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Opening extract from

Stories for a Fragile Planet

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Maha and the Elephant

A tsunami is a giant wave. It has a Japanese name because in the past terrible mighty waves have hit the Japanese islands and destroyed everything in their path. This story is about a tsunami, but it comes from Thailand. What happened is true, but the story is told through the eyes of someone imagined.

Maha had gone to Thailand because of the great beauty of the sea there. There are many shades of green in that water, and they shimmer like painted jewels. Out in the deep waters of the sea are wonderful, strange islands. They are like green pillars, rising on tall stilts of rock, but covered with trees on top. The water laps beaches that curve for miles and miles – beaches made of the finest white sand.

Sometimes Maha swam here all day, for the water was beautifully warm and clear. But on other days, he preferred to hire an elephant and ride

up the jungle paths into the cool of the forest. The elephant's great grey feet made almost no sound at all on the paths, so the birds and butterflies weren't frightened away. Maha believed that by the end of every day he had got to know his elephant. He was certain that they were wise creatures and that each one listened and watched and understood.

On this day, the day of the story, Maha was with a group of other travellers on the beach. They were swimming and laughing, talking about everything they had done and seen in the last few days. That evening they were going to make a fire on the beach and bring their guitars to sing together, for all of them loved music.

Maha turned and saw the elephants at the top of the beach, standing chained beside their owners as usual. He recognized the one that had taken him into the jungle two days before. But why were they making such a noise? They were trumpeting and stamping, waving their trunks wildly from side to side. The mahouts, the men who looked after them, were trying to calm them but they weren't succeeding.

On the other side of the beach there was another group of elephants, and it was just the same with them. It was as though they were trying to say something, Maha thought. It was as though they knew something the humans didn't. But what could it be?

The friends on the beach decided to investigate. They got out of the water and went towards the nearest group of elephants. As they got closer to them, the elephants became even more frantic. The young elephant that had



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taken Maha into the jungle recognized him and reared up, trumpeting.

The chain that held the elephant's foot broke.

"I think they're warning us!" Maha shouted to the mahouts. "I think they want to tell us something and try to help us!"

A mahout nodded and began releasing the elephants from their chains. He helped Maha up onto the young elephant's back, and at once it began chasing away from the beach towards the jungle and the hillside. All of Maha's friends and the mahouts did the same, and all of the other elephants followed Maha's elephant as fast as they could, up and up into the jungle. They didn't trumpet any more; they made no noise at all. They climbed the path to a level piece of ground and there they stopped.

Maha looked out over the sea. What was that strange line in the water? It was rising and coming closer and closer. The others were watching too,

but no one said a word. It was a giant wave, a tsunami. The elephants had known the wave was coming; they had sensed it long before it could be seen.

The wave grew into a great tower of water. It spilled onto the beach and snapped the trees. It crashed up and on in a terrible roaring, higher and higher until it was just a little way from the elephants. The beautiful jewelled birds scattered in terror; every living thing fled for its life.

Maha reached out to touch the face of the elephant that had recognized him and saved his life. He leaned forwards to put his head gently against that wise, great head. There were no words he could find for his gratitude. The elephants had saved them from the tsunami.