

## A View from the Top

by Robert D. Shepherd

“Uneasy lies a head that wears a crown.”

—William Shakespeare,  
*King Henry the Fourth, Part II*

As the first rays of sun struck the upper forest canopy, Mkuru (*um-kur'-u*) started awake. What had he been dreaming? He closed his eyes and thought about it. Slowly, like a dim and distant memory, the dream came back to him. In the dream he had been sitting by the river at the end of the day. Mtoto (*um-toe'-toe*) was grooming him, pulling burrs and insects from his fur, which was still luxuriantly thick and black, though in places tipped with silver. Chongo, the child of Mzazi (*um-zah'-zee*), was playing—rolling away from her mother and then rolling back again. Then, as if she had bumped into a snake, Chongo screamed—“Wrraaah!” But it was not a snake she was screaming about. Creatures—what were they?—had appeared from among the trees, looming, black-furred, stamping and baring their teeth, flashing their red eyes.

At once, the troop scattered. There was just Mkuru, and the creatures were chasing him. He ran and ran and ran. He came to the cliff that overlooked the rift escarpment at the western end of his territory. There was no escape. The creatures were closing on him. One of them lifted a rock and threw it. Mkuru turned and leapt. He would be crushed on the rocks below. No. No. Somehow—how?—he was flying, like a great martial eagle. Somehow he landed on the far side of the gorge in a different land, a new land of waterfalls and tasty things to eat—fruits, nuts, berries, and termites. Paradise. This was his dream.

High in the miambo tree, on his bed of leaves and branches, Mkuru rolled over, stretched, and absent-mindedly scratched

his tummy with the powerful, thick fingers of one hand. Birds were beginning to twitter. The morning mist above the rain forest canopy was burning away. Where were Jura (*joo'-ruh*) and Puzo (*pooh'-zoh*)? Those big, lumbering idiots. Were they awake? Would they dare stir before him? As leader of the chimpanzee colony, Mkuru alone had the right to stir the others awake in the morning and to lead them in the day's foraging. Would Jura and Puzo dare?

At thirty-three, Mkuru was getting old for an alpha male, and it had not escaped his notice that Jura, backed up by his brother, Puzo, was showing little respect lately. Jura was also throwing his considerable weight around the colony, intimidating the others when he thought Mkuru wasn't looking. At four feet and 160 pounds, Jura was massive. Mkuru felt fear, then anger, leap in him like a gazelle. Immediately, he sprang from his bed and began crying out and swinging violently from branch to branch through the trees in which the others slept. The others, startled awake, crawled meekly from their beds and then, recovering from their shock, began chattering noisily.

All day, foraging in the trees, heading down to the river to drink, patrolling the perimeter of the colony's territory, and later, dosing in the late afternoon, Mkuru



couldn't get Jura and Puzo out of his mind. What if they sneaked up on him while he was sleeping? Jura could hurl rocks large enough to break heads.


Once, three years before, Mkuru had led the colony in war against the Mahasidi (*mah'-ha-zee'-dee*), a neighboring colony of chimpanzees. The Mahasidi chimps had attempted to capture Mzazi's new baby and for weeks had sneaked into Mkuru's territory to steal fruit and, perhaps, the occasional baby bushpig. There had been a decisive battle. Mkuru swelled with pride as he remembered the fear on the faces of the Mahasidi when they saw his display – his hair standing on end all over his body, his feet stamping, his arms beating angrily at the air above his head. Mkuru and his band of warriors, including the adolescent Jura, had charged the Mahasidi. The enemy had fled, leaving one of their number slain on the battlefield. Even then, Jura had been a fearsome fighter. What was he capable of now? Mkuru could only imagine. He shuddered.

The next day, the thoughts of Jura and Puzo became even more insistent, trailing Mkuru as a lion trails a nervous herd of wildebeest. Then, just before mid-day, Mkuru encountered the two coming in the opposite direction on a trail. They made no attempt to move aside. They headed brazenly toward Mkuru as though prepared to knock him from the path. Only at the last moment did Jura and Puzo part, making way for Mkuru and dipping their heads and shoulders in proper submission. Was that jeering on their faces? These young thugs. What were they planning?

That night, Mkuru could hardly sleep, thinking of them. After all he had done for the colony – overcoming the Mahasidi, maintaining order, protecting the weaker ones, after eighteen years as their leader, was it to come to this? Would he be disgraced? hurt? perhaps even killed? What was he if not their leader? Nothing. Worse than nothing. He could not let it happen. He would not. He would not! All night he wrestled in his dreams. The next morning Mkuru overslept. On waking, he sprang up frantically and displayed even more violently

than the day before, charging arm over arm through the trees, bending branches so low that they almost broke and with such force that the trees shook and several colony members fell from their beds. But everything was all right. Jura and Puzo sat watching but dared not move.

When the end came, it came swiftly. The colony was beginning to stir after a rain storm. Out of nowhere, Jura pounced, then Puzo, then two others who saw that the tide had turned. The whole colony watched, many certain that Mkuru would show them all his wrath, beat them down. But he didn't. He struggled free and stole away into the bushes, and that was that.

Later, as evening came, Jura sat on a hillside as the other colony members came to show their respects. Mkuru sat separately, at the edge of the colony. As darkness fell, Mtoto came to comfort him in what she knew would be his overwhelming grief. She sat beside him, then twisted round to look up at his face from below. That's when she saw that his ancient eyes were not stricken but merry. He patted her arm. Mkuru felt not grief but relief. There was a time to be powerful. There is a time to be wise. And there was wisdom in knowing the difference. 

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**A note to the teacher:** This story draws heavily on field studies of chimpanzees in the Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania. The names in the story are all proper nouns in Swahili:

*Mkuru* means “elder” or “leader.”

*Mtoto* means “child.”

*Chongo* means “one eye” or “only child.”

*Mzazi* means “one who gives birth.”

*Puzo* means “stupid behavior, foolishness”

*Jura* means “idiot.”

*Mahasidi* means “enemies.”

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