airplane that would take them to the start of the safari.

The market was in a poor neighborhood surrounded by luxuriant vegetation. The narrow, unpaved streets were choked with people and vehicles: motorcycles carrying three and four people, broken-down buses, hand-pulled carts. A vast variety of the produce of earth and sea, and of human creativity, was for sale there, from rhinoceros horns and golden fish from the Nile to contraband weapons. The members of the group went different ways, after agreeing to meet one hour later at a predetermined street corner. That would be easier to say than do, because there was such tumult and uproar that it would be difficult to get their bearings. Fearing that Nadia would get lost or be run down, Alexander took her by the hand and they went off together.

The market was a showcase of African races and cultures: desert nomads; slender horsemen on elegantly

outfitted steeds; Muslims with elaborate turbans and partially veiled faces; women with burning eyes and blue designs tattooed on their faces; naked shepherds, their bodies painted with red clay and white chalk. Hundreds of children raced barefoot among roaming packs of dogs. The women were spectacular. Some were wearing dazzling starched kerchiefs on their heads that from a distance resembled the sails of a ship; others' heads were shaved clean and bead collars covered their necks from shoulder to chin; some were enveloped in yards and yards of brilliantly patterned cloth, while still others were nearly naked. The air was filled with incessant jabbering in several languages, along with music, laughter, horns, and the cries of animals being slaughtered on the spot. Blood streamed from the butchers' tables, soaking into the dusty ground, while black buzzards circled close overhead, waiting to seize the discarded guts.

Alexander and Nadia wandered through that fiesta of color, marveling, pausing to bargain over the price of a glass bracelet, savor a corn cake, or snap a photo with the cheap camera they had bought at the last moment in the airport. Suddenly they were nose to nose with an ostrich restrained by a rope around one foot, unknowingly awaiting its fate. The bird, much taller, stronger,

and more aggressive than they could have imagined, observed them from on high with infinite disdain, and then, without warning, bent its long neck and pecked at Borobá, who was riding atop Alexander's head and clinging firmly to his ears. The monkey twisted away to avoid the lethal beak and began screeching as if he were crazed. The ostrich, beating its short wings, charged at them as far as the rope would allow. By chance, Joel happened along at that very moment and captured the frightened expressions of Alexander and the monkey as Nadia waved her arms to fend off the unexpected attacker.

"This photograph is going to make the cover of *International Geographic*!" Joel shouted.

Fleeing from the haughty ostrich, Nadia and Alexander rounded a corner and suddenly found themselves in a section of the market devoted to witchcraft. There were practitioners of good magic and bad magic—fortune-tellers, fetishists, healers, poison brewers, exorcists, voodoo priests—all offering their services to clients under squares of canvas stretched on four poles for protection from the sun. They came from many tribes and belonged to an assortment of cults. Never dropping each other's hands, the two friends

wandered the alleyways, pausing before tiny animals in jars of alcohol; desiccated reptiles; amulets to protect against the evil eye and love sickness; medicinal herbs, lotions, and balms to cure ills of body and soul; powders for dreams, for forgetting, for restoring life; live animals for sacrifices; necklaces to drive away envy and greed; inks made from blood for writing to the dead; and, last but not least, an enormous array of exotic items to mitigate the terror of life.

Nadia had seen voodoo ceremonies in Brazil, and she was more or less familiar with their symbols, but for Alexander this area of the market was a fascinating world. They stopped before one stand different from the others: a conical straw roof that supported a circle of plastic curtains. Alexander bent down to see what was inside, and two powerful hands grabbed him and pulled him into the hut.

An enormous woman was seated on the ground beneath the straw ceiling, a mountain of flesh crowned by a voluminous turquoise kerchief. She was dressed in yellow and blue, and her bosom was covered with necklaces of many-colored beads. She introduced herself as a messenger between the world of the spirits and the material world, a seer and voodoo priestess. On the ground beside her was a cloth painted with designs in

black and white. She was surrounded by various carved wood figures of gods and demons, some wet with the fresh blood of sacrificed animals, others studded with nails, and before them lay offerings of fruits, grains, flowers, and money. The woman was puffing on some black leaves rolled into a tight cylinder, and the thick smoke brought tears to the young people's eyes. Alexander tried to free himself from the hands that had immobilized him, but the woman fixed her bulging eyes on him and let out a deep roar. Alexander recognized the voice of his totemic animal, the voice he heard when he was in a trance and his body took on a different form.

"It's the black jaguar!" Nadia exclaimed at his side.

The priestess forced the American boy to sit before her. She pulled a worn leather sack from her bosom and emptied its contents onto the painted cloth: white shells, worn smooth with wear. She began to mutter something in her language, without relinquishing the cigar, which she held clamped between her teeth.

"*Anglais?* English?" Alexander queried.

"You come from a distant place, far away. What do you want of Má Bangesé?" she replied in a comprehensible mixture of African words and English.

Alexander shrugged his shoulders and smiled

nervously, looking at Nadia out of the corner of his eye to see if she had any idea what was going on. She pulled a couple of bills from her pocket and put them in one of the gourds that held the offerings of money.

