

KEEPERS OF THE DEEP

By rcheydn

Copyright © rcheydn 2011

All rights reserved

Cover

Cover by Graphicz X Designs (graphiczdesigns.zenfolio.com)

Introduction

Nikko is happily playing in the backyard of his home when a giant bird swoops down and clasps him firmly in its talons and soars back into the sky leaving his mother desperately crying behind.

And so begins an incredible adventure for Nikko in a fantastical land where the Leaf Children live in trees with magical musical leaves, where the Drongs wage wars against them, where the beautiful Gabrysia is captured, and where Nikko and his new friends must go to the Dead Place in a bid to rescue her.

For Nikko it is just the beginning of things to come.

Keepers of The Deep is a story of wonder, of friendship, of trust.

About the Author

rcheydn worked as a journalist for newspapers and magazines throughout Europe, Australia and the Far East for a decade before entering the world of public relations.

For the next twenty-five years he was a senior PRO in the United Kingdom, Australia and, for almost 20 of those years, in Hong Kong.

Then he established his own public relations company in London which is regarded as one of the most dynamic and innovative agencies of its kind.

Keepers of the Deep is his first children's book

He is also the author of the political thriller *The Catskinner* which was set in Hong Kong.

Following *The Catskinner* was a crime novel set in the United Kingdom, *The Feathers*.

He is now working on his next project.

Dedication

For Nicholas

Chapter One

Nicholas's mother had never been outside her homeland before so it was not surprising that when she went to live abroad with his father for the first time she found everything strange.

Most things were unusual: The hot summer with its damp nights and sweltering days, and the chilling winter cold that seemed to slice through the wooden walls and seep relentlessly up through the floorboards of the houses she said looked like they were standing on legs.

There were other peculiarities too: The electric light poles which jutted out of the sidewalks like primitive totem poles, everyone rode in cars and seldom went for strolls even after the strong sun had settled behind the surrounding hills, and the language. Nicholas's mother found them all difficult to accept at first, but after a time she began to get a little more accustomed to them, even though she still regarded them as odd.

On the other hand Nicholas who had been born shortly after his parents had arrived found everything in his short life fascinating. A day did not pass without his discovering something new and exciting. Hours would be consumed as he searched every corner of the house, or picked his way around the outside garden in search of new wonders.

One afternoon he was playing in the garden of his parent's house when a shadow passed across the lawn. It was there only a minute or a few seconds really, and then it was gone. So quickly that Nicholas himself hardly noticed it as he busily explored the grass where there was a world unknown to him.

"What was that," Nicholas' mother asked his father "Was it a plane?"

"No," he answered. "It is something you have to know about and be careful of when you are out in the garden with Nicholas. You see," he went on, "here is this country there are special animals and birds and creatures that you don't find in other places."

He told her of animals that hopped instead of walking, and of others that slept during the day and emerged only after darkness fell, or which seemed to fly through the air as they leapt from the branches of one tree to another. There were even birds that could not fly even though they had wings, and reptiles that had all the appearances of miniature dragons and dinosaurs.

Nicholas' father also told her about a rare bird that apparently lived high in the hills, far away from the hustle and bustle of the city. There were very few of them and it was most unusual for them to be seen. In fact, not many people were aware they even existed. They were called Speckled Sparrows and they were said to have a special liking for little children.

It was a huge bird that sometimes left the remote trees and, around dusk usually, flew off towards the crowded city. As it soared high over the houses it peered downward looking for boys and girls. When it saw one, said Nicholas' father, it swooped down and in its long, strong claws picked up the child and carried it off.

"Oh, stop it," said his mother. She knew her husband liked teasing her and there were many times he had told her stories she had believed only to learn later he had been joking.

One day," she said, "you will tell a story too many." And with that she picked up Nicholas and went in to the house to prepare dinner.

The next day Nicholas' father went off to work as he always did and after having her own breakfast and doing some chores his mother went into the garden to water the plants. As it was summer the sun already beat down, sucking the night dew aloft.

Nicholas wailed loudly. He did not like having to stay inside his room playing with his toys when he knew his mother was outside. They were interesting enough but he preferred to be outside crawling around among the leaves and climbing on the handle of the metal clothes hoist. So he scrambled over the polished floor to the back door and carefully and very slowly worked his way down the single step. His mother kept a watchful eye on him and decided it was alright if he stayed out in the sun for a short time while she gave the flowers and ferns a good soaking.

Nicholas crawled around happily picking up twigs and leaves and holding them precariously in tiny fingers, sometimes putting them in his mouth, but quickly spitting them out again. Ants tickled his toes and he searched for them in the grass. The sun was hot but Nicholas' mother was pleased he was getting some colour onto his skin and was no longer pale. A few minutes outside would not hurt.

Suddenly it was very still and Nicholas' mother began to feel the oppressive heat as all breeze dropped and a single cloud above drifted past the sun allowing unhindered rays to stream down. It was so warm she purposely allowed the water to sprinkle on her feet. The cool spray soothed her. Just as she was beginning to feel better there was a flapping sound and Nicholas gave a cry.

His mother turned around to see a huge brown and yellow bird holding Nicholas in its claws and lifting him off the ground, its large wings beating the air and scattering dead leaves. She dropped the hose and cried out but the bird continued to flap its wings and rose into the air with Nicholas hanging helplessly below calling in his faint voice for his mother.

Within a short time the bird had climbed high into the sky, above the trees and was disappearing towards the south. Then it was gone from view. And Nicholas was gone too, leaving his mother calling after him far behind. The Speckled Sparrow, for that was what it was, a rare Speckled Sparrow just as Nicholas' father had described, flew for miles, far away from the city and into the hills.

Nicholas was held firmly in its talons, but it was a grip that was not painful. The bird changed course and turned east, soon crossing the sandy coastline and headed out over the sea. It flew on, far over the water, until in the distance an island appeared and the Speckled Sparrow began to slow and gradually fly lower. Undoubtedly it was going to land on the island, which as it got nearer, looked very lush and green with hardly any surrounding beach.

As the bird descended into the thick growth, with Nicholas dangling beneath with his eyes wide, the tallest of the tall trees seemed to shimmer and shake with excitement. The closer he came Nicholas could see the trees were a lot bigger than he had thought. They were, he was soon to find out, the most unusual trees in the world.

The trunks were enormous and measured in a few cases many meters around. Generally they were no smaller than ten meters in circumference and had windows, not holed but actual windows, which had been apparently cut into the sides. And for a moment Nicholas imagined he saw inquisitive faces peering out of a few of them.

The leaves were remarkable. There was no doubting they were unlike any leaves he had ever seen before, either lying on the grass in his backyard or rustling on the trees around

the fence. They glistened in the sunlight and shook gently even though there was not the slightest wind. The sound they made was as if orchestras of forest elves were playing sweet lilting tunes with the sole purpose of creating peaceful and tranquil thoughts. And with every note the leaves almost imperceptibly changed their hue to a more delicate and softer shade of pastel green.

Nicholas' eyes grew wider and wider, all the more so as he realised there were indeed faces behind some of the tree windows, and there were more partly hidden by branches at varying levels between the ground and the tree tops.

The Speckled Sparrow flew noiselessly into the forest until quite suddenly it lifted its head slightly and dropped onto a thick branch of a huge tree, gently nudging Nicholas forward on his bottom with two skipping bumps.

He looked around startled.

The bird perched motionless, the leaves continued their colourful ballet, the elfin orchestras played their delightful compositions, and mysterious faces appeared momentarily and shrank quickly from his glances.

What seemed like ages passed before anything happened. Nicholas had been too stunned to move. But move he did when he heard from below: "Who are you then?"

He jerked his head down and there standing in the cleft of two branches was a young boy about his own age, his feet planted arrogantly astride and his thumbs stuck in his breeches at the sides.

"I said, what's your name?" the boy repeated. This time he was somewhat more demanding in his question.

"Oh, I'm Nikko," said Nicholas shyly.

"What sort of name is that?" demanded the boy, adding a jutting chin to his manner. "I've never heard it before. Sounds funny to me."

Naturally Nicholas was very confused. "Nikko is what my mother and father call me. I think my real name is Nicholas though. But I like Nikko better."

He wanted to ask the other boy what his name was, but he was too shaken and shocked to say anything more. He was still thinking this when the boy spoke again.

"Come with me," he said. "Come on. Hurry up." With that he turned and opened a window in the tree trunk and disappeared inside, still with his thumbs in his breeches in a very cocky manner.

Nikko did not want to stay sitting on the branch with the giant bird staring at him and with the feeling that many strange pairs of eyes were peeking at him. So he stood up and followed the boy, hitching his own breeches which had slipped around his knees during the long flight and bumpy landing. Warily he climbed in through the window and found himself in a large room.

The first thing Nikko noticed was that he was not alone. A group of boys and girls stood motionless around the sides staring at him. They looked just like him with the breeches securely fastened at the front and wearing pale green shirts. The one thing that instantly stood out with all the children was that they were scrubbed clean with big round brown eyes. And each carried a tiny bow and arrows on his back, even the girls. Having been playing in his own back garden before he was carried off Nikko was rather grubby with dirt on his hands and feet, and he felt a little embarrassed.

Above them where the ceiling would have been if the room had one, which it didn't because there seemed to be no roof and there was only a hint of light at the top, there

were miniature chandeliers,. They were not fixed to anything, and from time to time they rotated slowly clockwise, casting rays of green light on the walls which were covered with shelves stocked to overflowing with toys Nikko had never seen the likes of before.

His attention was interrupted by the arrogant boy who had spoken to him outside.

“Who are you,” the boy asked with the emphasis on the *are* this time.

“I told you before. My name is Nicholas or Nikko. I prefer Nikko.”

“Don’t be rude,” said the boy. “Just answer the question. If I want to ask it again I will. And I do so I will. Who are you?”

Nikko once more told him his name, and as he did so he looked at the other children who had said nothing and had not moved. They stood there staring at him with their big brown eyes.

“What are you doing here?” continued the boy. “Why did you let Torpah take you away from where you were?”

Nikko told the boy he did not *let* anyone take him away from his home. He had been happily exploring in his garden when the big bird carried him off.

“That big bird, as you call it,” chastised the boy, “is Torpah. And he doesn’t just carry off anyone.”

Nikko was about to ask why he had been singled out by Torpah when a pretty little girl stepped from behind some of the children and put her hand on the elbow of the boy, quietening him. She was the only one who did not carry any weapons, but she did wear a thin gold chain around her neck from which hung a shiny red marble.

The lights suspended in the air danced around, the sound of the sweet music from all the leaves seemed to grow louder and all the children, even the inquisitive boy, appeared to move slightly back.

“Jason sometimes thinks everyone should be as smart as he is, and know everything he does,” she whispered. “Welcome to the trees. And please, don’t be afraid.”

Nikko was not really frightened. He didn’t exactly know how he felt. If he thought about it he guessed he would probably have said he was mostly mystified. Apart from the boy Jason who had been his inquisitor, and the only one to speak to him before the girl, nothing else had caused him alarm. Even the flight in the claws of the Speckled Sparrow had been more of an adventure.

The girl continued: “My name is Gabryisia and we are the Leaf Children. You might have felt outside that you were being spied on by someone you couldn’t see. There are a lot of us here. But most of our family are very shy and hide when a stranger comes. Don’t mind them. They will come out and meet you after a while.”

Nikko continued to look around him at the other children. There was something else about them he had not realised before which surprised him now because it was so obvious. They all acted so grown up. They were apparently only the same age as he was but their manner they were so much older. They seemed confident and obviously perfectly capable of looking after themselves very well.

