



Our Encounter with a Snow Leopard

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Level 4





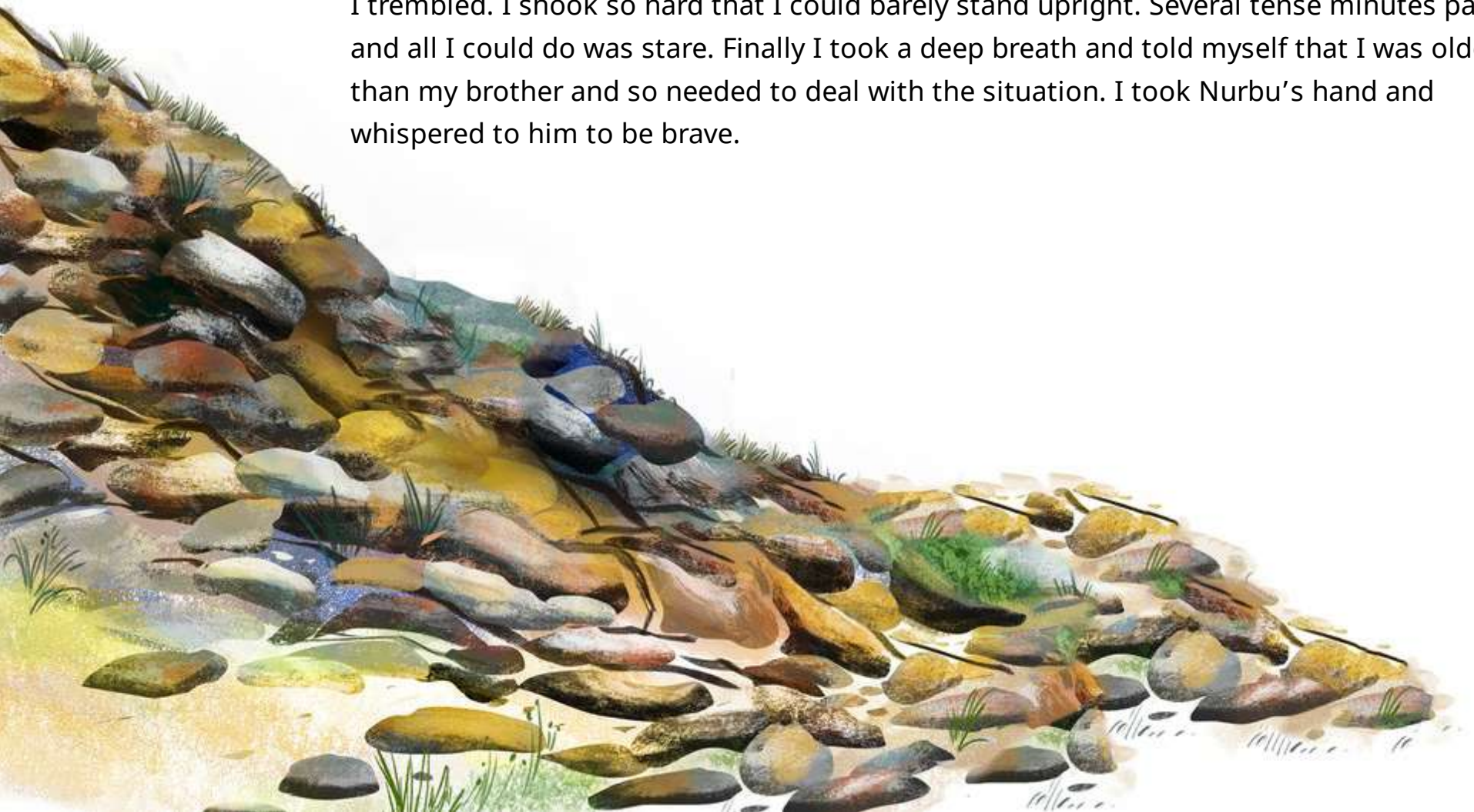
I grew up in Kumdok, a small village of 17 homes in the interior of Ladakh, a place of mountains and blue skies. When I was young, all of the families in my village reared livestock. Each family had goats, sheep, yak and cows. All of us, even children, herded the animals. We had to make sure we were with them as they grazed in the pastures around our village. I still remember that time when I first went to herd livestock for the village. It was the most thrilling and terrifying day of my life!

Since my parents were busy with other chores, they asked me and my eight-year-old brother Nurbu to go with the herd. I was six years older than my brother. We spent the day minding the animals, having tea and sattu (flour made from roasted barley), and chit-chatting constantly. We had nearly 50 animals in our charge. The day passed smoothly, and we were feeling confident. This seemed easy, I thought.



