PART ONE

THE OTHERS

The people to fear are not the Strong,
but the Weak. It's the Weak who'll buckle
when you're least expecting it, the Weak
who'll betray you without warning, the Weak
who will stop at nothing to save themselves.

MARK SACKS, PHILOSOPHER



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BASED ON A TRUE STORY

NEW DELHI TIMES, 21 OCTOBER, 2007

WILD MONKEY ATTACK KILLS MAN

Delhi's citizens are becoming increasingly alarmed by the hordes of wild street monkeys who roam public buildings, temples and street markets, assaulting and stealing at will.

In a sinister development, the Deputy Mayor of Delhi, S. S. Bajwa, died this morning after being attacked by a gang of Rhesus Macaques.

According to eye witnesses, Bajwa was reading a newspaper on the terrace of his house when he was surrounded by the Rhesus monkeys. As he struggled to fight them off, Bajwa fell from the balcony, sustaining multiple injuries.

Despite being rushed to hospital, the Deputy Mayor died this morning from severe internal bleeding.

City authorities are now coming under renewed pressure to find a solution to the monkey scourge, but are unable to take direct action because devout Hindus believe that all monkeys are manifestations of the Monkey-God, Hanuman.

In recent months the authorities have tried using Langurs, a larger and fiercer breed of monkey, to scare away the Rhesus, but the attacks show no signs of abating.

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1

SURVIVE

They struck at noon.

Monkeys shrieked in confusion as Langur fighters sprung down from the Cemetery walls, howling in an attacking frenzy. As they stormed through the tombs, fear and panic flashed everywhere. And with the screams came the smell of blood.

It was so terrifyingly fast Papina barely had time to think.

One moment she was relaxing in the sun-dappled tranquillity, the next her mother was scooping her up and leaping into the banyan trees, abandoning everything in a frantic scramble for survival.

Swooping through the canopy, clinging to her mother, Papina glanced down and saw an unstoppable wave of Langur monkeys thundering through the Cemetery. They pounced on their Rhesus victims with howls of bloodlust and dragged them into the shadows to finish them off, Langur claws savaging Rhesus flesh.

Papina closed her eyes, desperate to shut out the horror, and suddenly her mind jerked to save the one thing she could still understand—

"My carving!"

"WHAT?!" Willow screamed, incredulous.

"I have to get it!" Papina shouted, as if somehow clutching it would make everything all right.

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"NO!"

"PLEASE!"

Suddenly the branches in front of them snapped apart as two forbidding Langurs lunged towards them.

Willow let go of the branch and dropped – two breaths in free fall – then reached out, grabbed a vine and swung.

With claws scratching across stone, Papina and Willow grasped for the perimeter wall and dropped down on the far side, outside the Cemetery for the first time in their lives.

All they could do now was run.

Chaat had been out scavenging, and had no idea anything was wrong as he casually made his way back through the streets carrying some pilfered pomegranates … when suddenly he stumbled on a group of trembling monkeys huddled in the shadows. They looked so distraught Chaat assumed they were just Slum-Monkeys. Then Willow called his name and he realized with a shock they were his own family.

The words tumbled out of Willow's mouth – "ambush … blood … slaughter … attacked by Langurs".

But it didn't make sense to Chaat – everyone knew the Rhesus lived in the derelict Cemetery; they'd *always* lived there, ever since the Humans had abandoned it generations ago.

He tore open a pomegranate, squeezed some white pith onto his fingers and rubbed it on his forehead, making the Universal Sign of Peace. But as he turned to run back to the Cemetery, Willow grabbed his arm.

"No!"

"I have to."

"You mustn't go back!"

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"They can't just drive us out of our home!"

Then he felt another pair of hands clamp around his leg – it was Papina, emphatically refusing to let him leave.

Softening his tone, Chaat put his arm around his daughter. "Don't worry. Before you know it, we'll all be safe at home again." He lifted Papina's head to look into her frightened eyes. "Tell you what, while I'm there, I'll even check your carving is in its usual place, make sure it's safe. How's that?"

Papina gave a mute nod. Chaat hugged her one last time then turned and scampered away over the rooftops, determined to set everything right.