Jason over exemplified the confidence of the group with his arrogance, but there was quiet strength in the other children. He wanted to ask Gabryisia how they all got there and where in they were. Many other questions too.

Such as why he had been brought to the island and most importantly how long he was going to have to stay before he would be allowed to go home. After all, he was certain his mother would be worrying about him. But another of the children came forward, the

smallest boy in the room who was less tidy than the rest. His breeches hung lower and he had a tiny bow, but there were no arrows in his quiver.

He came up to Gabrysia's side and stated rather sternly: "Your eyes are green."

Before Nikko could say anything himself the little boy spoke again. "We all have brown eyes. Even Gabrysia doesn't have green eyes."

The girl, who clearly was the leader of the children, put her arm around the small boy's shoulder and spoke very gently. "Jordon, don't be so impolite. And where are your arrows? What have you done with them this time?"

The boy dropped his eyes to the floor. "I don't know. I lost them again."

Jason snickered but was hushed with a quick glance from Gabrysia who spoke to the small boy once more. "Go outside and try to find them Jordon. Get someone to help you look, but remember not to go far. Stay close by."

However, before he could take a step the leaf music took on a very agitated note, and everyone in the chamber started. They looked at one another and then to Gabrysia who spoke sharply. "Call the others in quickly. Jason, get your group into position."

Immediately there was action as the children ran off in different directions and the leaf music became a continuous urgent rustle.

Nikko did not know what to do and stood watching the hectic activity without the slightest idea of what was going on. The girl Gabrysia had disappeared through the window and Jason had followed out the same way. Other children scampered up rope ladders that had dropped from above and still others had opened unseen trapdoors in the floor and slipped through them.

Nikko thought he was going to be left alone to fend for himself until little Jordon appeared at his side and took his elbow. "Come on," he said. "Come and watch the fun." And with that he led Nikko to one of the trapdoors where a rope ladder took them down to the ground.

There he opened a door and motioning Nikko to follow ran very fast on his bandy little legs across the grass to a smaller tree about twenty meters away. He opened a hidden door where another rope ladder hung.

Following the smaller boy Nikko climbed higher and higher carefully going up hand over hand and mindful to make sure his feet gripped the rungs tightly so he didn't slip. Eventually they reached the top of the rope, raised themselves through another trapdoor and once again stood in a chamber similar to the one they had just left.

Jordon repeated his earlier instruction "Come on. Come and watch the fun."

Chapter Two

When Nikko followed Jordon outside onto a platform built across two sturdy branches high in the tree he looked around and could not believe his eyes.

On similar platforms in surrounding trees scores of children stood and sat chanting an enormous noise and waving their bows in the air. Far below on the ground a small group of about ten boys and girls crouched behind tree trunks and bushes.

Gabrysia could not be seen anywhere but there was no mistaking Jason. As usual he was standing clearly visible in a small clearing, his legs planted astride and his thumbs thrust into his breeches.

Following the direction Jason was facing Nikko caught sight of movement, movement that was unclear for a minute or two but which then became the scattered members of a second group of children.

“There they are,” shouted Jordon. At the same time the chanting from the trees died down and everything was very still as the children watched the scene on the ground.

Nikko did not know exactly what to expect, but he felt sure there was going to be a battle of some sort between Jason and a group of children who were apparently members of the Leaf family as Gabrysia had called them, and a group of other children who he imagined were not part of the family.

“Who are the others?” he asked. “What’s going to happen?”

Very quietly, almost inaudibly, Jordon answered without taking his eyes off the scene below. “It’s a war. They are our enemies and they try to make us leave the trees, but each time we drive them back. We’ve been fighting them for as long as I can remember.”

“They are called Drongs,” continued Jordon. “They try to make us leave the trees so they can get all our toys and things.”

On the ground the two groups of children were getting closer and Nikko could now see that the Drongs were very different. Those he could make out were filthy. They had incredibly dirty breeches and torn shirts which had not been washed in a long time. The faces of the children were smeared and their hair was black and matted. Like the Leaf Children they carried bows and arrows. When they were only about thirty meters apart the two groups stood up and shouted at each other and generally acted very threateningly. Soon the Drongs started shooting their arrows and it was only then that Nikko realised they did not have sharp dangerous points. Instead they had little plastic balls which when they landed splashed yellow dye or paint everywhere.

It wasn’t long before many of the trees and bushes, and much of the grass was covered in yellow dye. But very few of the Leaf Children were stained. For that matter very few of the Drongs were marked either. Those who were had patches of bright red on their tunics because the Leaf Children had bubbles of red solution on their arrows.

Once the shouting started the onlookers in the trees resumed their loud chanting and it became a raucous din, drowning out the shouting of the opposing sides.

Jordon must have been one of the loudest even though he was one of the smallest and so carried away he almost fell off the platform and Nikko had to physically hold him back more than once.

It was not long before both sides had used up their arrows and there was a lull when nothing happened. Then they charged each other and there was a mighty wrestling session with children falling over each other and rolling around in the grass locked in one

another's arms. They squirmed and huffed and puffed all trying to get on top of one another and pin their opponents to the ground...

The chanting from the trees got noisier and Nikko by this time was almost pinning Jordon to the planks of the platform to prevent him from dropping into the melee unintentionally. Suddenly out of the bushes stepped Gabryisia. Her golden hair shone and her clear brown eyes glistened as she called out: "Stop! Stop!"

Nikko thought her call would have no effect with the fierceness of the wrestling on the ground, but incredibly the two sides stopped at once with the brawling boys and girls remaining in their entwined positions like frozen statues.

A tallish boy walked from behind a tree carrying a large silver ball in his hand and wearing an elegant white beret at a jaunty angle. He was obviously the leader of the Drongs despite his comparatively clean and snappy appearance, and it was also clear that he was not afraid of anything that confronted him.

"Well Gabryisia," he began. "This is not like you to interfere with a bout. What are you doing down on the ground and why have you stopped the fun?" As he said this the boy narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to one side so that it looked as if his beret might well slide off.

"It is not fun Kerry," said Gabryisia. "And it is not normal for you to show yourself either. You usually skulk around in the background giving orders but you never risk anything on your own. You always let the others take the chances." She looked at the children who had begun to disengage themselves and form into two ranks behind their respective leaders. The children in the trees had stopped their noise and were watching the development closely. The leaves were rustling no more and it was as if the world had stopped to watch what happened next.

The boy laughed and patted two of his group on the shoulders. "We were just about to give you a good licking this time. Before you stuck your nose in."

Jason leapt forward and was about to strike the Drong leader when Gabryisia called sharply: "Jason! Stop it. This whole business is stupid."

"Stop it?" said the Drong leader. "Why should we stop now? We're having a great time. Are you afraid of losing Queen Gabryisia?"

When he used the title *queen* the Drong was not being polite and showing respect for Gabryisia. He was, rather, being facetious and displaying his derision. The last thing he considered Gabryisia to be was a queen. To him she was a little goody goody who deserved a "good licking".

That was something he had been trying to do for a long time but he had always been unsuccessful and had had to retreat to his hidden camp. Each time he blamed the fighters and usually took out his anger on one, often the weakest. The result was they feared him even more.

"Kerry," said Gabryisia calmly, "your bad manners and cheekiness does not hurt me. It hurts only yourself. All you are doing when you act that way is to show everyone how nasty you really are. So why don't you just listen and try to do something that would be good for all of us and not only you?"

The Drong leader laughed, throwing his head backwards so that his beret actually did fall off and land in a clump of red stained grass. Quickly picking it up and trying to brush off the stain, which only made it worse as his fist succeeded in spreading the offending mark, the boy glared at Gabryisia and then at the group behind her, one by one.

“You silly fool,” he spat. “I will never give up trying to beat you. I will go on and on until I win the trees and then I will take all your stupid toys and throw them on a big pile of grass and burn them. You will never see them again.”

He paused and then said: “You have a mistake Queen of the Leaves. This time you’ll see how smart I am.” And with that he tossed the silver ball that was in his hand high into the air over his head. As the sunlight struck it there was an enormous burst of white light which blinded the Leaf Children who had not had time to raise their arms to protect their eyes.

The Drong leader rushed forward and grabbed Gabrysia’s arms. Simultaneously two of his soldiers threw a bag over her head and together they lifted her off the ground and bundled her off into the trees. The other Drons also dashed forward and pushed all the Leaf warriors to the ground before turning and following their leader. Suddenly they were all gone.

The silver ball glowed brilliantly for another few seconds and then simply exploded in an even brighter light.

When the Leaf warriors had recovered and struggled to their feet they were alone. The Drons had vanished and with them Gabrysia. There was almost total silence.

High in the trees the Leaf Children, so rowdy a few minutes before, were now mute. They were utterly shocked and seemed not to comprehend what had taken place. On the ground the children looked left and right, noticing they were all present, but also instantly aware that Gabrysia was missing.

“Gabrysia! Gabrysia! Where are you?” called Jason. “Gabrysia!”

There was no response.

On the platform where Nikko had been watching the battle Jordon was crying with tears rolling down his face, leaving thin watery marks before dropping off his chin onto the planks where they left a damp dark brown stain.

“Where’s Gabrysia?” he asked plaintively. “What have they done wither?”

He was about to start crying again when there was a shout from below. “The necklace. I’ve found Gabrysia’s necklace.”

“Come on Jordon,” said Nikko, “Let’s go and see what we can do help the others,” and he helped the youngster to his feet and together they climbed down the rope ladder to the ground where all the warriors were gathered in a huddle.

Jason had the gold chain in his hand and was looking at it when Nikko and Jordon approached. He seemed uncertain what to do but when he saw Nikko he turned on him and said: “It’s all your fault. Before you came here we always won the battles. But now we lost and they have taken Gabrysia away with them. We will never see her again.”

Nikko wanted to protest but Jason would now allow him. He went on: “Why have you come and done this to us? Everything was alright before. You are probably a spy and planned the whole thing.”

He grabbed Nikko by the arm and pushed him backwards so that he stumbled over a branch and fell. Jason and the others advanced and were about to set on him when out of the sky swooped a huge bird and flapped its wings violently.

It was Torpah and he settled on the ground in front of Nikko facing the group with his wings spread wide.

Nikko sat up and Jordon came over to him cautiously to help. “Are you?” he asked. “Did you come here to make trouble for us?”

“No,” replied Nikko. “I didn’t even know any of you existed until Torpah brought me here. Against my will. How could I be a spy?”

“Why did Torpah bring you then?” demanded Jason. “What is so special about you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe it’s because he has green eyes and we all have brown,” suggested Jordon.

“Quiet,” said Jason sharply. He then added: “Alright, maybe he’s not a spy, but we have to decide what to do. The Drongs have captured Gabryisia and we have to figure out how we are going to get her back.”

As he was saying this Torpah hopped forward on his two big feet and picked up the gold necklace which Jason had forgotten and dropped when the big bird came to Nikko’s rescue. He hobbled back to where Nikko was sitting and offered it to him in his beak.

Nikko did not know what to do. He just stared at the chain and then looked at Jason.

Torpah inched closer with a hobbling step again and once more proffered the necklace. This time Nikko very carefully took it from the bird’s beak and as soon as he held it in his hands the red marble lit up in a dazzling glow. Nikko dropped it on the ground in fright.

As the glow suddenly died Jordon picked it up and slowly hung it around Nikko’s neck. Instantly the marble radiated its bright glow again and Torpah gave a piercing shriek that made the hairs on the back of the children’s necks stand on end. He then flapped his giant wings and flew off above the trees and disappeared, his shrieks getting fainter and fainter.

