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Opening extract from

The Elephant Road

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He walked past it and touched the chrome and blue metallic paintwork with one finger. What would it be like to own such a machine and to be able to go wherever you wanted? The thought of it made Wilen's heart race.

Denngu was his mother's youngest brother. He was as handsome as a movie star, and had a leather jacket and a mobile phone. Wilen hoped that, somehow, he would be like that when he was grown up. Denngu came from town to help out in the fields at busy times, but he never stayed long. He always had something more important to do somewhere else, but when anyone asked him what that was, he'd smile and say, "Business, business." Nobody knew exactly what Denngu did, or quite how he made so much money, but they liked him anyway.

Denngu stood with the other grown-ups, chatting. He smiled at Wilen and said hello when he put down the basket of food. With Denngu there, everyone was in a good mood, so no one asked why their breakfast was late. Wilen didn't want anyone

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to know that he had wandered off the path when he should have been concentrating. He hoped they wouldn't notice that the food was rather jumbled up in the bottom of the basket and scuttled off before anyone could find out. Denngu was busy with the grown-ups anyway.

A little way away from where everyone else brewed tea over the fire and chatted over breakfast, Wilen's grandpa was sitting on a tree stump. Denngu was Grandpa's youngest son, and they didn't get on. Grandpa was the only person who didn't think it was funny when Denngu said, "Business, business", in reply to questions about what he did for a living. But Grandpa always had time for Wilen, and never minded his clumsiness or his misbehaving voice. He beckoned to Wilen to join him.

"So, Nantong, come and sit by me." Grandpa was always inventing some kind of nickname for him. Skinny or Dreamy were the usual ones. Wilen didn't mind. He knew Grandpa was just being friendly.

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Grandpa was very old indeed and as wrinkly as an elephant. He wasn't really strong enough to help with work in the fields any more, although he liked to watch over it and offer his opinions on how it should be done. But with the help of his stick, he could walk up and down the hill paths all day.

"What's the matter with you this morning?" Grandpa asked. "Did you fall over on the path?"

Wilen shook his head.

"What, then? You have sticks in your hair and muddy knees. Something must have happened!"

Grandpa always managed to ask a question that *made* Wilen say something, even if all he managed was a squeak, a growl or a whisper.

"Elephants," whispered Wilen.

"I know," said Grandpa. "There were elephants in the village last night, weren't there? But they'll have gone over the river by now!"

Wilen shook his head.

"No?" Grandpa raised his eyebrows. "You don't think so?"

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"Elephants. Here," breathed Wilen.

"You saw elephants in the forest this morning?"

Wilen nodded and pointed back up the hill. In finding his way back to the path, he'd worked out just where he'd seen the elephants. And it was nowhere near the route they usually took down the valley to reach the river crossing.

"How many did you see?"

Wilen held up three fingers.

"Hmm," said Grandpa. "That's very interesting."

Wilen could tell that Grandpa didn't quite believe him. He felt a spear of anger leap up inside him like a sudden flame. Nobody took any notice of him any more! Sometimes, he felt like a ghost in his own life. Wilen left Grandpa sitting on his tree stump, picked up the empty basket and stomped back up the hill without bothering to say goodbye.

Halfway back along the path, Wilen put the basket down and headed off between the trees. He was determined to prove to Grandpa that he *had* seen those elephants. He wanted to prove it

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to himself too. The truth was that he doubted his wandering-cloud brain as much as everyone else seemed to.

He climbed around the roots of the big trees, concentrating hard on retracing his steps and on not getting lost, even for a second. If Grandpa were with him, it would be easy. Grandpa knew every bit of the forest around the village. He could name every plant and tree and could tell you a use for all of them. "This is good for flavouring fish," he'd say about some leaf or other, "and for curing fevers. And this is good for coughs."

Wilen couldn't remember which plant was which. He was much better at remembering the stories Grandpa told about the forest, and what lay beneath it.

"There are seven layers beneath the forest," Grandpa told Wilen. "Seven layers that you must travel through before you reach the underworld, where Sankani the giant snake lives."

Most of all, Wilen liked the stories about the

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ancestors who had come to the forest from the high, high mountains.

"Our people were headhunters back then," Grandpa would say with a wicked smile. "They used to put the heads of slaughtered enemies in the branches of the biggest trees."

The story of their headhunting ancestors was one of Grandpa's favourites. Wilen wondered if any of those old heads were still up in the trees somewhere, and what it might feel like to find one.

