For Mohan, Zubin, Coco, Sunnie, Clara and Annie.
May every one of your most beautiful dreams come true – N. G.

For Thaara – C. P.

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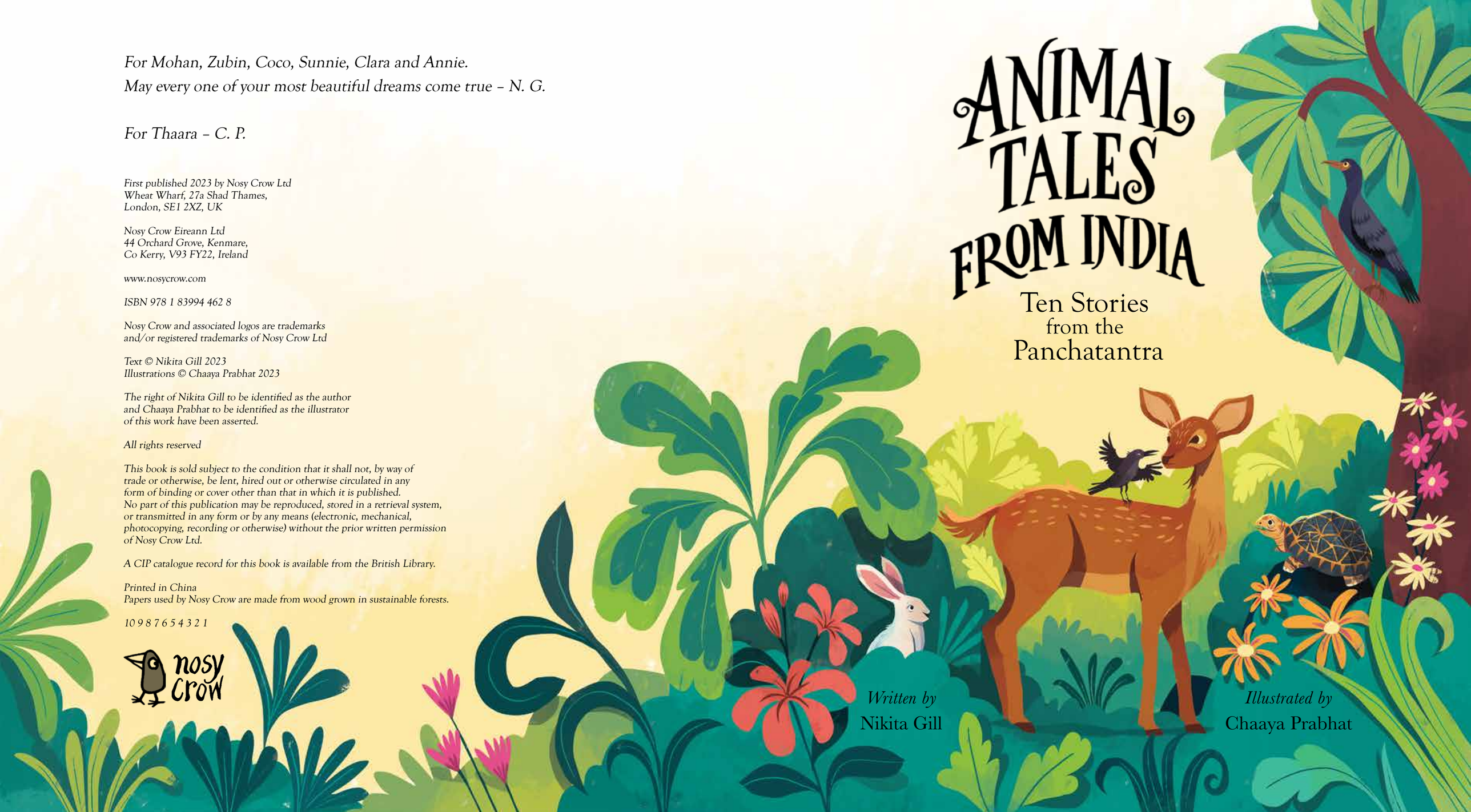
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ANIMAL TALES FROM INDIA

Ten Stories from the Panchatantra



Written by
Nikita Gill

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Introduction

Once upon a time, when I was small, about the size that you are now, my grandmother told me a story. It was a story about the world before there were many people in it, when golden lions prowled through big green jungles and great grey elephants splashed in the lakes, when the blue, blue oceans brimmed with quicksilver fish and massive whales. Back then, the whole world was fresh and new.

That first story has always been my favourite, but every tale my grandmother told me was as precious as the moon itself. There were stories about elephants and mice becoming friends, cunning crocodiles and clever monkeys, talkative tortoises and lapwing birds . . . stories that were as old and wise as the sun and all its warmth.