Chapter Three

“So, what are we going to do?”

The question was posed by Jason and it was the fourth time someone had asked. He and about fifteen other Leaf Children were sitting in a half circle with Nikko rather self consciously in the middle facing them.

One of the children, a young girl with long brown hair that flowed down her back in curls, spoke up. “You tell us Nikko. You have the necklace. You are our new leader.”

From the time he had had the chain placed around his neck and the marble had shone, which it continued to do, Nikko had been not only accepted into the family but held as their leader. Even Jason agreed reluctantly at first, and then more readily regarded him as the senior member. That did not mean he lost his arrogance. Far from it. Jason maintained his manner and made it quite plain that if Nikko was the Number One then he was Number Two.

The children were all looking at Nikko for an answer and he knew he had to give them a good one. There could be no uncertainty or indecision. He knew that, in a way, his future with the Leaf Children depended on how he was going to lead the rescue of Gabrysia. Indeed, his entire future depended on it.

Well,” he started. “First, we have to find out where the Drons have taken her.”

He looked into their faces and continued. “If I understand what you said before your search parties in the past didn’t find anything. Where have you looked?”

“We looked everywhere.” It was Jason who answered. “We went out to the north and the south and then east. Nothing but empty forest.”

“What about the west? Didn’t you look there too?”

“There is nothing there. Once you go about a kilometre the trees end and there is nothing but rocks and sand hills. It’s known as the dead Place.”

“Are you sure there could be nothing there? A camp hidden in the hills?”

“It has always been known as the Dead Place,” said Jason. “No-one has ever seen anything there.”

Jordon interrupted. “Venki went there once. Ad when he went back we didn’t see him again.”

“Be quiet brat,” said Jason and glared at the younger boy.

“Who is Venki?”

“Who is this Venki, and what was he doing here?” repeated Nikko when he received no immediate response.

There was a brief silence and then the girl with the long curls spoke. “He was our leader before Gabrysia. He went to the dead Place looking for one of our family who had disappeared and he thought the Drons might have taken him. But he came back and said he could find nothing. Then he said he was going back to have a closer look at the Dead Place and we never saw him again. At least that’s the story that has been passed down to us. It was before our time too.”

“Maybe we should look again,” suggested Nikko. “There must be a reason why this Venki didn’t come back. He couldn’t have just disappeared like that.”

There was a general fidgeting by the children as they exchanged glances. There was an air of fear in the room and Nikko sensed they all suspected he was right but did not have

the courage to agree in case the next decision was for someone, maybe one of them, to go to the Dead Place and see what was there.

They were absolutely correct in their worrying assumption for Nikko elected to reinforce his position. If he was going to be ultimately held responsible for either finding Gabryisia or leading a search party that turned up nothing, he was not going to neglect any possibility. Even if it meant facing the mystery of the Dead Place.

“We will go there,” he stated, “First thing in the morning some of us will set out.

We will have to leave early because it is a long way and we don’t want to have to spend the night there if it is as desolate as you say.”

There was an audible shiver in the chamber, and again all present looked sideways to one another, asking in their eyes if they or their companions would be chosen.

Little Jordon stood up and said firmly: “I’ll go. Please Nikko, can I come with you?”

“Don’t be silly, squirt,” said Jason. “You’re too small and would get in the way. Anyway, you keep losing your arrows and if you came you would probably lose yourself. Then we would have to go looking for you too.”

“I will not,” said the boy. “Please Nikko. Can I come?”

Nikko thought for a moment and said: “I think Jason is right Jordon. You are too small for this. We might actually find the Drongs and have to do battle with them. You could get hurt. Why don’t you stay here this time and help the others look after things.”

Jordon was about to protest but sat down and sniffed a few times before lapsing into silence with his eyes downcast.

“I will go of course,” said Jason. “And I suggest five others come with us. We don’t want too many to go crashing through the forest making all sorts of noise. Also we have to leave a good group behind as defenders just in case.”

He looked at Nikko who did not disagree. Jason immediately went on: “Those who will come are Fallon, Danielle and Simon.” He paused before adding: “Porky, you and Josh should be with us too.”

Seated to the left of Nikko, nearest the doorway, a fat boy with ruddy cheeks and blonde hair that seemed to stick out from his round head in all directions, smiled broadly. “Great,” he said and slapped the boy next to him on the knee. His friend, who was facially the mirror image of Porky, also grinned and said “Great.”

Nikko was to learn later the two boys were identical twins whose names were Joshua and Mordacai. They were alike in every way except Mordacai was a lot heavier. They both ate huge amounts of food but for some reason while Mordacai expanded sideways Joshua kept a slim figure. He also kept an abbreviated proper name whereas his brother was soon to become known to all simply as Porky.

They were excellent fighters who were not only skilful but who also loved to test their abilities in any way, whether it was in archery or physical combat, or in tracking or devising tactics. The others in the intended search party would be glad to have them along.

As much as Porky and Josh were alike, Fallon and Simon were dissimilar. They were about the same height and weight with fair hair and brown eyes of course, but Simon was the most talkative member of the Leaf Children. He would enter any conversation and attempt to take it over completely with his incessant patter. Fallon was the complete opposite. Comments had to be prized out of him and then they were more often than not limited to a single word.

Oddly enough they seemed to seek out each other's company and it was quite amusing to see them together with Simon merrily chatting away without taking pause for breath and Fallon seeming never to say anything. He either agreed with everything Simon said, the others remarked, or he simply didn't listen or couldn't be bothered to comment.

To be fair Fallon was the strong silent type. Literally he was the strongest boy in the forest having proved this one day when a branch from a tree was blown down in a gale and finished up on top of one of the girls who had against all caution ventured outside. He had heard her cries for help and had gone into the story and by himself lifted the branch off her legs so she could crawl away. After the storm passed and the wind had died down two other boys had tried to move the branch nearer the tree so they could break it up for firewood. But they couldn't budge it.

His silent side was evident when he was asked how he had managed to do it him self. Fallon merely replied: "Had to."

"That's it then," said Jason. "The seven of us will leave when the sun rises tomorrow. In the meantime we had better spend the rest of the day getting ready and making sure everything is alright while we are gone."

Later Nikko approached Jason who was filling water bottles made out of small twigs covered with layers of sap from the trees. The resin set firm and prevented any liquid leaking out and at the same time ensured the bottle was not broken if it was dropped. This method was also adopted in the making of doors and windows and trap doors. Thin layers also protected ropes.

Nikko called Jason to one side. Making certain that no-one else was within hearing he said: "Tomorrow could be very dangerous you know. We don't know what we will find or what will happen. Do you think we should be taking Danielle with us? She is just a girl."

Jason looked at him and then roared with laughter. "Just a girl," he spluttered. "You wait. You'll find out she not just a girl." Then he added: "Don't worry. She'll be OK." Then he thumped the stopper in the water bottle and walked off, still laughing.

For the rest of the day the children prepared for their trip and helped make sure they were leaving all in order at the camp. Precautions were outlined numerous times and lookout positions posted, arrows apportioned out and windows and doors checked. Ropes were tested and then everything was scrutinized again.

By nightfall everyone was satisfied with the arrangements and they retired to their tree chambers to get a good sleep. But Nikko did not sleep well. He tossed and turned fitfully with his thoughts racing over the day's adventures already and those which he might experience the next.

When he did finally fall asleep he dreamed of his home and pictured his mother and father sitting in the lounge of their house watching television and talking. In his dream each of them left what they were doing from time to time and went into his room where he saw himself lying in his cot with his quilt kicked to one side and his toys arranged around him. His parents would bend over him to see he was alright and then stand by the side of his cot smiling at him before tip toeing back down the hall to the lounge.

He dreamed the same scene over and over again throughout the night until he was jolted awake by Jason shaking him with an urgent: "Wake up. Come on. It's dawn and we have to get moving." His parents vanished and he was back in the chamber on a bed of soft warm leaves.

Within half an hour the seven children were ready and prepared to set out on the long trek to the Dead Place. The other children had gathered to farewell them and with final reminders of safety measures the group departed. Before they left Nikko gave the necklace with the red stone to a tall child named David. Someone had to be in charge during their absence and Nikko did not want to lose it while they were out exploring the unknown.

If they were not concentrating on what lay before them, known and unknown, they would have noticed that not all the children could be accounted for. Jordon was missing.

They headed west and walked until the sun had lost its pink tint and was a gleaming golden ball in the sky behind them. They trudged through the forest for about three quarters of a kilometer and then Nikko called a halt and ordered a rest and refreshments before they proceeded on the final stage.

Later, as they were about to continue on Danielle lightly caught Nikko's arm, and whispered to him and Jason nearby "Don't look now but someone is in the bushes to the left. There was some movement there and I thought I heard a sound."

Neither of them turned but Jason let his water bottle slide off his shoulder. It rolled a few feet in the direction of Danielle's warning and came to a stop. He casually walked to pick it up. Then at the last second he rushed towards the bushes. As he did so there was a scream and out through the brush hurtled Jordon yelling at the top of his voice. As he ran his little hands reached behind him into his breeches rubbing up and down briskly. Then he bent to rub his leg and fell heels over head landing in front of a dumbstruck Jason.

"You," bawled Jason. "What are you doing here?"

Jordon was rolling around on the ground trying to undo the pin on his breeches and at the same time undo his tunic straps.

"Yoowwie," he wailed. "Ants. I've got ants all over me. Get them off me please. Oowww! Oowww!"

Nikko could see the ants, big black ones, all over his legs and on his shirt. Some were crawling up on to his neck. He and Danielle quickly joined Jason and together they brushed the biting insects off the little boy's body. They could see there were already tiny red bumps which in a few minutes became larger and more nasty looking. By the time Jordon had refastened his pin and completely removed his top he was a mass of painful looking bumps and lumps.

"How did you get here?" asked Nikko. "You should be back at the camp. Why did you follow us?"

Jordon explained what he had done as he scratched at his legs, bottom and arms. It turned out he had risen before the sunrise and waited in the trees some distance to the west of the camp until the search party had headed off. Somehow he had managed to stay just in front to the side of them the whole time until they stopped to rest. He was tired too and sat down on the ground and closed his eyes for a while. The next thing he knew was that ants were crawling all over his legs and when he tried to brush them away they started biting him and he had to get up and run to try to avoid being what he feared was eaten alive.

"You stupid little brat," Jason said. "You could have ruined everything. What are we going to do now?" Then he answered his own question: "We'll have to take him back."

"No time," said Fallon.

“Fallon’s right,” agreed Simon. “It’s too late and we’ve come too far to turn back now. By the time we reached the camp we would not have enough time to come back and still have a good look at the Dead Place. We’ve already walked about seven hundred meters by my count and it has taken this long. Also the water would have to be fetched again and then it would be another long walk back. We would not reach this point again until afternoon. Then we would have only an hour or....”

“Agreed,” interrupted Fallon.

“He’ll have to come with us,” said Nikko. They had no choice. Jordon would have to join them or they would have to put off their search until tomorrow. The sun was already approaching the high point.

“You should have seen yourself,” giggled Porky. “You stopped dead in your tracks when Jordon came bursting out of that bush. You looked like you had seen a bear.”

“Two bears” laughed Josh. “Two huge black bears charging. You look terrified. Dead in your tracks. If he had been two bears, or even one, you would have been. Dead, that is.”