Now Papina sat silently on top of the Public Library, her heart slowly breaking. Why had they been attacked with such hatred? she wondered. Just because they looked different? Because they had brown fur, not grey, and pink faces not black? But Rhesus or Langur, they were all monkeys and they all needed somewhere to live.

Papina looked from the distant Cemetery to the handful of shattered survivors huddled further along the roof, her young mind struggling to make sense of what had just happened.

Underneath all her confusion lay the darkest fear of all – even though they had waited the whole afternoon, still her father hadn't returned. As the sun sank towards the horizon, Papina was gripped by the dreadful foreboding that she would never see him again. It felt as if a hole was opening up inside her, a yawning emptiness that nothing would ever be able to fill.

"We have to go." The voice cut hard across her grief.

Papina looked up and saw her mother beckoning.

"No."

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Willow scrambled over the roof tiles and grabbed her hand. “Move. Now!”

Papina pulled back defiantly. “Not without Dad!”

“We have to get away before the Langur hunt us down.”

Papina didn’t want to hear it; she clamped her hands over her ears.

“Listen to me!” urged Willow. “We have to survive. It’s what Chaat wanted.”

With that she took hold of Papina, dragged her across the roof and bundled her down the stepped walls.

Furtively, fearfully, the Rhesus survivors made their way into the Kolkata streets.

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2

SHADOWS

For Mico it was like entering Paradise – one moment he was clinging to his mother, surrounded by all the frantic noise of the City, the next he was in the cool, green tranquillity of the Cemetery. Whatever the Humans had meant this strange place to be, for monkeys it was perfect. High walls kept out the chaos of the City, there were row upon row of small stone buildings to scramble over, and a thick canopy of banyan trees was just begging to be explored.

Dropping down from his mother's back, Mico scampered excitedly up the Central Pathway, following the rest of the Langur Troop as they processed in.

"Mico, wait!" Kima called after him, but it was too late.

Hopping onto a fallen tombstone, he reached up, grabbed a low hanging branch, swung himself round the corner … and skidded to an astonished stop.

Towering in front of him was an imposing mausoleum. The walls were lined with carved pillars, and each corner of the long, rectangular building was adorned with a magnificent stone tiger. On the roof of this Great Vault, all the Langur leaders were lined up.

In the centre stood the Lord Ruler Gospodar, large and handsome with a coat of pure grey and a striking flash of

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white fur crowning the top of his head. Crouched next to him were his trusted advisors, the Troop Deputies; and ranged on either side of them in two long, brooding lines, were Gospodar's Elites.

Mico gazed up at the Elites in silent awe; he'd never seen the fighting monkeys all gathered together like this. Powerfully built, with long limbs and even longer tails, many of them had tramlines in their grey fur, the marks of battle, which they wore with pride. But to Mico's young eyes, the scarred faces and ragged ears made the Elites look grotesque.

Instinctively he edged backwards, and suddenly felt a hand grab him.

"How many times do I have to tell you about running off?" said Kima as she slung him onto her back, and for once, Mico was grateful to have been caught by his mother.

By now the last of the Troop had arrived, and spontaneously the monkeys started expressing their elation by thumping the ground with their fists. It sent a wave of excitement surging across the crowd. A huge smile spread across Lord Gospodar's face as he bathed in the euphoria, until finally he raised his arms to speak.

"My fellow monkeys, this is a day when right conquers wrong!" he boomed. "A day when courage is rewarded!"

A huge cheer went up from the monkeys.

"As we admire our magnificent new home," Gospodar opened his arms, embracing the Cemetery, "there should be one thought in our minds: WE DESERVE THIS!"

The howls of approval were deafening. Enthralled by the sheer energy of the spectacle, Mico started to laugh. As he gazed up at Lord Gospodar standing on the mausoleum, so full of conviction, suddenly he understood

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why everyone loved the Leader, why they trusted him.

Encouraged by the adulation, Gospodar started to reminisce. "Those of us who are older will remember it was just three Monsoons ago that we were Slum-Monkeys, scavenging around in the filth of the City. I spent my youth not playing or laughing, but trying to fight off the pangs of hunger…"

With dismay, Mico realized that the speech was going to go on and on. "Can we go now?" he whispered in his mother's ear.

"Shhh!"

Which left a simple choice: boredom or escape.