One night long ago, I asked my grandmother where her stories came from, and she told me that she had got them from her mother. And her mother had got them from her grandmother. And so it goes, like a river flowing back all the way through time.

And because these stories are important, they need to be given to someone strong and kind. Which is why I am now giving these tales to you.

Nikita Gill



THE BLUE JACKAL

There are so many stories to tell you, but where shall we begin? I know, let's start with the story of the Blue Jackal. Now, long ago in a land far away, there was a wild and beautiful jungle full of every kind of creature you could possibly dream of, like huge grey elephants, striped tigers and sapphire peacocks. And in this jungle there lived a family of jackals with short amber fur and sharp yellow eyes. Uncles and aunts, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters and cousins all played and ate and hunted together. On nights of the full moon, the whole family would howl at the sky in harmony, like this, "AROOOOO!"

One jackal always howled longer and louder than the rest – the smallest of the jackals, Fierce Yowl. He would often wander far away from his family, returning only at night. His favourite sister, Clever Snout, would be waiting for him. "The jungle is your home," she would say. "You shouldn't wander so far away from your family."

But Fierce Yowl just laughed. "You stay at home if you want to, sister," he would respond playfully. "I have more interesting places to be."

One day, Fierce Yowl was following the trail of a rabbit, his nose to the ground. He was concentrating so hard on the trail of the rabbit that he did not realise he had wandered all the way out of the jungle. He did not see he was on a road built by people. He did not even notice when he entered the village that his sister had always told him to stay away from. Until he heard a growl . . .

"What are you doing here, little jackal? You are not welcome in our village."

Fierce Yowl looked up in fright to see a large pack of dogs. He was surrounded! The little jackal looked desperately around him . . . then he saw it – a gap between two of the smaller dogs. Fierce Yowl dashed through, and ran off down the dusty street.

Faster and faster Fierce Yowl ran, with the dogs chasing after him, snapping at his heels and barking loudly. Through the village they went until Fierce Yowl saw a huge bucket of water standing outside a workshop. It was big enough to hide six jackals! He jumped straight in – holding his breath as he ducked under the water.



Slowly, as the barking faded away, he poked his head out to take a deep breath of air, before quickly jumping out of the bucket.

But what the jackal did not know was that the workshop belonged to an artist and that the bucket had been filled not with water but with indigo dye. As night fell, Fierce Yowl crept back to the jungle like a dark blue ghost moving through the leaves in the moonlight.

The tigers were the first to see him. They roared in fright and dashed away, terrified that for once they were the prey. The elephants did not act much better. He caused them to stampede, and the jungle was loud with thumps and roars and shouts from all the animals that night.



How strange! thought Fierce Yowl, but he was too thirsty to think very much about it and he trotted off to the lake, which was the favourite drinking spot for all the animals.

But as the first rays of dawn broke and he looked back into the water, he was startled to see a bright blue jackal looking back at him. Gone was his amber fur; his golden eyes now gleamed like two suns in an indigo sky. He was magnificent! And as he looked at his reflection, slowly an idea began to form in his head.

As all the other animals returned to the lake to drink water that morning, Fierce Yowl stood high on a cliff above them.

"My dear friends," said Fierce Yowl grandly, "you have nothing to fear. You see, the gods saw you had no king, so they sent me here to rule this jungle. I will keep you safe if you promise to serve and be loyal to me."

The tigers, monkeys, elephants, jackals and birds had never seen anything like the blue creature with his golden eyes.

"A king!" they gasped as they all bowed low.

The only one who did not was Clever Snout. She just laughed. "Don't you see? That's just—"

"Silence!" commanded Fierce Yowl. "Jackals, if you refuse to accept me as your king, you will be banished from this jungle forever!"

Before the jackals could protest, Fierce Yowl ordered the tigers to chase them out of the jungle. His secret was safe – for now . . .

Fierce Yowl wasted no time in giving each of the other animals a job to do. The lions and tigers would get fresh meat for him every day, the leopards were his personal bodyguards, and he would climb the elephants' backs as they took him from place to place in his jungle.

For a while, everything went very well for Fierce Yowl, who enjoyed the attention and glory of his new life. And if sometimes he wondered about his family, banished to the edge of the jungle, he quickly pushed the thought away. He was a king now!

But one night, when the moon was full and the jungle so quiet you couldn't even hear an owl hoot, there was a sound . . . It echoed through the trees to where Fierce Yowl lay sleeping in his royal bed. "AROOOOO!" It was his jackal family all howling at the moon.

Fierce Yowl woke with a start and before he could even think he returned the call, even longer and louder than the rest. "AROOOOO!"