Jason glared at the twins, his eyes blazing. “That’s it. Come on parrot. Can’t you say anything that fatty doesn’t start for you? Let’s see who’s afraid.”

Nikko stepped between them. “That’s enough,” he snapped. “Any fighting we do will be with the Drongs. Not ourselves.” He added quickly: “We have to get moving again. As Fallon said we have a lot to do yet and there’s not much time left. Josh, you take care of Jordon. Danielle and Jason will come with me in the lead.”

And with that he straightened his things and handing Jason his water bottle moved off.

The rest of the party fell into place with Jordon trailing, still scratching and rubbing his now swollen arms and legs.

As they had been walking through the forest Nikko had been able for the first time since his arrival to closely examine his surroundings. He observed that the musical leaves extended only in a relatively small perimeter around the tree camp and were to be seen nowhere else. In fact, the whole nature of the forest had changed dramatically once they were out of sight of the camp.

The Leaf Children lived in about a dozen trees scattered around a clear area of roughly two hectares. The border of the camp was marked by thickening scrubland where the trees were closer together and the undergrowth was dense. The further out one ventured the denser became the forest until about half a kilometer away it was more like a jungle than a forest where the tree tops almost blocked out the sun and the big green leaves of the ground plants slapped a person with waterladen plops and the tall grass made walking tiring.

Occasionally there were places where a big old tree had finally ended its life and come crashing down, clearing a space where it landed and making an opening for the warm rays to penetrate until the combination of water and sunlight fostered the regrowth of plants and the clearing eventually became overgrown again. It was in one of these recently created clearings that the search party had momentarily rested.

During the long hours of walking, and for that matter the brief stay in the camp, Nikko had not seen any birds or animals. Naturally he excluded Torpah from that observation but not a single bird had flown in the trees or any animals large or small passed within sight or hearing.

He had seen ants and Porky and Josh had referred to bears but he had not seen one or the tracks or any other signs of animals. Certainly no pets were kept by the Leaf Children.

The family had not talked about animals at all, but if he remembered correctly some of the toys on the shelves in the main tree chamber were dogs and elephants and so on and he thought he had seen a giraffe even. Most of them however he had not been able to recognize.

Nikko recalled his own toys he had to play with. There were plastic fish and two favourite green and blue turtles and a pink whale that he splashed around with in the bath, a large fluffy raccoon that was appropriately named Racky by his mother, a brown and white dog with large floppy ears and a cute little pink tongue that stuck out of its mouth, and a penguin dressed in a red tuxedo which left only the white breast and face showing. For a time he had also had real animals coming to see him.

A little black and white kitten had suddenly appeared one day and his mother and father had allowed it onto the house where it explored every room carefully and sniffed at him. The kitten visited a number of times but equally suddenly stopped coming which was a shame because he liked feeling its sleek fur and chasing it from room to room. A big black dog had also called on them and slept on the front steps during the night. But it too went away and never returned.

Nikko loved animals and was surprised why the Leaf Children did not have any as pets. It was certainly peculiar that the forest did not seem to harbour any at all. Maybe they were there but he just had not seen them. He made a mental note to ask someone about it when they got back to camp. For now though he had to concentrate on searching for Gabryisia and preparing for their arrival at the Dead Place.

The party continued through the jungle with the dropping leaves soaking their tunics. The further they walked the denser it seemed to get and Nikko began to wonder how far they would be able to go before the jungle prevented them from proceeding any further. But just as this thought was starting to really concern him the trees and scrub ended and white light struck their faces.

Someone might just as well have sheared off all the plant life in a straight line and then poisoned all the grass. For there in front of them lay a vast arid landscape. Not a single tree or bush. Not a blade of grass or indeed any life at all. There was only cracked brown earth rising in ranges of small to large hills covered with boulders.

It was as if a giant hand had torn some of the island away, squeezed every drop of life out of it, and then stuck it back, throwing rocks and stones all over it in an attempt to hide the damage it had caused. The peaks were mostly craggy and sharp and there was a steamy mist rising from the ground which made the horizon fuzzy and unclear.

The unhindered rays of the sun beat down on the land and the searchers could almost feel their damp bodies and clothes sizzle and dry out. The Dead Place was indeed very dead looking and resembled a cemetery with some of the boulders looking like rough headstones.

“Well, I think we’ve found it,” said Porky. He added without his usual grin: “And now that we have I’m not sure that I’m glad.”

“What an awful place,” joined in Jordon. “It looks like it’s cooking.”

Desolate was not an adequate description. Foreboding and evil was more appropriate and whoever had given it the name of the dead Place had been very perceptive, Surely nothing could live out there.

“Look at those hills and those rocks,” said Simon. “Some of them must be a hundred meters high and weigh tons. We can’t go out there. Half an hour in that sun without shade

at all and we'd probably fry and die. I'm already thirsty just standing here looking at it," and with that he took a long drink of water from his bottle.

Jason had said nothing but now he turned to the group. "Listen" he said. "We've spent hours getting here and we can't simply turn around and go back. We came to look for Gabryisia and she might be out there somewhere hoping we'll come and get her. So we can't go back without having a look. If we are careful and it doesn't take too long we can at least try."

Danielle nodded her agreement. "I think we should do as Jason says. We have to try."

Nikko had been scanning the area through squinting eyes. He too was deeply worried about venturing into the barren land but knew they must. He had not expected the Dead Place to be quite so terrible. So dead. A brief search was all they would be able to carry out.

He wiped the perspiration from his eyes. "There is no way we can just walk out there and wander around hoping to find Gabryisia. It would take us whole days and we could get lost. We don't even know how far the Dead Place extends." The others murmured their agreement. "What we'll do I think is head for that fairly big hill over there to the right. If we can climb it I think we might be high enough to get a good view of the land. We might save a lot of time and it could show the parts we should concentrate our search on." "Right," said Fallon.

The children checked their water bottles and using the straps from their tunics tied bunches of soggy leaves around their feet in rough fashioned shoes. Living in the forest where the grass was thick and soft they had not had to worry about their feet. But here in the blistering heat it was essential and it was Josh who had come up with the idea of the leaves and straps. He had also cautioned against removing their tops or they would be badly burnt so their garments hung loosely about their waists.

Cautiously they set off ever mindful of stepping around the rocks whenever possible because they looked sharp and were undoubtedly hot. It was relatively easy to concentrate on where they walked because they kept their faces down to avoid the persistent sun, and before long they were covered in perspiration and had to constantly wipe their eyes and brows. The sun burned into their shoulders and they could feel the moisture dribbling down their backs.

They walked in single file with Jason leading, followed by Nikko and the others and Josh bringing up the rear as guard, keeping a hand near Jordon in front of him. With brief upward glances to ensure they were heading in the right direction they reached the base of the hill Nikko had pointed out.

Rocks and dirt had tumbled down and formed a barrier around the bottom which they had to scramble over before they were able to tackle the slope. The hillside itself did not appear too difficult to climb. There were jutting ledges every few feet and rocky crevices they could put their feet into to help them up.

After a short pause to catch their breath they began the climb with Jason again going first and the others in order.

The hill was a lot higher than they had thought and despite its being relatively easy to scale they were exhausted after only twenty meters or so from having to exert themselves so much in the merciless heat. A few times young Jordon slipped but was grabbed by Josh and pushed back up to the next ledge and crevice.

Finally they reached a level very near the top, about fifty meters off the ground where a wide ledge formed a platform. Having all clambered onto it and taken deep hot breaths they looked around them.

The view was incredible. In a straight line from where they had come the jungle formed a solid wall as far as they could see. It looked impenetrable. To their right and left there was an endless expanse of nothingness. Hill after hill and countless boulders strewn haphazardly around. It was simply a lifeless land.

The group was speechless. No-one said anything for a long time. They could not take their eyes off the depressing scene and felt compelled to gaze in amazement.

It was Fallon who spoke the first uncharacteristic words. "This place is bad. Things have happened here which are evil. We must not stay." They were the longest sentences he had ever spoken but no-one noticed. All were captivated by the horror of the landscape before them.

None of them had ever witnessed anything like it in their lives. The Leaf Children had been protected by the forest with its verdant life. Nikko had only experienced his own home with its small garden and the various parks and similar gardens he had visited with his parents. The nearest he had been to such a barren place was the beach but that was quite different. This scene was utter desolation. There was nothing clean here, no water and any life that may have existed in the past had long expired.

Danielle broke the stunned silence. "I can't believe anyone could survive in this place. Even the Drongs would not possibly choose to live here. The jungle is better." She added: "What do you think Nikko? Do we waste time looking for Gabryisia here or do we go back and try the woods again?"

Nikko had been looking to the right, that is to say the north, studying the land as closely as he could through the heat and steamy air. There was a sense of sameness in every direction, but something was bothering him which he could not put his finger on.

"Umm," he answered. "Umm. I suppose so."

"What is it?" asked Jason. "You're not certain. Is it something you see or what? You're not considering going out there and turning over rocks or climbing more hills are you?"

Nikko continued his northerly gaze. "I suppose it is just the place. But something does bother me. I don't know what it is but something is not right here."

"We know that," said Porky. "It's like hell. Of course it is not right. In fact everything I can see is wrong. Just look at it. There is nothing but rocks and mountains and this awful heat. Another minute here and I will probably melt."

"Come on," said Josh. "We're wasting our time. Let's go."

"Just a minute," continued Nikko, waving his hand as if to ask them all to sit and be quiet. "We can wait a bit longer." Then he said: "Look. Tell me what you see there. Danielle?"

"Well, I can see forest or jungle very clearly. And I can see many hills, a dead tree, a lot of parched ground that looks like concrete and hundreds of boulders all over the place."

"Jason?"

"The same. Also the heat. I can feel it and see it too. It's stifling."

"Josh?"

"The same."

"Porky?"

“Me too.”

Fallon?”

“Same.”

“Simon?”

“I can’t see anything different.”

Nikko seemed to not to be satisfied still. “There is something,” he said. “I am sure of it.”

“I can see something,” said Jordon.

They all looked at him and Jason gave an exasperated hurrumph and asked impatiently:

“What can you see brat?”

“A dog,” he replied. “Up there. On the top of the hill over our heads. There’s a big black dog sitting near the edge watching us.”

The others quickly looked up, craning their necks and scanning the hilltop from one end to the other. There was nothing but the white hot sun burning into their eyes,

“What are you up to Jordon?” asked Josh. “There’s nothing there. It must be the heat and the haze. You’re seeing things.”

“We’ll all be seeing things if we stay here any longer,” added Porky. “I say we get back to the trees and the shade as soon as we can.”

“I saw it,” repeated the youngster. “I did truly. It was there.”

Simon wiped his forehead with his arm. “If there was a dog up there it is a pretty smart one. How could it have climbed up? We had enough trouble ourselves.”

They all agreed Jordon was imagining things and that the heat was playing tricks with his eyesight. On the other hand Jordon insisted he had seen an animal. And that’s where they left the argument as they prepared to climb back down the hill. As they were about to continue their descent over the side of the ledge Nikko clicked his fingers.

“That’s it,” he exclaimed. “I knew something did not fit.”

“What?” asked Danielle. “What is it?”

“Look again,” said Nikko. “Go on. Look carefully. What do you see out there?”

Jason answered. “We’ve already told you. Hills, rocks, a dead tree, heat, evil, misery, and more heat. There’s nothing else.”

“But that’s it,” said Nikko. “The tree.”

“What about it?” It was Danielle who asked trying to calm the others into listening for an explanation though she could not for the life of her imagine the importance of a tree.