Mico's eyes gazed up at the tangled tree canopy – so many tempting runs to be tried out; he looked across at the maze of strangely shaped miniature buildings surrounding them, and made up his mind.

Gently letting go of Kima's ears, he slid down her back and edged his way through the mass of monkeys until he stood at the very edge of the crowd. He surveyed the network of shady paths leading off into the Cemetery, gave a final backward glance to check he wasn't being watched, then slipped away.

Other young monkeys would have found the damp, decaying structures in the Cemetery unnerving, but to Mico they were fascinating.

He wondered why there were strange markings on all the stones, why the Humans had made buildings that were too small for them to live in, and why the whole place had been abandoned. For Mico there were always questions to be asked. Intrigued, he scrambled up the side of a miniature pyramid, launched himself onto a dome, dropped down between some stone columns—

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And instantly froze.

Up ahead something was moving in the shadows. Quickly Mico darted behind a tombstone, then very cautiously peeped out. At the end of the pathway he could see a group of Langur Footsoldiers working in the shadows. They seemed to be dragging something through the dirt.

Suddenly a gruff voice boomed angrily at them, "Kill like the thunder; clean like the rain!"

The Footsoldiers snapped to attention as General Pogo emerged from the shadows. "*Monsoon rain*. Not a spring shower," he said, glaring darkly at them.

"Understood, sir. Won't happen again."

They had good reason to be nervous. Pogo was a warrior with a fearsome reputation, backed up with an admirable scar that slashed across his face, right over the empty socket that had once contained an eyeball.

"Next time I say clean everything up, I mean *everything*," he said, rolling his eye sternly from one soldier to the next. "We have rules for a reason."

"We think he may have come back, sir."

"Come back?" Pogo seemed puzzled.

"We caught him hiding, sir."

"More fool him." The General's solitary eye rolled down in its socket, scrutinizing the lump on the ground. "Well," he shrugged, "better get rid of it before it starts to rot."

"Yes, sir."

And with that the General launched himself into the tree canopy and was gone.

Part of Mico wanted to run too, but his feet didn't move. He peered into the gloom and watched as two of the Footsoldiers scrambled up the perimeter wall and perched themselves on top.

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"Come on then, let's have it."

The others picked up the lump they'd been dragging and Mico's blood suddenly ran cold as he saw the flailing limbs, the limp tail, the head lolling lifelessly. They were carrying a dead monkey.

Mico dropped onto his haunches, unable to tear his eyes away from the gruesome sight, his stomach knotting. As the soldiers hauled the corpse up the wall, Mico saw that it had suffered horrendous injuries – there was a gaping wound in its chest, one of its ears had been bitten off, the limbs were slashed – blood still dripped from the torn flesh.

Trying to recognize the scent of the victim, Mico drew a deep breath and realized the corpse wasn't a Langur at all. He blinked, looked again – brown fur, short tail … it was a Rhesus.

Indifferent to the horror, the Footsoldiers on top of the wall started swinging the corpse by its feet.

"And here's what we think of peace," one of the others sneered, and he threw a stone at the corpse, hitting a white pomegranate smear that had been made on its forehead.

The others laughed, then with one great heave tossed the dead monkey over the wall as casually as if they were disposing of an unwanted tree branch.

Suddenly Mico lost all his curiosity.

With pounding heart he darted back across the tombs, swerving past mossy statues and sliding between headstones, until he reached the main path. He scrambled across the cobbles and snuggled into the safety of the crowd, worming his way through a tangle of legs until he found his mother standing near the front, listening with rapt attention to Lord Gospodar.

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Mico clambered up onto her back, gripped her fur and tried to blot the ghastly images from his mind. Perhaps if he listened to the speech, joined in with the cheering, everything would be all right.

"… because we, the Langur, are the only Troop that has the courage to fight for peace…" Gospodar was still in full flow, and his grand words were stirring Langur hearts.

All hearts except Mico's. Didn't Gospodar know what was happening just a short swing away?

Then Mico's confusion turned to fear as he saw General Pogo drop down from the tree canopy and silently take his place on the roof of the Great Vault. Lord Gospodar threw a questioning look at the General, who gave a silent, reassuring nod.

They were both in on it.

