

## SEIZE THE FIRE

By Mary Hoffman

*Appears here with the kind permission of the author.*

TOKE placed his feet as carefully as he could on the forest floor. But, as quiet as each step was on the damp leaves, he knew that his walk was being paced by even softer footfalls. Every now and again he would stop and listen, but all he could hear was the thumping of his own heart and the distant chittering of monkeys and birds.

It was getting dark and soon it would be impossible to see the path without a torch. But it was warm and muggy as only a tropical forest can be. There would be many more hours before the cool of the middle of the night. And then he heard it. One single cough, alarmingly close. He had been right about the silent stalker. The tiger was there.

Toke froze, not daring to lower his foot for the next step. He turned his head slowly towards the direction of the cough. The dying light caught its reflection in two amber eyes in the bushes. A dark shape, brindled with deeper shadows, flowed towards Toke in one easy bound. He felt the hot breath, smelt the tawny tang of big cat and then—

GAME OVER, blinked the message on his goggles. Toke took off his helmet, sighed and stretched. He had never got any further than this with ‘Wild Tiger’ sometimes not so far. Most kids played the game because, if you could get to the end of the forest trail before dark without the tiger detecting your presence, you would get an amazing number of credit points on your card—enough to buy your own virtual reality game. Toke played because he wanted to see a tiger.

See it, not smell it or feel its hot breath just before it devoured you. Creep so cautiously that you could circle round behind it and watch it before it saw you. There were other VR programs, of course, the educational ones, but none of them had wild tigers.

And Toke didn't need those programs, not any more. He knew everything there was to know about tigers and had been in love with the big striped cats ever since he was a very small boy. But he had never seen a real one.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were still tigers all over India and Nepal and Sumatra and Siberia. But by the end of the second millennium there were hardly any left. The rugs and stuffed heads and luxury coats had taken their toll, followed by poachers who sold bones and bits of tiger for medicine and magic.

In 1998 someone had suggested that the problem of tigers in the wild couldn't be solved and that the only way to save tigers was to farm them and kill some of the farmed animals for their body parts. It caused international outrage, but by 2010 it was a fact; the tiger farms began, followed by the elephant and rhino farms.

People were still uneasy about it but the farms were not illegal. At the same time conservation projects took the place of zoos. They were not open to the public but they were devoted to the ideal of looking after large mammals until their natural habitats could be regenerated.

The only zoo Toke had visited was a virtual one, where remaining footage of large mammals was supplemented by computer enhancement and digital tricks. Toke had stroked a tiger in his virtual zoo, but didn't satisfy him. Nothing would do that except coming face to face with a real tiger. And that was hard to do in 2030.

A yowling from outside his sleep unit door roused Toke from his thoughts. He got up and opened the door and in walked his own private tiger, Geronimo, the closest thing to a wild cat Toke knew. He scooped it up in his arms and sat on the bed while the cat rubbed her cheek against his, telling him how much he loved him with her low rumbling purr.

Just then Toke's mum burst in, gesturing excitedly at the wall where his computer screen was. 'There's an e-mail for you, Toke,' she said. 'From the Global Animal Conservation Trust.'

Toke held his breath. He had entered a competition to win a trip to India, to visit the Tiger Project Centre. He had written a long essay about the future importance of regenerating wild habitats, using all his knowledge and love of tigers to add force to his arguments. Toke turned on his screen and read the message without taking it in.

‘Congratulations,’ said Mum, reading over his shoulder. ‘You won! You’ll see your tiger at last.’

Geronimo didn’t like all the rushing round over the next few weeks. Mum had to organize time off from her software firm so that she could go with Toke, and he had to get permission to have a week off school. Bags were packed and unpacked. Just how hot would it be in India?

At last Toke and his mum boarded the hover-shuttle to the airport, leaving Dad with many instructions about feeding and caring for the cat. The supersonic flight took four hours and they stepped out into brilliant sunshine and stifling heat. They were grateful to climb into the air-conditioned shuttle that took them to the Tiger Project Centre.

The buildings, including the guest rooms for visitors, were underground and naturally cool. Toke and his mum had adjoining rooms with a sliding door between them. They had nothing to do that first night except meet their host, Dr Greenstreet, the director of the centre. He was a tall, thin man with glasses and the first person Toke had ever met who knew more about tigers than he did.