“Don’t you see,” said Nikko. “There is only the one tree. Not another one anywhere.” He went on: “Where are the others? How come there is only that one? If there had been trees here in the past you would expect to find something remaining of them. But there is not even a branch or a tree trunk lying anywhere. Except for that one big dead tree with no branches, I find that peculiar.”

Nikko went on cautiously, almost like he was thinking aloud: “Assuming there were trees here before, where are the others? Assuming there was never any trees here where did that one come from? Either way I don’t know the answer.”

He turned and looked at the others’ faces. They did not reply. Nikko looked in the direction of the tree again and said: “I think we should check it out.”

“How far away is it?” asked Danielle. Then she added: “It’s getting late Nikko. Maybe we should leave it today.”

“You’ve got me curious now,” interrupted Simon. “I agree. It is odd. There are no others. That’s the only one and it looks pretty solid from here, Mind you, it is hard to tell from where we are. We are not even sure how far away it is. But it is a big one I reckon.” They exchanged comments and finally decided they would climb back down the hill and have a look from there to see if the perspective changed very much. If they thought they would be able to walk to the tree and then back to the jungle in an hour they would try it. That would still leave them a few hours or so to return to the camp before it got too dark.”

Twenty minutes later they were on the ground at the base of the hill, sweaty and irritable. Jordon was the first to speak. “I can’t see it,” he said. “It’s gone.” “Don’t be stupid,” said Jason. “You’re just a squirt. That’s why you can’t see it.” “No,” said Porky. “I can’t see it either. It’s gone alright. I’ll be blown.” “There are no hills between us and where it was,” said Simon. “There is nothing blocking our view except a few rocks. But they are not big enough to hide it.” “A tree doesn’t just vanish.” Jason was annoyed. He didn’t want to spend any longer in the hot sun. He was already burnt on the neck and arms and the tops of his legs were scratched and itchy. “It’s got to be there some place.” They peered towards where the tree had been, shielding their eyes with their hands. Porky and Josh even jumped up and down as though the extra meter’s elevation would result in the tree being visible.

“It’s not there,” he panted. “It’s definitely not there.” Nikko decided. “We can’t stay here jumping up and down and saying it is not there. We saw it. Come on, we have an hour before we have to get back so let’s use it usefully.” With that he took a sip of water from his bottle, adjusted his makeshift leaf sandals which were brittle and barely holding up, and started off. The others quickly did the same and fell into line.

The children walked almost parallel with the rim of the jungle, keeping it in sight as they were far from happy being alone and vulnerable in the Dead Place. They walked around rocks, occasionally slipping or stubbing their toes on the sharp jutting edges so that by the time they had gone about four hundred meters they were in no mood for Porky’s humour. “Once upon a time,” he began, “there was a magic tree that mysteriously appeared and disappeared in the desert. One minute you could see it and the next you couldn’t. One day some kids set out in the middle of the most unbearably hot day to try to find the answer to the mystery. They had no idea of where they were or what..”

“Shut up,” said Jason, “This is no time for joking. Where is that tree? It’s got to be here somewhere.”

Another two hundred meters and the party stopped. They were surrounded by low hills and rocks and boulders. They looked around them in desperation searching for anything that might be part of a tree or even a column of stone that they might have mistaken for a tall stump.

“I don’t understand it,” said Nikko. “We all saw it. There was a tree out here. Can anyone see anything at all apart from these confounded rocks?”

They were huddled together in what appeared to be a shallow crater with hills on all sides. Had they been looking down on themselves they would have realized this but as it was from where they were standing they had no way of knowing. Such was the deception

caused by the heat and blandness of the landscape that the children imagined they were walking on flat terrain.

"I can't see anything that looks like it might have once been a tree, let alone still it," offered Jason.

"We'll spread out," said Nikko. "But don't go far from one another. The last thing we need now is for anyone to get lost."

Danielle and Nikko would go around the dunes to the right, furthest from the jungle edge. Jason and Jordon would go further north just beyond the next hill behind a cluster of boulders that were perfectly round. And Josh and Porky would go east. Fallon and Simon were to remain where they were in order to keep the group's bearings and to be ready in support if anyone needed help. They fanned out and each pair soon faded into the hazy horizon, gradually appearing like mirages for a second or two before disappearing altogether.

When they were alone Fallon and Simon looked about them at the silence of the barren land, the oppressive heat almost clogging their nostrils and the sun though now lower in the west still watering their eyes. Simon examined his friend's face and then smiled. "The right side of your face is red. You look as if someone slapped you with a paint brush. Or if you had been hit with an arrow."

Fallon instinctively put his hand to his face and rubbed sweat from his brow. "You too," he said and moved off in the direction of the round boulders which Jason and Jordon had passed. There were about six of them and they formed a sort of triangle which at this time of the afternoon cast a small shadow across the narrow opening. Fallon crept in and sat tentatively on the ground and eased his back against the smooth surface of one of the boulders. It was remarkably cool after the glare that had endured since leaving the shelter of the tree.

Simon continued to stand in the open, a solitary figure watching Fallon who slowly closed his eyes and began to breathe in long deep breaths. Simon watched for a while and then turned about to face the way they had come.

"The others are not going to believe this," he said faintly, more to himself than to anyone else. "It is incredible. Just incredible. Who would believe there could be anywhere like this so close to the forest? A few hours walk from here and there is beauty and peace. We've only been gone a day and I long to be home again. I wonder what the others are doing@ Getting ready for the night I suppose. Playing their last games of the day or cleaning up before the meal. The leaves will be starting their night music and it will be getting dark. Not like here which wouldn't surprise me if it stayed hot and sunny twenty-four hours a day."

Simon heard Fallon grunt and he thrust his arms out wide and pivoted to look directly at the blazing sun. Closing his eyes he called: "Come on rotten sun. Burn if you want to. You won't beat us. We have a mission and we are going to complete it. We will find Gabrysia."

He stood, his head held high with his eyes screwed tightly shut until he felt the hot rays suck droplets of perspiration from his forehead which dropped down his cheeks and off the end of his nose and chin. Suddenly he dropped his head and shook it violently sending a shower of moisture left and right like a dog wagging itself dry after a dip in a pool.

“How long have the others been gone Fallon?” he asked. He blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes with the back of the thumb of one hand and repeated. “Fallon, how long have the others been gone?”

He looked up towards where Fallon was sitting, focusing slowly on the cluster of round boulders. Fallon was not there.

“Fallon, where are you?” he called again. Then more urgently. “Fallon! Fallon! Where are you?”

Fallon was nowhere to be seen. Simon was alone, surrounded by silent hills and unmoving rocks.

Nikko and Danielle were nearing the other side of the hill when they heard Simon’s shout. They ran towards the voice and burst into the opening to see Simon running in one direction and then another shouting at the top of his lungs: “Fallon! Fallon! Fallon!”

At almost the same time Josh and Porky appeared at the run, followed by Jason and Jordon whom they had met up with a few minutes before.

“He’s gone,” yelled Simon. “Fallon. He’s disappeared. He was sitting here asleep and when I looked again he had disappeared. Fallon!” he called once more.

Immediately the others joined in shouting Fallon’s name. But there was no response.

“Where was he?” demanded Nikko.

Simon led them over to the boulders. They looked very carefully and it was Josh who exclaimed: “Here. Look here.”

Porky added seriously. “There’s been a scuffle. Here. See these marks. It looks like there has been a fight or something.” He then turned to Simon. “Didn’t you see anything at all?”

Simon was flustered. He looked around the group, from one to the other. “No,” he said. “I wasn’t looking. I was thinking about home and cursing the sun and this place. Then when I turned back he had gone.”

“Did you hear anything?” asked Jason. “There must have been some noise. Fallon would have had up some sort of struggle. There is no way he would have gone quietly.”

Simon insisted he had heard nothing unusual. In fact the only sound Fallon had made was a grunt as a comment to a remark he had made.

Danielle intervened before the situation reached a stage where accusations were made and blame leveled unfairly. “What matters,” she said, “is what happened to Fallon. We agree he would not have been taken easily. But that is not the big question. What we should be trying to work out, and quickly, is where he was taken to and where his captors came from.”

She continued as they all quieted and watched her. “We were all out looking for the tree when it happened. And remember, we had all four directions covered. The six of us went south, east and west, and Simon was here watching the north at the time. So it seems that whoever, or whatever, took Fallon did not come from there.”

“Oh come on,” said Porky. “Are you saying the thing, whatever it was, dropped out of the sky, grabbed Fallon and then lifted him up and carried him off? Without him calling out for help?”

“What I’m saying,” said Danielle, “is that we had all four land directions covered.”

“That leaves up or down,” said Josh. “And I don’t believe any bird could have snatched him away. Certainly not out here.”

“That leaves down,” said Nikko, searching the ground as if for some sign. Automatically the rest followed suit scanning the cracked earth in increasing circles. Porky and Josh also looked behind the boulders but found nothing that would give any indication of what might have happened to Fallon.

It was Nikko who spoke again. “We have to be sensible about this. It’s no good standing out here in the sun looking for a scrawled message in the dirt. There is none. We have to use reason and common sense.”

“That’s not easy in his heat,” said Porky. “I’m boiling.”

“Come over here then,” called Jordon who was perched on one of the boulders looking every bit the young master of the scene. “These rocks are cool. Much cooler than on the ground.”

“What are you talking about this time,” said Jason. “The rocks out here are all hot. These must be like fire,” and he marched over to the boulder where Jordon was sitting and put his hand on it, ready to remove it speedily if it burnt.

However, it was not only less hot than he expected. It was actually quite cool.

Chapter Four

“Aha, Queen Gabryisia. We have someone to see you.”

The Drong leader was standing at the entrance to the cave room where Gabryisia was sitting on the floor with her legs drawn up in front of her. She was dirty and her tunic had been torn at the shoulder bearing an expanse of white flesh crudely marred by a large dark bruise. Her legs were also scratched and her breeches torn at the knees.

Gabryisia raised her head, brushing her hair off her forehead in a sweeping movement and confidently faced her captor.

The Drong leader was smiling, his mouth curling at an ugly lopsided angle, and leaning casually against the side wall with another Drong at attention opposite. Sneering he said: “You have a visitor. But he is a visitor who will be staying quite some time.”

Behind him two of his soldiers struggled forward and shoved Fallon into the case.

“Enjoy yourselves,” he said adding. “While you can.” With that he pushed himself away from the wall, gave a short laugh and turning motioned four of his soldiers to remain as guards.

Fallon eased himself into a sitting position from the ground where he had been unceremoniously shoved. Rubbing his elbows he looked at Gabryisia and asked: “Where are we?”

All she knew, she told him, was that they were in a case. She had been unable to see where they brought her, not had she been able to leave the room since her arrival the day before. She remembered being bundled off with a bag over her head and carried for what seemed like hours during which she nearly suffocated from clammy dampness, then again when she felt incredibly hot. Suddenly she had been cool again and when the bag was removed she was in the cave.

“I have no idea where we are,” she said. “How did they get you? Are you alright?”

Fallon nodded. “Fine,” he replied. He then went on to explain how he had come to be captured.

In short halting sentences, a strain for him, he told how he and the others had left the camp that morning and trudged through the jungle to the Dead Place. This explained to Gabryisia the dampness and the heat she felt on her body.

Fallon went on to describe the group’s search in the Dead Place for the tree that was there and then wasn’t. Finally he related, rather embarrassingly, how he had dozed off in the only shade he could find to be caught in the same way Gabryisia had. A bag had been placed over his head and his arms pinned as he was dragged off.