Which is when the guilt gripped Mico. He had witnessed a disturbing secret, and even though he was clinging to his mother, surrounded by all the members of the Langur Troop, suddenly Mico felt very alone.

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3

LOST

As they staggered, bewildered, through the streets, the Rhesus survivors realized with shame that they were strangers in their own City.

Food gathering had always been the responsibility of the Rhesus males, and as the generations passed, the females had become increasingly detached from the hurly-burly of City life; many of them had never even ventured outside the Cemetery walls. But the males had been the first to die in the slaughter, all their knowledge dying with them, leaving the females to rue their seclusion.

Out here everything was chaos: crumbling buildings jostled for space, piles of rotting garbage lay in the streets as if deposited by some monstrous tidal wave, and the noise was everywhere – hawkers haranguing passers-by, couples arguing in shabby apartments, cars blasting their horns.

The Rhesus wandered, dazed, through street after confusing street, searching for somewhere to shelter, until finally, wretched and exhausted, they arrived at the banks of the Hooghly River.

Papina had never seen such a large body of water. "Look how it ripples!" she exclaimed, mesmerized by the river's dark, quivering energy.

None of the other monkeys shared her fascination.

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Cappa, one of the mothers, gave a resigned shrug. "Well, this is the end. It's every monkey for herself now."

"You can't break the Troop up!" said Fig, alarmed. Fig was younger than the others, still with two small infants clinging to her back.

"What Troop?" scoffed Cappa. "We've no leaders, no males. Just infants. We're nothing."

"Then let's choose a new leader," said Rowna, the oldest of the females. Although neither the quickest nor the sharpest, she had a confidence that most of the others responded to.

"Who? *You?*" Cappa rounded on Rowna. "Are *you* going to lead us out of this?"

Rowna hesitated. The responsibility of leadership was beyond her; she knew it and Cappa knew it. That was Cappa's great talent: knowing everyone's weakness.

There was silence – Cappa waited for someone to suggest that *she* should become the new leader; but when Willow finally spoke it was with a different idea altogether.

"Why do we even need a leader?"

Everyone looked at her as if she was mad.

"We're monkeys. And monkey troops have leaders!" snorted Cappa.

"Did our last leader protect us when the Langur rampaged into our homes?" Willow asked. "Maybe we need to find new ways of doing things now."

"With no leader, who would make the decisions?" Rowna persisted.

"We could all make the decisions," ventured Willow.

"All?!" Cappa sneered indignantly, baring her teeth.

"But we all have different ideas!" exclaimed Rowna.

"When we were protected by the Cemetery walls we could afford to have different ideas. Now the only thing

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that matters is survival." Willow looked at the monkeys as the cold truth of her words struck home. "We have to take responsibility. All of us."

There was silence as the monkeys' minds grappled with the idea.

"So how exactly would it work?" asked Fig.

"We talk problems through. Share ideas. Agree what to do. Consensus. Like the ants."

Cappa snorted. "You really think we can learn from the ants?!"

"Oh how funny!" Fig smiled as she started to understand. "I think I like it."

And once the first monkey had endorsed the idea, some of the others felt bold enough to nod their agreement, until the weight of opinion swung behind Willow.

"So, which way do we turn now?" asked Fig with disarming innocence. "What do we all think?"

The monkeys looked at one another. They looked across the river. And no one said anything.

"And *that* is what happens when monkeys have no leader," pronounced a voice from the shadows. "They starve by the riverbank."

The Rhesus immediately huddled, shielding their young, peering into the darkness to see who had spoken. All of them shared the same terrifying thought: the Langur had returned to finish them off.

Cappa snarled defiantly, "You want to taste your own blood? Step closer!"

"If you insist." The reply came loaded with dark intent, as a patrol of Bonnet Macaques emerged from the shadows.

Papina stared at them wide-eyed. A fluffy mop of hair on top of their heads made it look as if they were

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wearing caps, and several of them walked on their hind legs, giving them a distinctive, imperious air.

Although she'd never seen one before, Willow knew that the Bonnets were the oldest monkeys in the City, and demanded obedience. Aware that an aggressive response would only get them into more trouble, Willow hurriedly stepped forward. "Our Troop has been attacked. We're looking for a new home."