Just as we were climbing down the mountain with the herd of animals, Nurbu let out a shriek and pointed towards a huge, furry, grey animal that had caught a goat by her neck. Both of us froze. We did not know how to react. The creature we saw in front of us was a large-sized cat. Its paws were enormous, and we could see it flexing its muscles as it held the struggling goat in its jaws. It was a snow leopard, the phantom of the mountains, the most dangerous creature in Ladakh.

I trembled. I shook so hard that I could barely stand upright. Several tense minutes passed and all I could do was stare. Finally I took a deep breath and told myself that I was older than my brother and so needed to deal with the situation. I took Nurbu's hand and whispered to him to be brave.





Both of us inched towards the snow leopard. Our parents had taught us what to do in case we face a wild animal. The first thing we did was scream loudly. Animals get startled by noise. To protect ourselves, Nurbu and I picked loose stones from the ground and hurled them in its direction to scare it away. I took a stick and started beating the ground hard, making a ruckus.

Startled by the noise, the snow leopard dropped the goat and growled at us menacingly. Both of us together made so much noise that it made it impossible for the snow leopard to eat the goat in peace! So it moved away and climbed up into the mountains to look down at us.

Seeing our chance, we ran towards the goat to check if she was still alive. She was not. We were worried. We did not want to tell anyone in the village that there was a snow leopard in our valley. It was our first day as herders and we did not want to be held responsible for a missing goat!



"I hope it was not lactating," I said. Nurbu nodded. We did not want anyone to find out that the goat was missing. If it was a female goat, the owner might notice. If not, then we would have little to worry about as the owner would most likely not notice the missing goat. I tried to milk the goat and was relieved to find that she was not lactating. Small mercies.



Fact: When a female goat has babies, she has milk in her udders. If it is a mother goat who has a little lamb dependent on her, the owner would know the goat was missing as the baby would bleat for milk!



Together, Nurbu and I wanted to carry the carcass back to the village with us. But we were both small and did not have the strength to carry an animal that weighed between 20 and 30kg. We contemplated hiding the carcass but noticed that the snow leopard was observing our moves and would, therefore, discover the hiding place.

For two hours, we stood with the carcass, worrying. Suddenly Nurbu looked around. "Achey, our herd!" he cried. In our worry about the goat, we did not realize that we had been ignoring all the other animals in the herd. They were nowhere to be seen! I felt a pit form in my stomach.

I looked at my brother and told him not to tell our parents or the villagers what had happened. We were both afraid that we would be punished as it was in front of us that the snow leopard had killed one of our village goats. We thus decided to keep it a secret.

We placed the carcass exactly where it had been killed and quickly climbed down the mountains to track the rest of the herd. We found them huddled together about 3 kilometers downhill. They were not able to move because they were too afraid of the snow leopard. We eventually coaxed them into action by hurling some sand in their direction and making loud noises with our sticks.





On our way home, we met a few villagers who had been looking for us. They had come to help with herding. They asked us if we had encountered a wolf or snow leopard that day. My brother and I shook our heads and glanced at each other.

We reached home late in the evening and my mother gave us some tea and roti. Although we were bursting with emotions we decided that it would be safer to pretend that things had gone smoothly.



While we were having tea, mother said that she had been thinking about us all day. She had been worried. We did not tell her what had happened. How do you tell your mother that you had faced a snow leopard? We did not want our mother to worry. We smiled and bravely told her everything was okay.