As Toke lay in his comfortable bed, he thought, I’m in India; but it was hard to believe. His imagination, fuelled by history video-clips, summoned up a tent, a camp-bed, a mosquito net, and the night sounds of the jungle. But in fact he could hear nothing but the whirr of the controlled temperature and humidity unit.

Next morning Dr Greenstreet took Toke on a tour of the centre, beginning with its substantial research facility. Here scientists worked on stored tiger DNA, artificial insemination, diet, diseases and anything else that could affect captive tigers. When Toke thought he couldn’t take another laboratory, he was led up a spiral staircase out into the natural light. The sunshine made him blink and his heart was beating fast. He was going to see his first tiger.

It was the smell which reached him first. Not just the musky big-cat smell, familiar from countless virtual reality programs, but the smell of the natural outside world, which he rarely met. The sun beat down on the compound and the trees around it were full of brightly coloured birds and rustlings of small mammals.

Dr Greenstreet took Toke down a shady corridor roofed with plaited bamboo.

‘How many tigers are there?’ asked Toke.

‘About thirty adults and half a dozen cubs at any one time. They are all kept very healthy, because of their regulated diet and our vaccination programme. They’re in much better shape than they would be in the wild.’

‘But you will return them to the wild as soon as you can, won’t you?’ asked Toke.

For a moment he thought Dr Greenstreet was going to say no; he seemed to prefer having tigers where he could keep an eye on them. But he quickly smiled and said, ‘Of course. But it will take a long time for regeneration to be complete. So much jungle was cleared for agriculture in the late twentieth century.’

Dr Greenstreet punched a code into a computerized door lock at the end of the corridor.

Another worker behind them had been listening. She smiled at Toke. She was a young woman with short curly red hair and freckles. ‘But it will happen, Peter,’ she said to Dr Greenstreet.

‘Ah, Halley,’ he said, ‘I didn’t see you. Will you take over and show our guest the animals? I really should get back to the lab.’

‘Sure,’ said Halley, taking Toke through the heavy door.

When they were on the other side, she looked at him for a long time before asking, ‘What do you think of the centre so far?’

‘It makes me want to puke!’ said Toke, and then turned bright red, surprised by his own reaction. But he couldn’t stop. ‘OK, the tigers are well looked after, I guess. And they might be extinct in the wild if you didn’t have places like this. But how can you love tigers and be happy to keep them in cages and runs instead of working flat out to get them back into the wild?’

‘You do love tigers, don’t you?’ said Halley softly. She put her hand on Toke’s shoulder. ‘Come and see them before you say any more.’

She led Toke, still trembling from his outburst, down a metal-lined corridor with bolted doors on either side and then back out into the bright sunshine. And there they were.

Pacing up and down in their separate metal-fenced runs, the big cats swung their tails and shook their heads. Their glossy coats shone and their white teeth flashed as

they snarled with every turn. Halley took Toke slowly along the runs, naming all the tigers: Sheba, Solomon, Tariq, Taahra, Yasmin and her cubs, Rafi the two-year-old.

Rafi was a magnificent specimen, a great advertisement for the centre's health claims. As he reached the bars nearest to Toke, he shook his head and made a snuffling noise, a cross between a sneeze and a grunt.

Halley looked quickly both ways to check that there was no-one else in the compound and led Toke to the middle, away from the fences. 'Look,' she said under her breath, 'I shouldn't tell you this, but everything isn't quite what it seems at this centre. I can't talk freely. There are bugs on the gates and CCTV cameras filming everything. Pretend I'm pointing out the security devices to you. Have you been to the computer suite yet?'

'I'm going to get a tour this afternoon,' said Toke, mystified.

'It's a slim chance they'll leave you on your own, but try to find a file called "Investments".'

'What does that mean?' asked Toke. It didn't sound very exciting.

'You'll see,' said Halley grimly. 'Use the password "Farmer". Have you got something you could download the file onto?'

'Yes,' said Toke. 'I've got my pocketbook.'

'Good,' said Halley. 'That'll be very useful to us.'

'Who's "us"?''

'I can't tell you more now, but I'll meet you in the VR room after dinner.'