"So, you're all alone?" the Bonnet leader mused as he strode over to Willow. "No males?"

Papina slid closer to her mother, gripping her hand tightly as the Bonnet paced around them.

"Well, staying here is out of the question, old girl," he finally pronounced. "These are our streets." As much a warning as a statement of fact.

"We meant no harm," Willow said hastily. "Only we don't really know the City at all."

The Bonnet scoffed. "Word of advice: start learning your way around, or you won't last two moons. Every corner of this City is bagged. Every monkey Troop has its own patch. And this is ours."

The Bonnet turned his back on the Rhesus – as far as he was concerned, the matter was closed – but Willow scampered around to block his path. "There must be room for us somewhere?" she pleaded.

"Still here?" The Bonnet's patience was wearing thin.

"Please. We have infants. They're hungry and cold. They can't walk much further. Please."

The Bonnet cast his arrogant gaze over the fidgeting young Rhesus. "I believe there's still some room in the Slums," he said loftily, evoking wry chuckles from his comrades.

"We're not Slum-Monkeys!" protested Rowna.

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The Bonnet turned and glared down his snout at her. "It looks to me as if you don't have a choice."

"But that's not fair," said Willow. "You're monkeys just like us and—"

"Fair?!" Aggression flared across the Bonnet's face. "Did you care about fairness when you were lording it inside the Cemetery walls? Did you ever think about what it was like outside?! We won these streets, over many moons. We fought for them. We earned them. If you were careless enough to lose your home—" he shrugged indifferently—"that's no concern of mine."

"So you're just going to abandon us?" Willow retorted.

The Bonnet paused, exchanged a dark glance with the patrol, then pointed at Fig. "We'll take her … and her." He had picked out the youngest, most comely females.

A malevolent smirk spread across the faces of the Bonnet patrol. Papina glimpsed it, but didn't know what it meant.

Willow drew her monkeys into a huddle and whispered urgently, "It smells of danger."

"But maybe it's our best chance," said Fig. "How long will our infants last out here?"

"They have plenty of females," Cappa warned darkly. "You'd never make it back to their Troop."

"If they were going to hurt us, they'd have already done it, wouldn't they?" said Fig.

Willow could see how torn she was. "Look, if you want to go, go. Do what you think is best."

Fig looked at Willow searchingly. "Would *you* go?"

Willow turned and studied the Bonnets – for all their airs and graces, she knew what lurked in their hearts. "No. I wouldn't."

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It was enough for Fig. “Then that’s settled,” she said and, turning to the Bonnets, announced with a breezy smile, “Sorry, we’ve had a better offer.”

Her friends stifled a laugh. For a timid monkey, Fig really picked her moments to be cheeky. But none of the Bonnets smiled. They were irritated that these strays showed so little respect.

The leader paced over, stood on his hind legs and looked down at them darkly. “If you’re still here when we come back, we won’t be nearly as civil.” Then he gestured to his patrol and in an instant they were gone.

Papina looked up at her mother, at Fig and the others, and felt a swell of pride. So *that* was how consensus worked.

Then, with a guilty jolt, Papina realized that for the first time that night she’d stopped pining for her father. Maybe the only way to cope with this strange new world was to tackle it head-on.

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4

CHOSEN

"Mine!" declared Breri.

"Why?" protested Mico.

"Because I'm the eldest."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

Just a short while ago Mico and his brother had been delighted when they'd set eyes on their new home. It was a small mausoleum with matching triangular walls, a flat roof for lounging on and a ledge running all the way round, ideal for ripening fallen fruit. But the moment they dashed inside and saw four large stone blocks arranged in the cool, dark space, the trouble started. Both young monkeys wanted the same tomb for their bed.

Breri bared his teeth. "You want it?" he sneered. "Fight me for it!"

Mico hesitated – he longed to lash out at that smug, domineering face, but he didn't want to deal with the consequences. Breri was a big, muscular Cadet, with a reputation for being able to wrestle three friends at a time; while the one thing everyone knew about Mico was that he was small.

Mico was ashamed of his size. He had always been smaller than other monkeys his age, and his mother continually made excuses for him. "Every monkey grows at

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their own pace," Kima would say, or "He's been a little ill recently."

