

# THE QUARRY

## The Chameleon and the Tiger

Ellise Artery

Labord tip-toed swiftly through the silent morning streets of Raipur. The pale dawn light provided him with ample shadowed doorways and inlets to conceal himself from the undesirable early-risers walking by. The day was already warm, heralding the heat that the sun would bring. Labord wiped his sweaty hands roughly across his dirt stained shorts and absently brushed away the fallen strands of loose hair that covered his eyes. Checking once again that the street was empty, he rose from his crouch and moved onwards, quickly resuming his hunt along the scented and unmistakable trail of freshly baked bread.

The man he followed, a baker from Chor Bazaar, pushed a bread-laden cart down the cobblestone streets, unaware of the lithe figure pursuing him. His overloaded cart rattled down the road, its burden of bread bounced and shifted precariously over the rough street. With his target now back in sight, Labord crept closer. The rising beat of his heart cautioned him to remain concealed, yet his stomach impatiently growled with hunger. The muscles in his legs were beginning to ache with tension and his thick, unkempt hair had latched itself to his sweaty forehead.

The sun did not share his patience and as the number of shadowed doorways lessened Labord began to hear the sounds of scooter engines and bike bells on the streets surrounding him. It would soon be too late.

He continued to maintain a close watch on the cart and its driver and noticed with anticipation that the baker had taken a short cut. Just up ahead now was a small, yet hazardous, inlet where carts wheels can easily become unbalanced.

The timing was perfect.

Labord sprung forward as the left front wheel of the cart dipped into the gap. Caught between the two stones the cart jolted and the perfect integrity of the bread-stacks gave way. A large loaf had fallen from the cart and Labord ran for it as fast as his thin and short limbs would carry him. On his left and right he glimpsed other figures emerging from the surrounding streets and converge towards the front of the cart. It was the pack. He quickly glimpsed Lomadi, Hiran and Singh all closing in on their own fallen target as he himself lunged straight towards the loaf.

The baker who was trying to gather his fallen wares hadn't yet noticed the ambush of children and before Labord knew it, he was running down a side street at full speed, his catch held tightly to his chest and laughing as he ran, joyous as he was with his success.

Labord wound his way down the streets, still confused by the many twists and turns and found himself in dead-ends quite a number of times before the stranger found him.

He was headed well in the wrong direction when a boy, only a few years older than himself, stopped in front of him, blocking his path.

Labord thought nervously about his catch and instinctively tried to hide it, but the stranger remained stationary. He wore a tan sleeveless shirt, black linen shorts and his long black hair was tied up revealing his gaunt face and bone thin frame.

Labord nervously asked, 'What do you want?'

The stranger stepped closer. 'You are part of Singh's pack, are you not?'

Labord did not answer.

'I've been watching you, I know you are.'

'What's it to you?' Labord countered warily.

'I wanted to warn you about Singh,' he said, stepping closer. 'What's your name?'

Labord answered.

'But that's not a pack-name,' the stranger said, puzzled.

'How would you know?'

‘That is what Singh does. His “pack-names” are all animals.’ The stranger scoffed but continued on seriously. ‘Singh, who I knew as Rosh, thinks only about survival and he thinks the only way to survive is to become an animal.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ Labord retorted, feeling the need to side with his pack.

The stranger moved closer and continued, ‘Singh is trouble. I know because I used to be in the pack – in fact I used to be the pack-leader and Rosh was my closest friend. Until he...lost himself.’

‘Lost himself?’

‘He forgot where Rosh ended, and Singh began.’ The stranger looked into Labord’s eyes and a look of deep hurt and doubt passed over his face. He said no more.

Labord swallowed and stepped back.

‘I don’t know who you are, but I have to get back.’ He turned to leave.

‘You should leave the pack while you still can,’ the stranger behind him warned, as Labord began briskly walking back the way he had come.

‘Don’t trust Singh Labord, don’t trust him!’

Labord finally found the Ghar, a small abandoned warehouse on an empty street behind Raipur train station. Across the road was a flour mill, a small pharmacy and a few shabby houses.

The Ghar was their main *maand* – their den – as it was perfectly located close to three main bazaars in the area, and well away from any police stations; an area Singh had claimed as their pack’s territory.

Labord was the last to arrive back. He jogged inside, eager to escape the sun’s heat. As his eyes adjusted to the shadowed warehouse, he spotted Singh, Lomadi, and Hiran sitting together on the rugs surrounding their brick-made fire pit.

They hadn’t noticed Labord enter yet and were all sharing their own catch and laughing together. As he walked up to announce his victory, bread in hand, the laughter stopped, and they looked towards him.