Just then another worker with a clipboard came out into the compound and pressed a series of buttons which released the calorie-controlled vitamin-enriched tiger food into the animals' feeding areas. Toke went back into the metal corridor and through the security door into the bamboo one.

It was a relief to find his mother waiting for him on the other side. But they were taken to lunch by the director and Toke couldn't tell her everything about his morning. He ate his lunch almost in silence, but his mother was enthusiastic enough for both of them. 'I've been talking to your head of Information Services,' she said. 'I think we could provide you with some software to speed up your data exchange with other centres.'

The computer suite was next to the labs. A white-coated programmer showed Toke around, demonstrating the state-of-the-art hardware and software. All the tiger projects around the world used a high-speed link to communicate to one another and data was shared once it had been collected. But Toke's mother was sure she could cut seconds off the transfer and was deep in discussion with one of the researchers.

'Choose a tiger,' said Toke's programmer; 'one of the ones you saw this morning.'

'Rafi,' said Toke quickly.

R-A-F-I, typed the programmer. 'There we are!'

The tiger's face filled the screen, every stripe and whisker in sharp definition.

'You can access his height and weight at any date in his history, plus his blood type, DNA structure, his diet, his vaccinations, anything you want to know,' said the programmer, 'and so can any of our colleagues at the other centres.'

He let Toke scroll and click his way through all the data. At the bottom was a box he didn't understand—FORECAST. He clicked on it. The screen bore a single date—12 June—tomorrow.

'What does that mean?' asked Toke.

The programmer looked at him anxiously. 'You don't need to worry about that. Why don't you look up our records on cubs?'

Just then something started beeping on the lapel of his white coat. 'Excuse me a moment.' He took out a communicator and engaged in a brief conversation. 'Would you mind if I left you on your own for a few minutes? You seem to have picked up the basics. You can carry on looking things up while I'm away.'

Toke put on his politest smile and said he'd be fine. He couldn't believe his luck. FIND FILE. INVESTMENTS, he typed. CLASSIFIED. TOP SECURITY, read the screen; ENTER PASSWORD. FARMER, typed in Toke and was greeted with the message ACCESS GRANTED. As the screen filled up with data on animals and a list of dates, Toke's blood ran cold. There were columns with entries like 'tailbone', 'ribs' and 'skin', with large sums of money beside them. This wasn't a conservation centre at all. It was a cover-up for a tiger farm!

At the bottom of the list was tomorrow's date and the name RAFI. Toke couldn't believe it. Rafi would be killed tomorrow and his beautiful body cut up and sold for profit. Whose profit? Dr Greenstreet's probably. Toke wondered how many other

workers at the centre knew about it—Halley, obviously, but she clearly wasn't on Greenstreet's side. Perhaps she could do something to save Rafi?

Toke hastily got out his pocketbook and began to transfer the data. He had just finished and changed the open file by the time the programmer returned. 'I hope you don't mind,' he said. 'I copied some data to use when I write up my report for school.'

The programmer looked at the screen: CARNIVORE DIET, FEUD FORMULA. 'That's fine, Toke,' he said.

Halley was waiting for him in the VR room. 'Did you find it?' she whispered.

Toke nodded. 'It's in my pocketbook,' he said. 'Is it safe to talk?'

Put on this helmet and goggles. If we stand at these two consoles, the CCTV cameras won't know we aren't playing and our intelligence says this room isn't bugged.'

'Who's "us"?' Toke asked for the second time and got a full answer.

It was the weirdest experience of his life, standing next to Halley in a VR helmet listening to her soft voice pour out a crazy story of greed and corruption in high places and an underground movement dedicated to sabotage and the liberation of tigers.

Noah's Army, that's what we're called. We've liberated twenty tigers from farms, including this so-called conservation project, in the last eighteen months. We can't save them all, of course, or we'd give ourselves away. It has to look like an accident every time.'

'What happens to them afterwards?' asked Toke.

'Eight were shot,' said Halley. 'It's a risk every time. But some of us work outside the farms. We're trying to re-establish the tigers in the wild and to breed enough to make these obscene farms obsolete.'

'Is there anywhere safe for them to live?' asked Toke.

'Yes, one of the regeneration projects is only a few miles from here and the director is sympathetic to Noah's Army. Her own brother is one of our agents.'