But the truth was simple: Mico was small, and in the Langur Troop, physical strength was everything.

"So that's settled then," Breri announced, as he stretched out on the tomb, gloating. "The lesser monkey loses."

Infuriated, Mico leapt at Breri, landed on his back and knocked him to the ground.

"You want some?!" sneered Breri. He swung round, but Mico clung on tightly, staying just out of reach. Relishing the fight, Breri thrust backwards. "Take this!" And he slammed Mico into the wall.

Mico grunted as the air was knocked out of him, but still he held tight, digging his claws into his brother's fur. Breri had no option but to grab Mico's tail and yank it as hard as he could.

Mico screeched, loosened his grip and, before he knew it, Breri had pinned him painfully to the ground.

"Pathetic!" Breri smirked. Then he grabbed Mico and lifted him off the floor, holding him above his head like a trophy.

"I am the master!" he trumpeted.

It was a humiliating end to the fight; Mico tried, unsuccessfully, to wriggle free.

"Say it!" ordered Breri.

"No!"

"I am the master!"

"NO!"

Suddenly another voice boomed across the room.

"*I* am the master!"

Still holding Mico above his head, Breri spun round and saw their father, Trumble, standing at the entrance.

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"Put. Him. Down." Trumble spoke with utter self-assurance.

For a moment Breri hesitated. It was a brief flash of rebellion, but Trumble saw it and knew that his eldest son was already starting to break away. Soon Breri would be his own monkey.

But for now Trumble was still the head of this family, and he still had a few tricks up his sleeve. "Put him down before I swap this for a poky little crack in the Cemetery wall. Then there'll be no arguments."

Mico and Breri knew their father well enough to understand that this wasn't a bluff. Reluctantly, Breri dropped Mico to the ground and skulked off.

"Are you hurt?" Trumble asked gently.

Mico shook his head. His father swung over and put his arms around him. Neither said anything; they didn't need to. Trumble had lost count of the number of fights he'd broken up over the years; a vindictive streak ran deep in Breri and there was no doubting the pleasure he derived from bullying Mico.

Just then, from outside, they heard Kima call, "Fresh mangoes! Nice and juicy!" Which made Mico and Trumble feel suddenly hungry.

As the moon rose, bright and clear, Kima chased everyone out so that she could lay some fresh palm leaves on the floor. Breri scampered off to be with his Cadet friends, who were discovering new swings up in the tree canopy. Left on his own, Mico decided to check out the views from the roof.

When he scrambled up the pediment, though, he found his father already sitting there in a pool of cool moonlight, surrounded by carefully arranged piles of stones.

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In his youth Trumble had fought in the Elites until a bad injury cut short his career. Desperate to still serve, he had become a quartermaster, responsible for Troop supplies. Trumble's logical mind was well suited to the job, but the key to his success was the Stones.

Over many seasons Trumble had carefully scoured Kolkata's streets and collected a mass of small stones; some contained flashes of colour, others were deep black, while a few were transparent like glass. Having carefully polished them all, Trumble set about devising a complex system of accounting. Some stones represented different types of food, others stood for weapons, that much Mico knew, but the clever part was how these stones were distributed across a set of empty coconut shells. This told Trumble exactly which provisions were running low, what had to be acquired today and what could wait.

Only Trumble fully understood how the system worked, but the whole Troop knew that it *did* work. Shortages were something the Langur didn't have to worry about.

Mico watched Trumble carefully moving the Stones from pile to pile, from coconut to coconut. Not wanting to disturb the air of studied concentration, Mico remained silent, and instead started running his finger along the scar that stretched across his father's back.

Even though it was now an old wound, the fur stubbornly refused to grow back, leaving a bumpy pink ridge that was curiously insensitive to touch. Ever since he could remember, Mico had enjoyed running his finger along the scar, pressing harder and harder until his father noticed with a start.

Tonight, though, Trumble quickly sensed that

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something was troubling Mico. He put the Stones down and peered over his shoulder.

"Not playing with the others?"

Mico shrugged. "Did it hurt? When it happened, I mean?" he asked, stroking the scar again.

"Not at the time. It was in the heat of battle. But afterwards, when it was being patched up…" Trumble grimaced, remembering the pain.