“Not far though,” he added. “Twenty minutes at the most.”

Gabryisia gently massaged the bruise on her shoulder. “How is Jason coping as leader?” she asked.

“He’s not,” answered Fallon. “Nikko is in charge.”

Gabryisia’s eyes narrowed and with her head to one side she said almost inaudibly. “Tell me Fallon. Tell me exactly what happened.”

Again in his crisp speech, and with many interjections from Gabryisia, Fallon outlined how Torpah had given the necklace to Nikko and once he put it around his neck the red marble had shone brightly, just as it did when she wore it. All the children, including Jason surprisingly, had recognized the significance of this and had decided Nikko should be their leader until Gabryisia was returned.

“Good,” she said. “Good.”

Fallon was about to ask her a question when the guards at the cave entrance snapped to attention and another Drong appeared at the opening.

“Get up,” he barked. “You are to come with me.”

He wanted, staring at them menacingly, as they slowly got to their feet, Fallon stretching his legs and rotating his shoulders to relax the tension. Then they moved off to follow the Drong soldier into a long tunnel, their four guards close behind.

The tunnel had been hewn out of the earth and was roughly three meters wide and six meters high. It had been in existence for many years as the ground underfoot had been solidly trodden and it was fitted out for permanence rather than temporary occupation.

Small bows and arrows lined both walls and Gabryisia noted the arrows all had red tips. They were trophies and their position leading from the dungeon where she had been held was clearly not accidental. Gabryisia counted no fewer than twenty of the weapons before she and Fallon and their escort turned the corner. The tunnel led another thirty-five meters or so and again veered left when after forty paces it opened onto a huge cavern.

It was crowded with children, all scruffy looking, all with matted black hair and all standing motionless. They ringed three quarters of the room leaving the end unoccupied except for the Drong leader sitting on a square rock with another soldier standing beside him.

The cavern was dingy but light did penetrate in from above. It appeared to Fallon to come through small holes on the roof except above the Leader where the opening was impressively large allowing a much brighter radiance to shine on him. There had been similar small apertures in the tunnel he realized as well as in more tunnels which he now saw were leading off in other directions from the main cavern.

“Welcome to Drong base,” beamed the Leader.

“Welcome indeed,” retorted Gabryisia. “You call this a welcome? Let me tell you now Kerry, what you are doing is very wrong.”

The Drong leader laughed, and perhaps remembering his humiliation in the forest at their last encounter he quickly put his hand to his head making sure his white beret remained firmly planted where it was.

“Wrong?” he said. “It is only wrong because we have you and this other Leafy here. If you had captured one of us it would have been alright. That’s the trouble with you. All you want to do is play silly kids games and do other boring things.”

He looked around the room and repeated “boring” in a long drawn out drawl which made the other Drons laugh and echo him in a similar but louder drawl.

He went on: “We have you now. You won’t get away, you know. This time you have lost. From now on you do what we say, when we say it. You’re going to do whatever I tell you.”

Gabryisia continued staring at the Leader and again in an even voice she said: “Kerry. Please. Be sensible and stop all this.”

“That’s enough,” he suddenly shouted. “I don’t want to hear any more about being nice.”

He went on in an arrogant tone: “And don’t go hoping you are going to be rescued either. Because you won’t be. You see, we know you have your friends out there looking for you. Not very far away actually. But they have no idea where you are. That’s how we grabbed this Leafy here.”

The Leader turned his attention to Fallon standing silently beside Gabryisia. “A great sentry you turned out to be. You fell asleep when you should have been keeping watch. It was so easy for us. All we had to do was wait a few minutes and then when you dozed off and your stupid friend turned his back and started talking to himself we simply grabbed you.”

Laughter rippled around the large room and Fallon could feel the anger and humiliation well up in him. Try as he might to control it he could not help himself when he blurted out “Damn you!”

Fallon’s fists were clenched, his eyes were red with anger and he look as if he was about to allow tears to break from their sockets and gush down his face. He rushed towards the Leader screaming at the top of his voice. His sudden attack stunned the Drons and it was not until he was almost at the square rock where the Leader sat that three of them grasped his arms and shoulders and overpowered him. They knocked him to the ground and pinned him there as he fought with all his strength to free himself. But he was no match for their combined weight.

“Hold him,” called the Leader. “I’ll show him what happens here to anyone who tries something funny like that,” and he approached where Fallon was being held. “You’re going to get a black eye Leafy,” he threatened.

“Don’t you dare touch him.”

The command from Gabryisia halted the Leader and he stared at her with the crooked expression on his face. “What?” he said. “What did you say?”

“I said, don’t touch him.” she repeated calmly.

“Who do you think you are? You’re not a queen down here. Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Kerry, I ask you again. Please let us go and stop these nasty things you are doing.” She went on: “There is no reason why we can’t all live together happily. We used to before. There is plenty of room for all of us. But if you go on like this you will be sorry.”

“Sorry?” shouted the Leader. “We won’t be sorry. You are the one who will be sorry. We are happy here, and now that we have you we are going to be even happier.”

But he motioned to the three soldiers and they relaxed their hold on Fallon who quickly leapt up, brushed himself down and moved back to Gabryisia’s side. They stood together facing the Leader without saying another word. Gabryisia had tried to persuade him once in the forest before she was captured and once more here. Both times she had been relected and she felt to try again would merely be a waste of time.

For his part Fallon had nothing to add to his uncontrolled outburst. His mind was now concentrated on escape and he was busily absorbing all he could of his surroundings. The cavern probably measured about twenty meters across and it was startling how circular it was. There were no uneven corners and the walls were hardly pocked at all. If he had been told the Drons had sandpapered the room he would have had a second look to check if it was indeed so.

As with the ground leading from the dungeon the earth floor was packed solid from feet crossing it over a long period of time. Another indication of the fact the cavern was not recently made was the markings on the walls. Fallon had at first thought they were random patches of lighter clay or rock. Now he could make out rough and very faded images. When he studied a few in careful detail he realized they were in fact drawings of some sort. One looked like a bird with huge spread wings and body and an incongruously tiny head. Its beak was also small, but its talons were sharp and long. But the most

striking feature was the eyes. They were virtually the bird's entire head and the painting showed lines radiating from each indicating a brightness as one would when painting the sun. Fallon thought for a moment he could detect a faint pinkish pigment in the eyes but was hard to tell in the gloom and the outline itself had paled with age. The bird worried him somehow.

The illustration next to the bird was far from alarming. It depicted a cat with long fur and what seemed the sleepest, slowest eyes Fallon had ever seen. The artist had either been very good and something of a humourist, or exceptionally poor and miscast his subject badly. Either way the dull looking feline provided light relief.

The feeling was short-lived however because the third sketch Fallon could make out was the clearest of the three. The outline was sharply defined and there was no mistaking it. It was a large black dog with bulging yellow eyes and giant paws. It was snarling and its tongue, in vivid red, lolled from its jaws.

Fallon's depression threatened to return but Gabrysia must have senses this and gently brushed his upper arm with a hand. She too had been examining her environment. Not so much the visible trappings as the vibrations emanating from the occupants. Her sadness was caused mainly by the aura of bitterness and fear around her.

While they were many times outnumbered and their wishes were obviously no more than that, she had no doubt there was fear present among the others, fear in large measure. Looking around at the Drongs Gabrysia carefully studied their faces. They were grimy and their eyes were sunken in their sockets, giving the appearance of shadowy holes. As she had noticed on all previous occasions she had confronted the Drongs their hard was entirely disregarded by the children. It was doubtful if any had ever combed it or if they had it was a long time ago and they had forgotten to repeat the chore. On the boys tight caked curls often reached their shoulders, whereas on the girls it generally hung in unintentionally plaited straight lank trails that made them more untidy than unattractive. Their clothes were a disgrace. Gabrysia doubted if there was a single complete tunic in the room, and without exception every pair of breeches had gaping holes in the knees.

The children had no expression. Or more correctly they had a uniform expression. Flat. Any joy and zest that may have been evident in the past had burnt out leaving just an empty shell. It was this loss that saddened Gabrysia so deeply. She had to touch Fallon's arm as much for her own benefit as for his.

Their examination of the cavern and those in it was cut short by the Drong leader. "Do you want to see the rest of Drong base, Queen Gabrysia?" Before waiting for a reply he added: "I'm sure you would. Come on then, we'll show you around."

He instructed all but four dungeon guards and the three who had overpowered Fallon to stay where they were. The seven he picked out were to accompany him on his tour and make certain Gabrysia and Fallon behaved themselves. Each carried a heavy stick ion his hand as well as his bow and arrows strung across his back.

The Leader left his rock chair and walked up to stand in front of Gabrysia and Fallon. To Fallon he said: "We'll finish our fight later on Leafy." And then to Gabrysia: "I've got a few more surprises in store for you." With that he smiled awkwardly and strutted off towards one of the tunnels which led off at an angle on the opposite side of the cavern to where the two captives had been held.

The tunnel was much the same as the other, the same width and height and again there were Leaf Children's bows and arrows mounted on the walls. They were interspersed

with more faint pictures which could not be easily identified. The tunnel was long and Gabryisia sensed it sloped slightly down. The further they walked she also seemed to hear murmuring sounds like bubbling brook or perhaps very distant snoring. It was not easy to put a cause to it. It was more of a reminder of a familiar sound than a distinct noise.

After another fifty meters the sound stopped and all she could hear was their footsteps and the heavy breathing of one of the guards. At numerous intervals slightly smaller tunnels branched off to the left and right, but each veered in another direction within a few meters of the entrance and it was not possible to see where they went or if they were simply short dead end appendices.

The main passageway turned sharply to the left and then almost immediately to the right again. The further they walked a brightness at the end got more pronounced until it became obvious they were nearing a large opening.

It was upon them suddenly and Gabryisia and Fallon's mouths dropped open in amazement at the scene that was before them. They had come to the lip of a massive room, a subterranean cave that must have been eighty meters to the opposite side. The roof was another twenty meters above their heads. The bottom was three times as deep.

Fallon took an instinctive step back and gasped: "My god." In his wildest dreams he had never imagined such a sight.

The Drong leader smirked. "Neat eh?" Proudly he stepped right up to the edge and casually kicked some loose earth into the abyss. Fallon listened but did not hear it land at the bottom.

There was nothing smooth about this cave. Everywhere Gabryisia and Fallon looked there were sharp jagged edges. Rough pillars climbed out of the bottom, some reaching all the way to the roof, others ending just below or above where they stood. From the ceiling hung precarious stalactites of rock. And even as they watched one dislodged a fragment that went crashing down in a shower of dust and small pebbles.

Though enormous, the two Leaf Children could see every feature quite clearly as there was a lot of light entering from large and small holes in the roof area.

"Fantastic," said Fallon.

"We could hide here forever and no-one would ever find us," said the Drong. "It is the perfect place."

"Where does the light come from?" asked Gabryisia. "How do you reach the entrance? There doesn't seem to be any way to climb up."

The Leader shook his finger admonishing her. "Good try Queen. But you won't fool me that easily. The way into our base is our secret. And it's going to stay a secret. We are the only ones who know about it. But what I will show you is what is down below us." He pointed to their left where the ledge ended in an abrupt drop.

Smiling he advised: "After you, Queen Gabryisia."

Gabryisia and Fallon exchanged glances and it was Fallon who answered. "You'll have to force us. We won't go without a fight."

The Leader's smile disappeared and he said in a serious tone: "Don't be stupid. We're not going to push off. Go and have a look."