‘Look what I got, Singh,’ he beamed and handed the loaf over.

Singh took it silently as Labord sat down across from him, next to Hiran.

‘How did everyone else go?’ he asked.

‘Not too bad,’ Hiran said. ‘We’re the only group who got something though. The others have already gone back out.’

‘Why did you take so long to get back?’ Singh asked absentmindedly as he tore up the bread loaf.

Labord cringed, ‘I – I got lost.’ He looked to Hiran who gave him a supportive smile. ‘I’m still getting used to the streets, sorry.’

‘And this is all you got?’ Singh held up the now dismantled loaf accusingly. ‘You didn’t... stop along the way and eat something else you got?’

‘No!’ Labord objected, taken aback. ‘Of course not. I brought everything back, I swear.’

Singh continued to stare at Labord, his expression unreadable, his eyes glaring and contemplating. Labord was too frightened to try and decipher his thoughts. Did he somehow know about the stranger? The silence dragged on while both Lomadi and Hiran ate their share, aware that any interference would not help the situation.

He knew then, Singh was deciding whether or not to officially adopt him into the pack. He had only been with them for two months; he was the *pilla* of the pack, the ‘cub’ as Singh called him, and Singh had for so long refused to give him a pack-name, to finally accept him as one of them.

Worry and a slight tang of panic quickened Labord’s heart. He needed this – he needed to stay with the pack to survive, he couldn’t do it on his own, he knew that now. He knew how quickly somethings could change.

Just six months ago Labord had been living with his father in New Delhi and just three months ago with his half-brother in Raipur’s north.

But war and death and his half-brother’s hatred had kicked him out to the streets.

He didn’t think about food at first – he cared more about finding somewhere warm and dry to sleep, some clean water to drink and only then, when his stomach began to ache, would he look for someone to provide him with food. Labord had been naïve to expect such charity, for weeks he survived off the leftovers, scraps or whatever else strangers would pityingly give him. But the charity was not enough and after the fourth week he had resorted to stealing. He was small, nimble and found it surprisingly easy to snatch an apple or banana from the bazaar without being noticed and it worked a few times...until it didn’t.

His quickly degrading appearance turned looks of pity to looks of disgust. He spoke to no one, in fear they would call for police, an occurrence Labord had learnt to avoid totally.

He had fallen to the harshest form of existence and was surviving only from the food found in unlocked garbage containers in back alleys when Singh had found him.

Singh took him to the Ghar, fed him, clothed him, and introduced him to the pack.

He now slept on dry ground and went to sleep each night with food in his stomach. And he owed it all to Singh.

Labord swallowed nervously, remembering what he had come from and knowing how easily Singh could make that nightmare his reality once again.

His sweaty palm rested in his lap and whilst he refused to look, he could hear both Lomadi and Hiran softly chewing their meal and he could smell the sweet scent of bread. His ever-rebellious stomach tightened and growled in hunger at the smell of food.

Labord, horrified, tried to ignore it but Singh grinned and finally looked away.

He reached down and threw Labord a portion of the loaf then went back to eating his. 'Your pack-name will be Girgit,' he said.

Labord radiated pure relief whilst Lomadi and Hiran praised him and officially welcomed him into the pack.

He was one of them now. But for good or bad? He was not yet certain.

Labord had tried to forget the stranger, but each time he saw Singh he wondered exactly what it was he had been warned of. Even weeks later he still couldn't get it off his mind and he found himself watching Singh closely, trying to find the answer. But now that Labord was Girgit – an animal Lomadi told him was a small camouflaging lizard – Singh was even more friendly and encouraging than when he was the *pilla* of the pack.

The further he thought on the stranger's words the more lost he became. Nothing made sense. Who was the gaunt-faced stranger and why did he seem so eager to protect Labord from Singh and the pack? Labord could think of no answer and found no other option than to search for the stranger and ask him these questions himself.

But, finding him proved much harder than Labord had anticipated. He had spent eight days wondering the streets near where they had last met, and though Labord was now considerably more confident making his way around Raipur's streets, he could not find any trace of the stranger.

Not until the ninth day... when the stranger found him.

Labord was about to finish his fruitless search for the day and began heading back to the Ghar when the thin youth stopped in his path exactly as he had done before.

‘You were looking for me?’ he said.

Labord swallowed and stepped closer. ‘Yes.’

‘You want answers?’

‘Yes.’

The stranger smiled knowingly. ‘Walk with me,’ he said, turning and walking away without waiting.

Labord caught up and waited for the stranger to speak first, he didn’t know how to begin. But the silence stretched patiently, and they had walked down two streets before he finally spoke.