"Was there a lot of blood?"

"Oh yes. It was a real mess."

Mico nodded. Now they were getting to the heart of the problem. "So … when you were in the Elites … were there things you did that … did you ever have to… "

"Did I have to kill?"

Mico looked at his father, amazed that he could read his mind.

"Your brother asked the same thing when he was your age." Trumble smiled at Mico's astonishment. "Every young monkey asks – it's natural."

"Well?" persisted Mico.

"The Elites protect the whole Troop," Trumble replied gently. "Sometimes that means doing things that are … difficult."

"So that's yes?"

Trumble nodded – Mico might be small but he was sharp. "Does it worry you?"

Mico hesitated; he remembered the mutilated, lifeless monkey being dragged up the wall, the gaping wounds, the lolling head, the fur matted with blood. "Was your fighting … brave?"

"It was dangerous, if that's what you mean."

But that wasn't what Mico meant. "Were you…" he tried again. "Were you heroic? Did it matter *how* you killed?"

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Trumble felt out of his depth. He'd never been questioned so closely about this. The Langur were a fighting Troop; it was what they did.

"What's upsetting you?" he asked.

Mico hesitated. He couldn't tell the truth without revealing the terrible secret he had witnessed. "I think I'd be frightened," he said finally.

"That's what training is for. It teaches you to put your fears aside."

"But when monkeys get horribly wounded or killed… How can that ever be right?"

Trumble sighed. "It all comes down to trust. We don't have to question everything, because we trust Lord Gospodar."

"But asking questions is…" Mico frowned. "It's what monkeys do. Monkeys question."

"The Langur Troop aren't like other monkeys. We were chosen," Trumble replied solemnly. "Chosen to fight for peace. The Langur keep the streets safe from the hordes of wild monkeys out there. If we questioned every decision Lord Gospodar made—" Trumble broke off to look around the Cemetery—"we wouldn't have all this."

Mico looked up at the trees, where swarms of midges were darting back and forth in a frenzied dance. The Cemetery certainly was a perfect place to live, but still, no matter how hard he tried, Mico couldn't shake off the memory of the monkey corpse.

Sensing his son's doubts, Trumble put a firm hand on Mico's shoulders. "The City needs us. And it needs us to be strong."

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5

SNAKE

Papina lay trembling in the cold dawn light. It wasn't the damp that made her shiver; it was the fear.

She had urged her mother not to rest here, but everyone was so exhausted they were beyond reason. All night they had been roaming the streets searching for a place to sleep, and all night they had been chased away. Rival monkey Troops, packs of street dogs and scurrying rat colonies had all spurned them; once they had even been hustled along by a family of wild pigs.

So Willow, Cappa, Fig and Rowna had led Papina and the others, zigzagging across the City until they were too exhausted to carry on. They had stopped here, in a sprawling garbage dump on the edge of the Slums, and when they found to their relief that no one had pounced to move them along, they all slept.

All except Papina.

She had a dreadful sense that there was a compelling reason why no one else wanted this spot, and she lay awake the rest of the night trying to work out what it was.

They were in a small hollow in the middle of the dump where three open sewers met, so the smell was appalling. But out here in the City there were all manner of offensive smells; that alone would not stop animals moving in.

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Papina gazed at the multi-coloured piles of garbage that formed a rolling mountain range – it might not be pretty, but it offered rich pickings. Rats should have been thriving here – they had no scruples about where they lived – but even they had abandoned this place.

Then a murmur.

Papina sat bolt upright. She held her breath, muscles tensed, then glimpsed movement out of the corner of her eye. She spun round – a solitary tin can rolled lazily down a garbage hill.

Everything was still again, but Papina knew in her bones that something was very wrong.

She stood on her hind legs, ears straining to unravel the medley of sounds bobbing in the air: the bark of dogs marauding for their breakfast, the wail of Slum babies, the bubbling gurgle of the sewers. The sinister rustle of something sliding through the trash.

Papina's heart raced as she craned her head, tracking the sound. Another tin can tumbled down a slope, this time triggering a mini-avalanche of ripped packaging. As she gazed across the winding valleys of debris, Papina had an awful hunch that something was moving underneath the mounds.