"Má Bangesé can read your heart," said the gigantic woman, speaking to Alexander.

"And what is in my heart?"

"You are looking for medicines to cure a woman," she said.

"My mother isn't sick any longer; her cancer is in remission . . ." Alexander murmured, frightened, not understanding how a witch in a market in Africa could know about Lisa Cold.

"At any rate, you fear for her," said Má Bangesé. She shook the shells in one hand and tossed them like dice. "The life or death of that woman is not in your hands," she added.

"Will she live?" Alexander asked anxiously.

"If you go back, she will live. If you do not, she will die of sadness, not illness."

"Of course I'm going back home!" the youth protested.

"Nothing is sure. There is much danger, but you are strong of heart. You must use your courage, otherwise you will die and this girl will die with you," she

declared, pointing to Nadia.

"What does that mean?" Alexander asked.

"A person can do harm, and a person can do good. There is no reward for doing good, only satisfaction in your soul. There are times you must fight. You will have to decide."

"What am I to do?"

"Má Bangesé sees the heart; she cannot show the way."

And turning toward Nadia, who had sat down beside Alexander, she placed a finger on her forehead, between her eyes.

"You are magic, and you have the vision of birds; you see from above, from afar. You can help him," she said.

She closed her eyes and began to rock back and forth as sweat poured down her face and neck. The heat was unbearable. The smells of the market filled their nostrils: rotted fruit, garbage, blood, gasoline. Má Bangesé let forth a guttural sound that came from deep in her belly, a long, hoarse lament that rose in tone until the ground shook, as if it came from the depths of the earth. Dizzy and perspiring, Nadia and Alexander were afraid they were going to faint. The air in the tiny, smoke-filled space became unbreathable. More and more befuddled, they wanted to leave but they couldn't

move. They were shaken by the vibration of drums; they heard dogs howling, their mouths filled with bitter saliva, and before their incredulous eyes the enormous woman melted away, like a burst balloon, and in her place emerged a fabulous bird with splendid yellow and blue plumage and a turquoise-colored crest. This bird-of-paradise unfolded the rainbow of its wings, wrapped Nadia and Alex inside, and flew away with them.

Nadia and Alexander were launched into space. They could see themselves like two pinpoints of black ink lost in a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors and undulating forms mutating at a terrifying speed. They were transformed into Roman candles, their bodies exploding into sparks. They lost any notion of being alive, or of time or fear. Then the sparks fused into an electric vortex, and again they saw themselves as two minute points caroming among the designs of the fantastic kaleidoscope. Now they were two astronauts, hand in hand, floating in starry space. They could not feel their bodies but they had a vague awareness of movement and of being connected. They clung to that contact, because it was the one manifestation of their humanity; as long as they were holding hands they were not totally lost.

Green, they were immersed in total greenness. They

began to plunge earthward like arrows, and when impact seemed inevitable, the color diffused, and instead of crashing they floated down like feathers, sinking into surreal vegetation, into the warm, moist, cottony flora of another planet. Dissolving in the mists of that atmosphere, they metamorphosed into transparent medusas. In that gelatinous state, lacking bones to give them form, or strength to defend themselves, or voices to call out, they confronted the violent images passing in rapid succession before them—visions of death, blood, war, and a destroyed forest. A procession of ghosts in chains marched before them, dragging their feet among the carcasses of large animals. They saw baskets filled with human hands, and children and women in cages.

Suddenly they were once again themselves, in their familiar bodies, and then before them, emerging with the terrifying clarity of the worst nightmares, they saw a threatening three-headed ogre, a giant with the skin of a crocodile. The heads were different: One had four horns and the shaggy mane of a lion; the second had no eyes, was bald, and breathed fire through its nostrils; the third had the skull of a leopard, with bloody teeth and the blazing pupils of a demon. All three had gaping jaws and iguana tongues. The monster clumsily thrust its colossal paws at them, trying to claw them.

Its hypnotic eyes bored into them, its three muzzles spewed a thick, poisonous saliva. Again and again Alex and Nadia eluded the ferocious jabs, unable to flee, feeling as if they were mired in a swamp. They evaded the monster for a time that seemed infinite, until suddenly they found they held spears in their hands and they began blindly, desperately, to defend themselves. When they subdued one of the heads, the other two came at them, and if they succeeded in driving back those two, the first returned to the attack. Their weapons broke in the struggle. Then at the final instant, when they were sure to be devoured, they made a superhuman effort and turned into their totemic animals—Alexander into a jaguar and Nadia an eagle—but before that formidable enemy, the ferocity of the first and the wings of the second were impotent . . . Their cries were lost in the bellowing of the ogre.

"Nadia! Alexander!"

The voice of Kate Cold brought them back to the known world, and they found themselves sitting exactly as they had been when their hallucinatory voyage began: in the market in Africa, beneath the straw roof, facing an enormous woman dressed in yellow and blue.

"We heard you yelling. Who is this woman? What happened?" Alexander's grandmother asked.

"It's nothing, Kate. Nothing at all," Alexander managed to get out, his head reeling.