‘Shall we start with my name?’ he asked.

Labord nodded.

‘I am Drongo, formerly Baagh, the ‘tiger’ of the pack.’ He spoke the latter name with disgust. ‘Are you still Labord?’

‘Yes...well no, I am called Girgit now.’

‘Ah.’

Labord heard his disappointment and pushed on.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘Tell me why I should be so cautious of Singh.’

Drongo stopped suddenly, forcing Labord to halt too. They were on one of Raipur’s highways; scooters buzzed past them in both directions, motorised carts, bikes and every now and again a car. Crowds of people walked along the streets, carrying baskets of food, children on their hips or large jugs of water balanced on their head.

Labord instinctively wanted to walk back the way he had come, to hid in the quieter streets and alleys he was now so used to. But Drongo wasn’t looking at the people or at Labord, he was looking up at the sky and smiling.

‘Look there,’ he said, pointing. ‘Can you see those geese up there? See the way they fly – the v-shaped formation?’

‘Yes,’ he said, looking up. ‘What of them?’

‘See there? The goose who was in the lead is now falling behind and another one has taken its place. Now if you keep watching, you will see this happen again and again.’

Labord began to grow frustrated. He didn’t see how this had anything to do with Singh, in fact he was quite certain it had absolutely nothing to do with *any* of his questions. He heatedly said so to Drongo.

‘No, no!’ Drongo assured. ‘Don’t you see? It was geese that Rosh and I used to be; not ‘lion’ and ‘tiger’. That was how we ran things; we took turns leading, and we worked together, the whole pack – as one. It was good and it worked.’ He smiled at the memory.

Labord sighed in frustration. ‘But Drongo,’ he pleaded, his patience all faded, ‘What did Singh *do*?’

His face dropped and he looked at Labord calmly, then he sighed and finally told Labord everything.

Singh wasn’t an orphan but a runaway child from an abusive household. *He* saved Drongo’s life four years ago when he had first entered the streets, *he* was the one to help Drongo form the pack and *he* was the one who thought of survival above all else.

He was the one who, for survival alone, had almost killed Drongo for leadership and had forced him to leave the pack.

Labord didn’t want to believe it... but he also knew it was surely true.

He left Drongo in a hurry, hoping that the distance between them might help him to think. But it did not.

The further from Drongo he walked, the closer to the Ghar he became – the closer to Singh.

He could not just forget this and go on. Being in the pack had so changed his life that just the sight of Drongo reminded him of what he had so narrowly escaped. He couldn’t sit idle and condemn Drongo too.

He knew what he had to do.

It was dark when he walked purposefully into the Ghar and straight towards where Singh sat with the other nine members of the pack.

Singh noticed him straight away and stood.

‘Where have you been?’ he asked harshly.

‘Out talking to Drongo,’ Labord answered, looking him in the eye.

Were it not so dark, Labord would have seen Singh’s face pale, as confusion then understanding crossed his face. His mouth opened then closed and he was noticeably unsure exactly how much Labord knew.

Their silent confrontation had caught the attention of the other pack-members, who waited silently aware of the tension.

Labord's heart beat furiously and the adrenaline pounding in his head pulled the words to his lips.

'Why did you do it?'

'I don't know what you are taking about,' Singh answered calmly.

Labord stiffened and clenched his jaw. 'Are you really going to deny that you unfairly banished the former pack-leader?' He spoke loud enough that an audible murmur rose from the pack on his right.

'What's he talking about Singh?' Hiran asked, stepping forward.

'Did you say Drongo?' another voice asked. 'I remember him. He disappeared last year.'

'No, Singh kicked him out,' Labord declared and pointed an accusing finger. 'He almost killed him, and he kept it a secret from all of you.'

'Singh is this true?' Lomadi came forward warily.

'Baagh was a leading us nowhere. I did it for all of you,' he proclaimed. 'I did it for the pack. For us!'

Those of the pack who were not already standing, jumped to their feet.

'Drongo was our leader! How could you do this?' they all exclaimed.

Singh tried to calm their accusations, but his voice was drowned out by the others who clearly remembered who their true leader was. Singh began stepping away from the pack in retreat. He looked to Labord who had stepped forward and now stood with the whole pack behind him.

'You won't last a week with that broken tiger leading you,' he spat.

Labord grinned. 'Who said anything about a tiger?' he said. 'We are all geese here.'

**Commented [R1]:** Is he spitting as in how he speaks, or is he actually spitting as in expelling saliva on the ground – because if the first is the case, the full stop in the dialogue should be a comma.