'But isn't what you do very dangerous?'

'Incredibly,' said Halley, and Toke could hear she was grinning. 'We are all crazy, what with the risks of being caught in the farms, and the risks of handling tigers on our own. Of course, the operation here is pretty unusual. We usually liberate tigers from the known farms.'

‘Can’t you tell someone about Greenstreet and stop him?’

‘We were working on that. It was my job to get the data off that “Investments” file, so that we had proof. Thanks to you, we’ve got that now. But the news about Rafi changes everything. There’s no time to get the information to the proper authorities in time to save him. We’ll have to carry out an emergency rescue.’

‘How?’

Halley didn’t answer straight away. Instead she said,

‘Toke, have you wondered why I’m telling you all this?’

Toke felt the hairs on his neck rise as he realized he knew the answer. ‘You want me to help.’

‘One of our key members is sick with a fever. There’s no time to get anyone else infiltrated and there’s no-one I can trust in the centre. It’ll take two of us on the inside and at least three on the outside to spring a tiger. It’s a lot to ask, but will you step in and help me liberate Rafi?’

‘Why me?’ asked Toke.

‘I think you know,’ said Halley. ‘It’s only people who really love tigers who can be part of Noah’s Army.’

It was what Toke wanted to hear but he still couldn’t believe it. His brain was in a whirl but there was no time to think it over. ‘When?’ he whispered.

‘Tonight,’ said Halley. ‘Two o’clock. Here’s what we’ll do.’

Toke’s mother was sure he was coming down with something. ‘You’ve hardly said a word all day and I thought you’d be just buzzing with all those tigers you’ve seen and everything you’ve found out.’ She insisted on giving him a mediscan and was almost disappointed to discover that his temperature and blood pressure were normal.

‘It’s OK, Mum,’ said Toke. ‘I think I’m just tired. You know, it’s been a lot to take in. I think I’ll get an early night.’

That is a line which always works with mums. She yawned in sympathy. ‘Good idea. I think I’ll do the same. Being on holiday is so tiring.’

Toke smiled. Mum put in sixteen-hour days at home running her own software business, and she was entitled to a holiday. But instead of sightseeing, she had spent the



whole day talking computers with the staff at the centre; she was exhausted: convenient for Toke's first mission with Noah's Army.

At first he thought he'd never do more than doze. But the computer beeped him into wakefulness from a deep sleep. It was one thirty in the morning. He slipped on his shoes and quietly opened his door. The corridor was empty, but shone with a dim green light. Toke found his way to the spiral staircase and crept up and out into the cold night air.

He shivered as he walked down the bamboo corridor, wishing he was wearing something warmer than T-shirt and shorts. When he punched in the code Halley had given him, each beep sounded eerily loud. He slipped through the metal door and froze as a hand grabbed his arm. 'Halley?' he hissed. 'You nearly gave me a heart attack!'

'Sorry,' whispered Halley. 'You got here earlier than I thought you would. The perimeter guards are just passing.'

They waited about three minutes, then slipped out into the compound. The moonlight shone on several tigers, turning their gold bars to silver.

'The farmed tigers are often restless the night before a cull,' whispered Halley. 'We think they sense it.'

'You've done this yourself before?' asked Toke.

'Once or twice,' grinned Halley. 'I've been an inside agent on two farms but this is the first tiger I've liberated from this centre. And I had to get the team together so fast I'm not sure if I've covered all my tracks. So I'm out of here as soon as Rafi is safe.'

Rafi was awake. He lifted his head at their approach and sniffed the air. Then he came up to the bars of his run and made the snuffle of greeting.

'Don't worry, Rafi,' Toke told him. 'We're going to get you out.'

'Remember what I told you, Toke,' warned Halley. 'He's still a big dangerous meat-eater, not a pussycat. Never stop being afraid, or you could make a serious mistake.'

Toke heard a low whistle from the outer fence and knew that there were other members of Noah's Army out there. It made him feel braver than he really was. But there was no disguising that this was the most dangerous thing he had ever done. And, unlike the others, he was only a kid.

The next few moments were crucial. Halley had organized a 'power failure', which would immobilize the cameras, microphones and alarm system for about ten minutes.