He didn't know how to explain to his grandmother what he had just experienced. Má Bangesé's deep voice seemed to reach them from the dimension of their dreams.

"Stay on your guard," the seer warned them.

"What happened to you?" Kate repeated.

"We saw a monster with three heads. It was invincible . . ." Nadia murmured, still dazed.

"Stay close to each other. Together you can save yourselves; separated you will die," said Má Bangesé.

The next morning the *International Geographic* group flew in a small plane to the vast nature preserve where Michael Mushaha and his elephant safari awaited them. Alexander and Nadia were still feeling the impact of their experience in the market. Alexander concluded that the rolled leaves the sorceress was smoking contained a drug, but that did not explain the fact that Nadia and he had had identical visions. Nadia did not try to rationalize what had happened; for her that terrible voyage was a source of information, a way of learning, as one learns from dreams. The images were sharp in her memory; she was sure that at some moment she would have to call upon them.

The plane was piloted by its owner, Angie Ninderera, an adventuresome woman overflowing with contagious energy, who expanded on their flight plan to make a couple of detours and show them the majestic beauty of the landscape. One hour later they landed in an open field a couple of miles from Mushaha's camp.

Kate was disenchanted with the modern facilities of the safari; she had expected something more rustic. Several pleasant and efficient African guides wearing khaki uniforms and carrying walkie-talkies attended the tourists and looked after the elephants. There were several tents, as large as hotel suites, and a pair of light wood constructions that housed the common areas and kitchens. The beds were hung with white mosquito netting, the furniture was bamboo, and zebra and antelope skins served as rugs. The bathhouses had chemical latrines and ingenious warm-water showers. The camp had an electric generator that operated from seven to ten at night; the rest of the time they managed with candles and oil lamps. The food, prepared by two cooks, was so tasty that even Alexander, who on principle rejected any dish whose name he couldn't spell, devoured it. As a whole, the camp was much more elegant than most of the places Kate had stayed during her years as a professional traveler and writer. She decided that such luxuries detracted from the safari;

she would not forget to criticize them in her article.

In order to take advantage of the coolest hours of the day, the wake-up bell rang at 5:45 A.M., though earlier, with the first ray of sun, they had awakened to the unmistakable sound of colonies of bats returning after flying the entire night. The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee was already on the air. The visitors opened their tents and stepped out to stretch their limbs as the incomparable African sun, a magnificent circle of fire that spanned the horizon, began to rise. The landscape shimmered in the dawn light; it seemed that at any moment the earth, enveloped in a rosy mist, would fade and disappear like a mirage.

Soon the camp was boiling with activity. The cooks called the party to the table, and Mushaha issued his first instructions. After breakfast they would meet for a brief lecture about the animals, birds, and vegetation they would be seeing that day. Timothy and Joel readied their cameras and the employees brought the elephants, which were accompanied by a two-year-old calf that trotted happily alongside its mother. Occasionally the baby needed to be retrieved because it had stopped to puff at butterflies or roll in the mud near waterholes and rivers.

From atop the elephants, the panorama was magnificent. The great beasts moved silently, blending into

the landscape. They advanced effortlessly and with massive calm; they also covered many miles in very little time. None of them, other than the calf, had been born in captivity; they were wild animals, and as such unpredictable. Mushaha warned his party that they must follow his directions closely, or he would not be able to guarantee their safety. The only person who tended to violate that rule was Nadia, who from the first day established such a special relationship with the elephants that the director of the safari simply decided to look the other way.

The visitors spent the morning roaming around the preserve. They communicated with gestures, never speaking, so they would not be detected by other animals. Mushaha took the lead, riding the oldest bull of the herd; behind him came Kate and the photographers on females, one of them the mother of the calf; then Alexander, Nadia, and Borobá on Kobi. A pair of safari employees riding young males brought up the rear, carrying provisions: canopies for the siesta, and some of the photographic equipment. They also carried a powerful tranquilizer they could shoot in case they came face-to-face with an aggressive beast.

The pachyderms occasionally stopped to eat leaves from trees where only a few moments before a family of lions had been resting. Other times they passed so

near rhinoceroses that Alexander and Nadia could see themselves reflected in a round eye studying them suspiciously from below. The herds of buffaloes and impalas were not spooked by their passing; they may have picked up the odor of the humans, but the powerful presence of the elephants disoriented them. The party was able to amble among timid zebras, photograph at close range a pack of hyenas quarreling over the corpse of an antelope, and stroke the neck of a giraffe as it licked their hands and gazed at them with princess eyes.

"In a few years," Mushaha lamented, "there will be no wild animals in Africa; you will see animals only in parks and reserves."

At noon they stopped beneath protective trees, lunched from the contents of some baskets, and rested in the shade until four or five in the evening. At the hour of siesta, even wild animals lay down to rest, and the broad plain of the preserve lay motionless beneath the burning rays. Mushaha knew the terrain, and he was expert in calculating time and distance, so just as the enormous disk of the sun began to sink below the horizon, they sighted smoke from their camp. Sometimes at night they went out again to watch the animals that came to the river to drink.