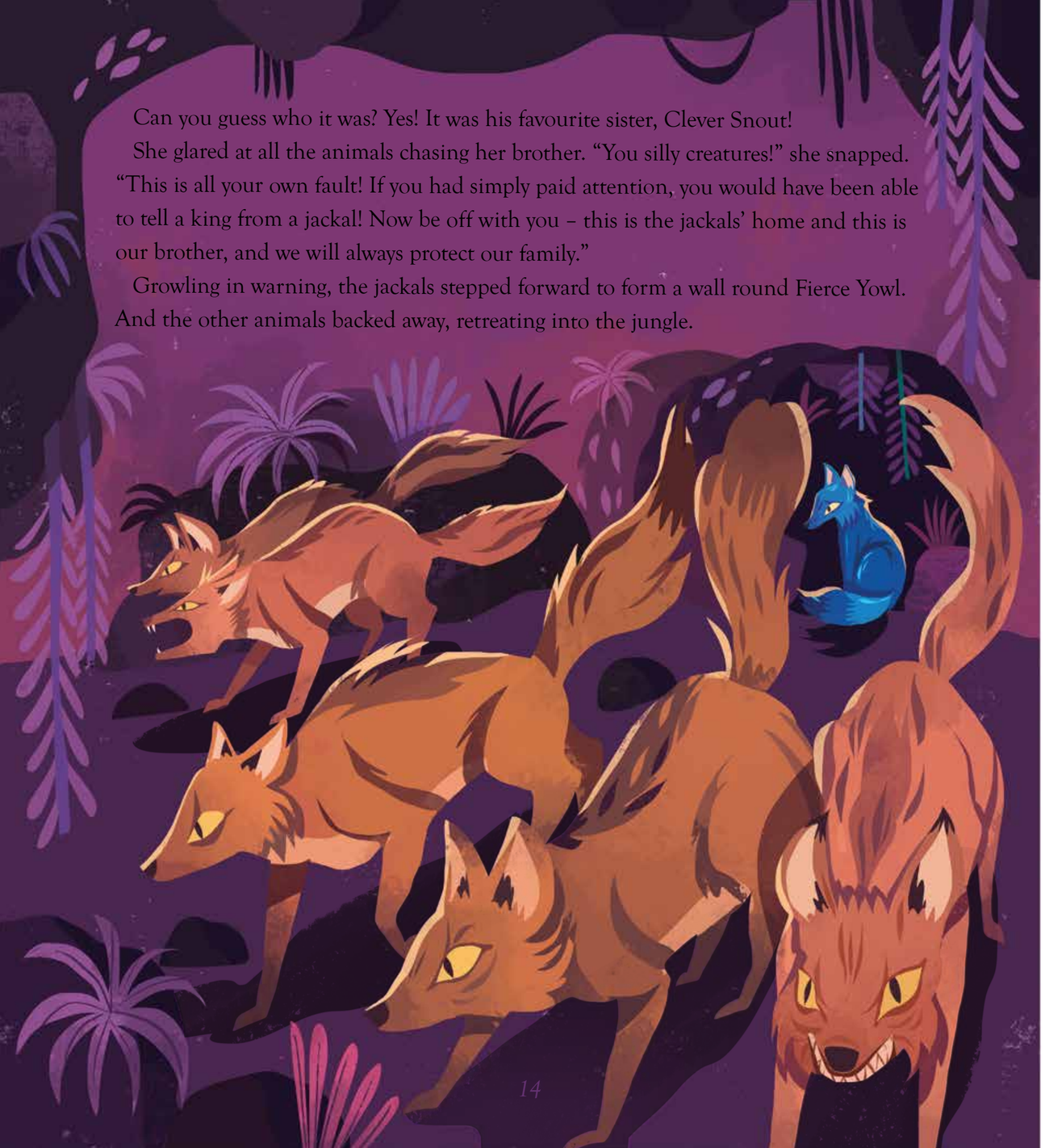
The other animals all heard Fierce Yowl's loud howl. The leader of the monkeys shouted, "This is not a king from the heavens! This is just a sneaky jackal trying to be clever!"

The furious animals chased Fierce Yowl out of his royal home. Faster and faster he ran, with the animals chasing after him, snapping at his heels, until he collapsed, exhausted, outside a cave at the edge of the jungle. Raising his head, Fierce Yowl saw a pair of familiar paws . . .

Can you guess who it was? Yes! It was his favourite sister, Clever Snout!

She glared at all the animals chasing her brother. "You silly creatures!" she snapped. "This is all your own fault! If you had simply paid attention, you would have been able to tell a king from a jackal! Now be off with you – this is the jackals' home and this is our brother, and we will always protect our family."

Growling in warning, the jackals stepped forward to form a wall round Fierce Yowl. And the other animals backed away, retreating into the jungle.



I bet Clever Snout had a few words with her brother about loyalty and family, don't you? No good comes from telling lies and that cheeky jackal certainly learned an important lesson – your family will always protect you and there is no place like home!