She was going to open Rafi's door and the gate in the perimeter fence. She knew the combinations, of course, but had to make it look as if it were linked to the fluctuation in the power supply. The outside team was going to accept Rafi as soon as he was out. But getting the tiger out was a two-person job, which was where Toke came in.

'Ready?' asked Halley.

Toke nodded.

She punched the combination into the lock on Rafi's cage and released the door, then held it in place. Rafi was just on the other side.

'Quick, hold the door while I release the gate,' said Halley.

Toke put his weight against the door, wedging it almost but not quite shut. He looked into Rafi's eyes while Halley dealt with the outer gate. Then they swapped places, with Toke holding the outside gate, while Halley prepared to release the tiger.

She nodded to Toke in the moonlight. He whistled softly twice to the waiting team, to signal that the time had come. Then he opened the gate outwards into the jungle. A split second later Halley opened Rafi's door and called him out.

The tiger moved cautiously out of his run. The outside team had brought meat with them to lure him towards the gate and he caught the aroma. Slowly he paced across the compound to the outer fence, ignoring Halley, who had closed in behind him to block his retreat.

Toke held his breath. The huge head lifted and Rafi looked him in the eyes once more. Then the sinuous black and gold body slipped past him and out of the gate, so close that the tiger's fur brushed his bare legs. Rafi had escaped.

But in that moment of triumph, Toke's exultation turned to terror as he heard the sound of people in the metal corridor.

Halley froze for a second, then did the unthinkable. She thrust Toke out into the night. 'Hide!' she hissed.

There was no time for further explanation. Toke hid.

From behind the bushes outside the compound he could hear voices—several male voices—raised in anger, then Halley's, calm and explanatory. Suddenly an ear-piercing alarm went off and bright searchlights flashed on all along the perimeter fence. Toke had to move fast. Guards were rushing to the gate from both inside and outside the fence. Toke turned and ran.

He ran until he had a stitch, then stopped, doubled up, to get his breath back. The shouts from the centre had faded and he was deep in the heart of the jungle. He had no idea where he was. And then suddenly he recognized it.

He was on a path just like the one in 'Wild Tiger'. He inched his way soundlessly along, sure that another, softer footfall was matching him pace for pace. Was it Rafi? Halley had told him that another tiger liberated from this centre, Rukhshana, was living in the regenerated habitat nearby. They hoped that Rafi would mate with her and that she would bring two or three cubs to adulthood in the wild. Suppose Rukhshana had wandered close to the centre? If his silent companion was the tigress, she wouldn't know him. Did a love of tigers show in the dark? Toke wondered.

Then he heard a tiger cough. Oh God, I know how the next bit goes, thought Toke, expecting the rush of air, the hot stinking breath and then extinction. Only this time it would be for real.

But it wasn't 'Wild Tiger'. The tiger came towards him down the path and, after a few seconds of sheer terror, Toke saw that it was Rafi and that he had a large piece of raw meat in his jaws. Behind him came three people in camouflage fatigues, two men and a woman.

The people stopped in their tracks but Rafi came on. As he approached Toke, he paused and gave his snuffling grunt, muffled by the meat. Toke grunted back and the members of Noah's Army relaxed. 'You must be Toke,' said one of the men. 'What happened back there? Is Halley OK?'

'I don't know,' said Toke. 'Some people came into the tiger compound and she shoved me out of the gate. I heard them talking to her but then all hell broke loose and I just ran.'

There was a quick consultation, then the man said, 'I'll take you back and get you into the centre. Then I'll see if I can get Halley out. The others can look after Rafi till we rejoin them.'

They crept back through the jungle, Ketu, as he was called, leading Toke round to the other side of the centre. There were no guards at the front; all their attention was directed to where animals might get out, not people in. Ketu knew the security overrides and soon opened the door to the sleeping quarters.

‘Go carefully, Toke,’ he whispered. ‘And well done. You’ve made a great start in the Army, releasing your first tiger. You’re our youngest member ever. We’ll be in touch.’

‘See you,’ said Toke. He stood for a while in the corridor, adjusting his eyes to the green light. He was bracing himself to get back into his room, hoping that the alarms hadn’t wakened his mother. Bracing himself too, for whatever had happened to Halley.

But whatever happened, he was now a member of Noah’s Army. He had released his first tiger. And of one thing he was sure: it was not going to be the last.