She reached a hand out towards her mother, but Willow was so exhausted she just turned over, brushing her daughter away.

Papina was torn – if there was danger out there, it was her duty to raise the alarm; but if it was nothing but the wind and her own fearful imagination, she'd be in big trouble for waking everyone so early.

As silently as she could, Papina picked her way across the dump, following the slow, undulating movement of the trash, through a valley, under a hill.

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Suddenly the movement stopped.

Whatever was down there had sensed her presence. Papina peered into the dark cracks between the garbage and saw a strange texture inching its way along.

Snake.

As she staggered backwards, the monster started to surface, effortlessly shrugging off its shroud of trash to reveal a body of enormous proportions, a massive, rippling tube of muscle. The python's head, grotesquely small compared to its body, twisted round to inspect its prey.

Mesmerized, Papina looked at the cold, black eyes that promised nothing but death; she saw the snake's neck muscles flex and knew the strike was only a heartbeat away.

Adrenalin surged through her body. She turned and leapt just as the python's head lunged past her and smashed into the debris like an explosion. Papina dodged in the opposite direction, scarcely able to believe that it had missed its first strike.

"SNAKE!!!" she howled.

The word was like a bolt of lightning flashing through the monkeys' brains, galvanizing their bodies. Rowna led a terrified scramble up some pipes running along a crumbling wall; Fig, hysterical with fear, dragged her sleepy infants towards the pipes, but in their panic one of them tripped and tumbled, screeching down an escarpment of trash.

Fig froze, for a terrible moment torn between saving the youngster in her arms and turning back to save the other.

Cappa saw what was happening and sprang down from the wall yelling, "I've got him!" as she grabbed the

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baby monkey and hurled it back up to Fig. But the impact of her landing trigged a landslip of trash that made it impossible for Cappa to find a foothold and she was washed away from the wall.

Papina saw the landslip tumbling towards her. Hoping to outrun it, she turned, tried to wade through the trash, but was so blinded by panic she didn't concentrate on her footing, and found herself sinking into the debris.

She opened her mouth to scream for help when suddenly a hand grabbed her arm and hauled her back to the surface.

"It's all right! I've got you!" It was her mother. Paying no heed to her own safety, Willow had bounded across the dump to rescue Papina, her darting eyes picking out firm footings with incredible speed.

"Follow my feet!"

Willow started to charge back towards the wall, when suddenly a mound of trash rose up in front of them as a huge length of python body broke the surface. Papina and Willow spun round to scramble the other way only to see another section of python slither into view – it had encircled them, cutting off their escape route in one calculated sweep.

"The head! Where's its head?!" Willow yelled.

Papina looked left and right but couldn't see it. How could they know which way to run if they didn't know where the head was?

Too late. The loop of the python's body was already tightening on them.

"Do exactly as I do!" shouted Willow, then she ran straight at the loop of muscle surrounding them, reached out and put one hand on the python's hideous body just long enough to use it as a springboard to leap clean over.

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Papina gritted her teeth and ran, stretched out her hands, shuddering as she felt the dry, rough skin, then her legs pushed hard and she sprang over the beast.

Just in time – a split second later the python's ugly head drove up from below at the exact spot where they had been standing.

The python hesitated. If it went for another strike too quickly it risked tying itself in a knot. The momentary pause was all Willow and Papina needed to dive across the dump and scramble up the wall to where the other monkeys were waiting.

Willow hugged her daughter tightly as her eyes scanned the faces, checking everyone was safe.

And then she realized. "Where's Cappa?!"

The monkeys spun round and peered down, but all they could see were disjointed bits of the python's body as it slithered, half-submerged, through the garbage. Suddenly with an enormous clatter, a pile of tin cans exploded as a great length of the snake emerged – and trapped in its coils was Cappa.

"He–help … meeee…"

She was already gasping for breath as the snake tightened its relentless grip.

The monkeys on the wall started shrieking, hysterical with fear, as with majestic elegance the snake's head emerged from the trash and inspected Cappa with a cold gaze.

Irritated by the noise of the spectators, it turned its black eyes on the howling monkeys, who immediately fell silent. The python's head rocked from side to side, taking its time, enjoying its total power.

The monkeys could only look on helplessly as Cappa wrestled with death – but the more she struggled,

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