In spite of his good intentions, Wilen found that his mind had wandered again. For a moment, he wasn't sure where he was and then he saw the tree with the yellow seed pods. *That* was where the elephants had been! Slowly, looking hard and listening at every step, Wilen walked around the tree. Leaves and bark had been pulled down all around the spot and there – in a pool of sunlight on the forest floor – were big, round dollops of poo. Elephant dung. He touched one with his fingers. It was still warm. The elephants *had* been real, but

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perhaps now they had headed down the valley to cross the river, like they usually did.

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Chapter Four

For supper, Mother had cooked a meal of little fish from the river and pumpkin for the whole family, because Denngu had decided to stay the night before going back to town. Everybody crammed round Mother's dining table. Her sister, Aunty Em, was there, and her husband, who everyone always called Dax, their children, Wilen's almost grown-up boy cousins Toka and Tika and twin girls Salmi and Saljak, who were Relip's age. Mother's older brother Rengu, whose wife had been

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dead for years, was there too, and so were Mother, Father, Grandpa and Grandpa's very ancient sister-in-law who they all called Auntymama; plus Denngu and Relip and himself. Finally, there was little Nono, who was passed around the table to be cuddled and cooed over until she'd done what she was so very good at doing, which was fall asleep.

Denngu was sandwiched between Dax, who was always jolly and friendly, and Relip, who never ever stopped talking even though no one paid the slightest attention to what he said. Wilen loved it. It was almost like Christmas all over again, except that his two oldest brothers Kelip and Ruhap were back at college. Everybody talked and laughed all at once and Auntymama kept asking Grandpa what was being said because she was as deaf as a tree. Wilen forgot all about his cloud brain, his wandering voice and feeling like a ghost.

Afterwards, Mother, Aunty Em and Auntymama sat in the kitchen gossiping, whilst all the men took their chairs outside and sat talking around a wood

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fire. Relip fell asleep on Toka's lap and was carried off to bed. Wilen sat at Grandpa's feet and felt himself getting sleepy too as the conversation wandered to and fro with the wind blown smoke.

"We did well with the jhum plot today!" said Dax.

"Hmm," Grandpa snorted. "You should have left it fallow for longer. Fifteen years, we used to leave jhum fields to rest, when I came to Umiamara. Now it's only five."

"I know, I know," sighed Wilen's father. "But we have to feed everyone. We can't leave fields unused all that time."

"And crop yields fall every year," said Rengu. "Soon we'll have to cut down more of the forest to grow food."

There was a moment's pause and Denngu sat forward in his chair, his eyes shining in the firelight. "Why not clear some forest and make *real* money?" he said. "There's coal under all these hills. We could start mining and make a fortune. Enough money for proper Tarmac roads that you can drive

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cars on. Brick houses. Mains electricity. *Think* of it!"

There was a sharp edge to Denngu's voice and it seemed to cut away all the warmth and comfort of the fire. It was as if the air had suddenly grown colder. Wilen shivered and sat up, wide awake.

Grandpa drew himself up extra straight in his chair. "Brick houses and Tarmac roads in exchange for our forest!" he said. "That's your answer, is it? The forest gives us *everything*. It gives us rivers to drink from, rain for our crops, food, wood for our homes. Without the forest, who would we be?"

Everyone grew very still. Even the fire stopped crackling, as Grandpa and his youngest son squared up to each other like two cockerels in the yard, about to tear each other's feathers out.

"Ourselves, but richer," Denngu answered fiercely. "Not struggling any more."

"*Richer!* Ha!" Grandpa barked. "Is *that* what you think? Our hills stripped of their trees, our rivers dead and black with coal dust and chemicals. Our fields dried up and ravaged by all the wild elephants

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whose homes we'd taken." Grandpa stood up and so did Denngu.

"This is the modern world, Father," Denngu growled. "Forests don't pay and elephants belong in zoos."

They glared at each other over the flames for a moment then walked away in opposite directions into the darkness. Everyone drifted off to bed soon after that and talked in private. The sound of his parents having a long, intense conversation in whispers came through the wall but Wilen couldn't hear what they were saying. For a little while, Nono wailed and then, at last, everything went quiet.

Wilen lay awake, watching the bright moonlight slice through the walls like thin blades of silvery grass. Relip murmured in his dreams and pulled all of the blanket onto his side of the bed.

Now, Wilen was too cold to sleep. Silently, he pulled his shorts and sweatshirt on and slipped out into the night.

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