Fallon paused and cautioning Gabryisia to remain where she was he warily approached the end of the ledge. At first he didn't see anything but then he noticed two steel rods protruding from just under the lip. Fastened to them was a rope ladder that swayed gently as it disappeared beneath him.

“Go on,” said the Drong. “It’s perfectly safe. We’ll be right behind you.” He turned to Gabryisia and with a mock now offered: “Please. You follow your frightened friend.”

Fallon and Gabryisia decided there was nothing for it but to do as they were instructed. They could not stay where they were and it was obvious the Leader and his soldiers were not going to allow them to return down the tunnel.

Fallon lay on his stomach and tugged at the ladder. It came a few inches but jerked to a halt. Clearly it was also fastened at the bottom.

“The rods stupid,” said the Leader. “Pull them out.”

Fallon tried to pull the rods up but they wouldn’t budge. However when he pushed them away from the cliff face they slid out a meter or more and clicked into a locking position. This meant there was space for a person to sit in the ledge and using the rods as handles to ease himself onto the ladder. It was not the ideal means of doing it from a height of sixty meters. But it was better than hanging over the side facing away from the yawning opening and risking slipping.

Fallon moved into a sitting position and very carefully shifted his weight forward onto the rods. They held firm. He then took the strain on his arms and equally carefully and slowly transferred himself to the ladder. It swung back and forth in a right arc, enough to make Fallon’s adrenalin race and his muscles tense. Blood pumped through his veins and his heart pounded in his chest. But the steel rods and the thick rope ladder with its wooden rungs were sturdy and eventually the rocking motion ceased.

Step by step Fallon descended, followed by Gabryisia who repeated his example when he had lowered himself about five meters. Then the Drons, led by the Leader, came after them.

Neither Gabryisia nor Fallon took much notice of the view as they climbed down. They concentrated totally on their foot and hand movements. A slip would mean certain death or at the very least severe injury.

By the time they reached the case floor the light through the roof above was almost gone. Night was upon them.

Chapter Five

The rock was certainly much cooler than Jason had imagined. Everything else in the Dead Place was scorching except it seemed for this round boulder which had apparently absorbed the sun's rays throughout the day.

"How could that be?" queried Jason. "It should be blazing hot. I don't understand it."

"It's not the only one," said Danielle. "This one here is cool too. And this one."

"Here also," joined in Porky.

The group realized the cluster of boulders, seven of them, were all cool. Everything else was hot, even with the sun now setting, but this single group of rocks which had somehow rejected the heat.

"First we have a tree that is here and then it's not. Now we have cold rocks in a desert where everything else is red hot." It was Josh who spoke but there was no trace of humour in his voice. Instead, there was a note of seriousness, of concern and apprehension. "What's going on?"

The children were confused. For some time they stood in a circle without saying anything. There was nothing they could say really. No answers were forthcoming and they were in the position of merely raising more doubts and introducing additional mysteries.

The sun was nearing the distant horizon and there was a golden glow stretching across the land adding a glint to the hills and boulders that under different circumstances would have been inspiring. The stark reality of the Dead Place was rapidly giving way to an unreal beauty. Shadows were cast by the hills that reached out and formed patterns on the cracked earth breaking it into a light and dark patchwork of mottled colours. The peaks themselves took on grander proportions and intruded on the reddening sky like daggers stabbing at the very heart of the heavens.

The jungle to the east was no longer a lush green set against a bright blue sky. The blue had darkened and the green had become a black wall.

By the minute the temperature in the open was dropping and whereas it had been still and quiet a short time before a breeze was not noticeable and this seemed to bring with it faint noises from afar.

"It's too late to go back now," Nikko was saying. "We've been caught here. The sun has gone down a lot quicker than we expected. I don't think we should even try for the trees. We might not be able to find this place again in the morning and we do have to try to find Fallon."

There was a groan from Porky and Jordon gave a little whimper. "I don't want to stay out here all night," he said. "Let's go home please."

"We can't," said Jason, "Nikko's right. We forgot the time. Bad as it sounds I reckon it is safer to stay where we are. The light will be gone completely in a moment."

"Well, we'd better decided quickly what we are going to do," said Simon. "We've got no food and if you are all the same as me we have very little water left."

A check proved him correct. Each of them had only a few mouthfuls or so of water in their bottles.

"I think we should stay here," said Simon again. "There is no point trying to go anywhere else. If we crawl in between these rocks and huddle together we should be alright."

"Providing nothing comes creeping around," said Josh with a quick glance at the hills and landscape around them. He couldn't distinguish much as the sun had now disappeared

and night had fallen. Fortunately the moon was rising and this provided a slight glimmer of light, sufficient for the party to see what they were doing and some meters distant, but not much further.

They were worried. And the half hour immediately after darkness fell was an anxious thirty minutes. It was a foreign land for the seven and they did not know what to expect. But one thing was certain: They intended to be prepared for the worst if they could.

The children decided they would bed down in the small area surrounded by the seven boulders. Two would keep watch while the others tried to get some sleep, though they all realized this would be difficult.

The Leaf Children had never spent a night out of the reassuring forest and the Dead Place was a most inhospitable initiation. Nikko too had never been anywhere like it. Indeed, he had been nowhere without his parents and he would think of this a number of times during the night.

During the long hours before morning the children took turns to stand guard in pairs while the others dozed on and off. In snatches they did sleep but it was only for a few minutes at a time before they were awakened by strange sounds, real and imagined. At least six times they were woken by the wind which strengthened, blowing dust through the narrow entrance of the hideaway and raising a howl like a distant crying of a wolf.

Young Jordon again insisted he saw the blazing eyes of huge dogs lurking behind and above boulders but in spite of waking the others with his frightened screams he was the only one. He was roundly chastised by the tired group and excused from further watch duty after only fifteen minutes. He crept into the most sheltered corner next to Danielle and Nikko and promptly fell asleep not waking until the following day had begun.

Jason, the most impatient of Jordon's unsubstantiated claims, and therefore his most vocal critic, coined yet another term for the youngster: Rip Van Brat.

Nevertheless the night did pass without incident.

Exhausted, hungry, stiff and thirsty the children faced the day with the dawn. As the sun shed its veil and the dazzling rays again beat down on the earth the landscape bared its starkness and the children knew they must return to the jungle before continuing their search. It was unanimously and rapidly decided they would walk to the trees, fill their bottles with any water they could find, repair their makeshift sandals and then spend half the day searching for Gabrysia and Fallon.

"No more," said Nikko. "We were trapped yesterday. We must not get caught again."

So off they went towards the jungle again green and unusually enticing. There was a spring in their step despite their uncomfortable sleep and Porky, Josh and Jordon actually sprinted the last hundred meters, collapsing in the moist grass under a tree panting. The others also sat on the grass, slowly allowing their bodies to unknit and soak up the cool shade. But at the urging of Nikko they searched for, and finally located a rock pool of clear fresh water from which they replenished their bottles.

Simon found a berry bush like the ones that grew so plentifully in the forest and they managed a reasonably satisfying breakfast before Nikko again spoke. "Alright then," he said. "Let's find Gabrysia and Fallon." And he strode from the jungle heading straight for the area they had left an hour before.

Along the way Danielle came to his side and quietly said: "Nikko, I don't know what your plan is but I would like to have another look at those rocks where we spent the night. I think they might tell us something."

“That is the only plan I have at the moment,” answered Nikko. “I really have no idea what else to do. We can’t cover the whole of the Dead Place.”

Danielle almost reluctantly it seemed started to say something but stopped herself.

“What is it?” Nikko said. “You wanted to say something.”

“Oh it’s nothing,” said Danielle. “Forget it.”

“Come on Danielle. If you have any ideas I’d like to hear the.” He went on: “The others, and you too, have put me in charge so if you think anything might help I’d like to know about it. We’re searching for two needles in a very big haystack so if you have any thoughts please share them.”

Danielle cleared her throat, already parched again, and began tentatively. “Well, don’t think I’m silly and laugh but I have been thinking of those rocks. When I was walking back to the jungle this morning I was thirsty and kept reaching for my water bottle. But of course I didn’t have any water left. It was empty. It was just reflex I guess but I kept putting my hand on the bottle. I noticed that even though I was hot and my clothes were hot the bottle seemed cool. And I started thinking. The bottle was empty but it was not hot. Nikko, what if those boulders are also empty? I mean what if they are hollow?”

Nikko slowed his pace and looked at Danielle.

“How do you mean hollow?” he asked. “Rocks can’t be hollow. They looked very solid to me. And anyway even if they were why should they be cool?”

Danielle went on more quickly this time. “I figured my bottle was cooler because it had had cold water in it. After I drank it all I put the stopper in my tunic pocket so I wouldn’t lose it and breeze was getting in through the top. That’s why it stayed cooler. So I thought what if there is a wind somehow getting under the rock? I didn’t remember seeing any opening so I wondered if there might be another opening somewhere else. Nikko, what if there is a case somewhere and the rocks are markers for an air hole? What if they cover secret openings? It could explain maybe how Fallon could have been captured so quickly and quietly.”

Nikko stopped walking. When he spoke he did so slowly and thoughtfully. “They were smooth. So smooth they were like large ping pong balls. No rocks are that smooth unless they have been made like that.”

He lifted his head and peered into the distance, in the direction they were heading. He could make out the hills where they had spent the night before and he could also discern the outlines of a number of the larger boulders.

“Let’s take a good look at them,” he said finally. “I don’t know if they are hollow or not, but I think we should examine them very carefully.”

When they arrived nothing had changed. It was exactly as it was the day before with the seven boulders nestled to one side of a high hill. Nikko again noted how smooth and unmarked they were. Everything else he could see had suffered at the hands of the elements. The hills had been worn away by the wind and had crumbled over time. The ground was cracked and dry. Other boulders and smaller rocks were rough and jagged. The seven boulders it struck him all of a sudden looked like marbles.

Slowly he walked around one of the boulders scrutinizing every facet of it and from time to time fingering it as if to reassure himself it was really there. He then did the same thing with the others, rubbing his hand over the surface and tapping them with his knuckles.

The children stood back watching intently. They had not overheard the conversation between Danielle and Nikko, not had they been told if it. However they realized Nikko was suspicious of the strange rocks.

Finally Nikko stopped and then returning to the first smooth boulder he said: "I don't know. They all seem the same. There's not a mark on any of them but they feel and sound solid."

"Of course they are," said Jason. "What did you expect?"

Nikko told Jason and the others he was curious about the rocks and was testing them to see if there was anything about them that would explain their unusual condition. In deference to Danielle he did not tell them what was remotely suspected.

Danielle bent down and began scratching at the earth surrounding the base of the boulder. Unexpectedly she found it to be not as hard as she imagined. While it was not sand or altogether loose soil it was nevertheless quite easy to scrape away.

Seeing what was happening Nikko joined in and they soon had cleared a break half way around the circumference. They stood up puzzled. The boulder did not sink further into the ground as it should have. Instead it appeared to rest on a level platform that looked like aged wood.

"What is it?" asked Danielle.

"I'm not sure," Nikko replied.

All of them hunched down and together they cleared a break around the entire boulder. As the very last handful of gravelly earth was brushed aside Porky exclaimed: "What's this?"

There in front of them was a circular hole in the wooden platform that seemed to be supporting the rock. In the middle of it was a plunger-like device with a ring handle attached to it.

"It's a secret key," said Jordon excitedly. "We've found a secret hiding place. Maybe we'll find Gabrysia and Fallon, maybe even treasure." With that he reached for the handle on the plunger.

"Don't," shouted Simon and pushed the youngster's hand away before he had grasped the ring.