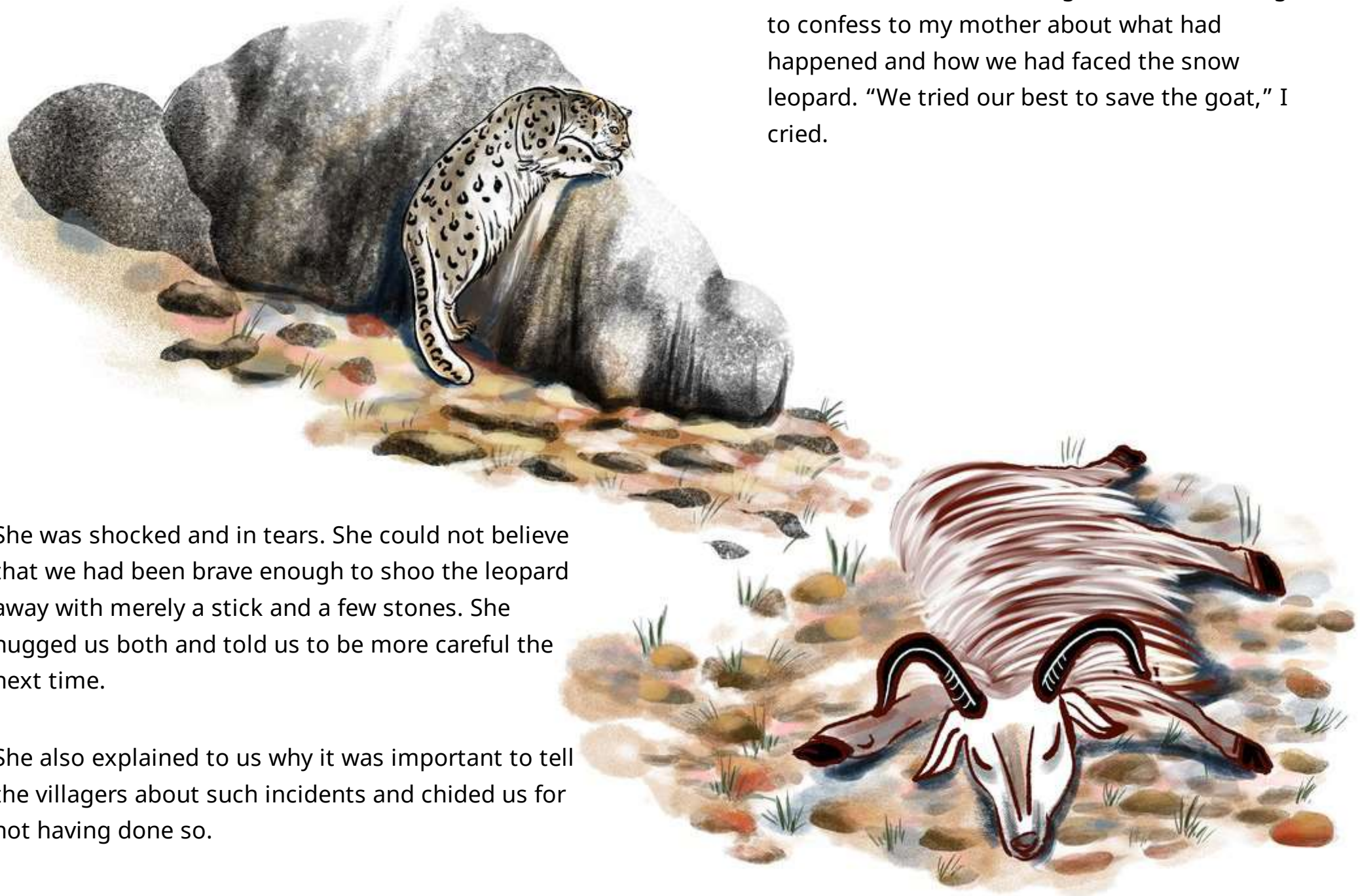
Somewhere we knew what we were doing was wrong. Traditionally, each herder is supposed to alert other herders if there is a carnivore in the valley, threatening the herd. This way, the herders going the next day are better prepared and can be accompanied by four instead of two shepherds to protect the animals and themselves. Instead, we had decided to keep the news secret, to ourselves. We were ridden with guilt!

Next day, I noticed that since we had not alerted the villagers about the snow leopard, only one male shepherd went into the pasture. We worried ourselves sick about what would happen. Would our friend be in danger? By deciding not to tell anyone, had we put his or the goats' lives in danger?

For a whole day we waited, standing at the entrance of the village, our eyes glued to the mountains. By the evening, our friend returned. Thankfully, no animal was harmed.



After about two months, I gathered the courage to confess to my mother about what had happened and how we had faced the snow leopard. "We tried our best to save the goat," I cried.



She was shocked and in tears. She could not believe that we had been brave enough to shoo the leopard away with merely a stick and a few stones. She hugged us both and told us to be more careful the next time.

She also explained to us why it was important to tell the villagers about such incidents and chided us for not having done so.

It was only much later when I began to work in conservation that I realized that the ideal thing to do when a snow leopard kills an animal is to let the carcass lie undisturbed so that it can feed on it. This makes sure that the snow leopard doesn't kill more animals the next day. My brother and I had done so, but only because we had not been able to carry the carcass back with us.

Nowadays, thanks to conservation efforts, people leave the carcass untouched, allowing the leopard to eat. This had worked out for the leopard, the villagers and for us!



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Our Encounter with a Snow Leopard

(English)

What happens when a girl encounters a snow leopard? On a summer day in a valley in Ladakh, Lobzang Le and her brother have taken their parents' livestock for grazing. They freeze with fear when they face a snow leopard, eyeing their goats. Read this amazing true story about coming face to face with the elusive big cat of Ladakh and how the children deal with it.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



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