"Get out of the way Jordon," Jason added sternly. "We have no way of knowing what would happen if we pulled that plug. Just stay back there and don't interfere."

Jordon retreated to the rear of the group and sat quietly sulking as the others crowded around the mysterious object.

Nikko fingered it cautiously. He lifted the ring but did not pull it. He flicked some small stones out of the way and then bent lower and blew away the residue dust until the contraption was clearly visible. There was no doubt it was a plunger of some sort.

"I can see what it is, but I don't know what could happen if we pulled it," he said. He looked enquiringly at the rest.

"Maybe it's a trick. Maybe we're meant to pull it alright, but the result might not be for our benefit," Josh added.

Jason didn't offer an opinion. He shrugged and stared at the device. Simon too made no comment.

"Danielle?"

Danielle did not answer straight away. When she did she was confident. "I don't think we are supposed to find it. That's why it was covered up. So I don't think it's a trap. If you ask me it's a trigger. Pull it Nikko and let's see what happens."

"She could be right," said Simon. "The thing was hidden." Then he added: "What made you look here Nikko?"

With a glance at Danielle who nodded Nikko explained their suspicions and conjectures. "I think there may be something to what Danielle says," he added. "To my mind this whole setup suggests a hidden passage or something. I don't believe it's a trick."

Jason who had remained silent throughout got up and walked to another of the boulders nearby and began raking the dirt around the base with his hands.

Jordon crawled over to him and joined in. "Come on," he called. "Maybe there are other secrets."

It was obvious what Jason was doing. He wanted to see if there were any plungers near the other boulders before he decided whether to pull it or not. The other children crowded around and before long another six had been discovered. Each boulder had an accompanying plunger device apparently connected to it.

"Well, I don't think they're a trap," Jason said finally. "I'm sure Danielle is right. There must be something under these rocks and I suggest we see what it is. The only question is which one?"

The decision was made for them by Jordon. He had gone back to the original boulder and with his boyish curiosity getting the better of him he had grabbed the plunger with both hands and tugged. Instantly the large boulder flipped up without a sound revealing a gaping hole in the ground. Jordon fell backwards with a yelp and the others hearing his cry wheeled around and then rushed to his side. Danielle tried to lift him but was hindered by Jason who cuffed the youngster around the ears.

"Stop it," hissed Nikko. "Keep quiet." He carefully approached the hole where the boulder had been and cautiously peered in. The wooden platform they had seen earlier was in fact a collar only acting as a firm base for the rim of the rock to sit on.

"I knew it," said Danielle as she came to the edge. The hole was about two meters across with a single strut bisecting it. "I just knew it. There has to be a tunnel leading to a cave or something."

About a meter below the opening was a long plank, wide enough for a number of people to stand on. Dangling from it was a rope ladder.

"It's pretty dark inside but I can see some light. I think it is coming from deep down, over there on the right." Porky was leaning right over the opening holding onto the bar that was securely fastened on both sides.

A rapid exchange of views followed with the consensus being that there was probably a tunnel, or series of tunnels, running beneath the earth, linking up with other openings under the other boulders and most likely more outlets elsewhere. It was generally agreed the discovery was a breakthrough in their search for Gabrysia and Fallon.

It was Jason who proposed it was the hideout of the Drons and that they should exercise great care in what they did next.

"If it is their hideout, or the hideout of anyone or anything else, we had better be alert and mind how we go," he said. He turned to Jordon and added: "And that means we have to be quiet. Especially you. So don't touch anything."

“If it’s their camp they probably have guards nearby. “Simon knotted his brow and frowned. “Why haven’t we seen anyone?”

“Maybe they are so confident their secret door wouldn’t be found they don’t post any lookouts.”

“Or they might be watching us right now.”

“We haven’t seen anyone so far and I reckon if we had been spotted they would have done something about it,” said Josh. “They would not just let us barge in.”

“We are not going to just barge in Josh,” corrected Jason. “If we do decide to explore down there we will do it very quietly. Up to now we look like having surprise on our side. We don’t want to spoil it.”

“I didn’t mean....” Josh started before Jason again cut him short.

“I know. But I think we should get something clear before we do any further.” He looked around the group. “First of all, there are only seven of us, or six really. Now we have located what appears to be the camp of the Drongs, or perhaps someone else we don’t know about. I don’t know who they could be, but from what we’ve seen somebody lives down here. It’s a pretty elaborate setup. It’s also reasonable to assume there are quite a few of them, so there is the strong possibility we will be outnumbered. Also we are going somewhere we know nothing about. We don’t know if there is only one tunnel or many, and we don’t know where it is going to lead us. There seems to be light coming from somewhere but not that much and it looks pretty dangerous.”

He paused. The others said nothing.

Jason continued: “Let’s assume it is the Drong camp. Also, that this is where they are holding Gabrysia and Fallon. The fact that they haven’t escaped means the security of the place is good. That means it will not be easy for us to sneak up on them. It also means we have to work out what we plan to do and how we do it.”

Jason sat down and crossed his legs in front of him. He reached for his water bottle and took a long drink before hammering the stopper back in. “So, what are we doing to do?”

They had all agreed they would go down into the opening, but their plans do far had not extended any deeper than the plank immediately below the entrance. The first step was the easy one. Subsequent ones were not so simple.

The sun continued its relentless assault on their shoulders. It was high in the sky without a single cloud to obstruct the rays and the Dead Place was once more shimmering. The breeze of the previous night had left with the darkness and all was still and quiet.

Droplets of perspiration formed on their foreheads and trickled down their cheeks. Their tunics clung to them and their breeches grew uncomfortable as they seemed to tighten and shrink in the heat as the waistbands soaked up the moisture from their backs and chests.

Porky particularly was suffering from the heat and continually wiped his face with his hands and arms. “Let’s decide quickly eh,” he said. “This heat is killing me.”

“OK,” said Nikko. “We agree we are going in. I think all we can do at this stage is get down onto that plank and see how far it goes in either direction. But let’s not all go in through this opening. Let’s open up another one and see if they do join.”

The plunger next to the nearest boulder was pulled and again the smooth rock sprang up. The entrance was exactly the same and there was another ladder dangling from a plank. Clearly the plank too was the same one.

It was decided they would go in through only the two holes and then descend in groups down the ladders. In one group would be Nikko, Danielle and Simon. Porky, Josh, Jason and Jordon would make up the other.

Getting in was simple enough. Each held on to the cross bar and swung down onto the plank. Their eyes took some time to adjust to the gloom after the glare of the outside, but when they did they could see the cavern below was very large indeed.

The standing plank extended around in a wide circle and there were seven descending ladders, suggesting they corresponded to the boulders above.

Danielle asked if they should close the openings. Nikko's first response was not to as it would block out the light and seriously hamper their progress. But Simon thought that if they didn't it could give them away if there were any Drongs outside. Nikko accepted the advice and instructed they be shut.

There was a similar plunger on the inside linked at right angles to a rod which in turn was connected to the plunger that protruded outside. When pulled down it would push the exterior plunger out of its socket activating the mechanism that controlled the boulders. At a signal Jason and Danielle simultaneously pulled the two handles. The boulders slammed shut sending a booming echo through the cavern.

"Blast," whispered Nikko. He feared the noise would be heard in other sections of the underground network, alerting whoever was there that they had intruders. Also, the sunlight from outside disappeared and the cavern was plunged into almost complete darkness.

Jordon gave a startled cry but was instantly shushed by Jason.

"I can't see a thing," said Porky. "We've got to have some light."

"Porky's right Nikko. It's very dangerous as it is," Simon said. "We'd better open one of them at least."

Nikko agreed and pulled the handle over his head. The boulder popped open with a hiss and light poured in.

"Right," Nikko said. "Let's hope no-one is outside or comes up here later. If they do we're goners," He continued. "Let's waste no more time. We'll get down these ladders and take a look around the bottom. From there we can decide our next step."

The children climbed down the ladders, marveling at the magnitude of the underground cave. It was enormous and every sound they made seemed to rebound off the walls ever louder. Although the ladders were very well made and were in excellent repair they were glad when their feet touched solid earth again.

They all stood in a tight huddle and craned their necks at their surroundings. It was as though they had entered another world. They were struck by the awesome nature of the cave and turned slowly to absorb the heady atmosphere.

Josh whispered, more just moving his lips than actually speaking. "This is creepy. How could such a place exist? And so near the forest? Who could choose to live here?"

"Someone certainly does," said Simon. "The rocks and the ladders prove that. I'm not sure it is the Drongs any longer. They are rough I know, but this can only be home to someone who is much worse than they are. I don't like it at all."

Nikko looked up and could see clearly the entrance where the boulder had opened and let in the light.

“We have to decide what we’re going to do,” he said. “Can anyone see a path or something?” As he spoke there was a thud above and the boulder closed over the opening.

They moved carefully around the floor until Simon came upon a narrow slit in one of the walls that was almost hidden but which had a faint light at the back of it. It was just wide enough for a person to squeeze through and after a brief discussion they decided to explore it a short length to see where it led. If after twenty paces or so they were unsure of its safety they would return and look for another way.

Nikko went first followed by Jason and then the others. They stayed close to one another and Jordon kept hold of Simon’s tunic.

The crevice was narrow for about fifteen meters and was on a sloping angle, so it was difficult to edge their way through it. But it gradually leveled and widened and after a curve to the right it straightened out and the children could see there was light about forty-five meters in the distance.

“We’ll go on as far as that light,” said Nikko. “Stay close and be careful.”

The children had discarded their makeshift sandals in the man cavern. They had finally crumbled into brittle pieces. During the hours in the heat outside they had served their purpose, but there was never any doubt they were only an emergency and temporary protection. At least the children had not suffered blisters on their feet which would have made the going a lot more difficult than it already was. The ground was hard and it seemed reasonably smooth, but with so little light it was hard to see where they stepped. For all they knew there could be sharp rocks and other things in their path. Or worse, deep holes.

As they approached the end it became evident that the narrow crack was to open onto another cave. Cautiously they approached it. Nikko directed with his hand that the others should halt while he went ahead to see what was in front of them.

It was indeed another cave, somewhat smaller than the first but it held another surprise for them.

Nikko walked out into the cave and stood gazing ahead of him for more than a minute before motioning the others to follow.

When they were all standing together again it was Porky who spoke. “What is it?”

In front of them against the far wall was a tree. The trunk was easily eight meters around and it extended from the floor to the very top of the roof. There were branches at various levels but no leaves. It looked like it had been dead a long, long time.

“What the heck is that doing here?” asked Josh.

Simon walked over to the tree and touched it tenderly. Then he rubbed it, and like Nikko did with the boulders earlier, he tapped it with his knuckles. “It’s petrified,” said. “It’s a petrified tree.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” said Porky. “How can a tree be petrified?”

“A petrified tree is one that is so old it has turned to stone,” Simon replied. “It takes hundreds of years after it dies, but finally it becomes like a rock. It’s then called a petrified tree.”

Porky and Josh joined Simon and also rapped their knuckles against it. “It really is stone,” said Josh. “I would never have believed it. I guess you could say it was really scared to death.”

For the first time for quite a while the children laughed.

Chapter Six

Gabrysia and Fallon were back in their dungeon.

They had spent an incredible night and there was no reason for them to be in good humour this morning. In fact, both were depressed and they sat quietly reflecting on what had transpired since descending the long ladder in the huge cavern as the previous day had come to a close. They had been surprised, shocked and humbled by what they had seen and heard.

As they stood at the bottom of the ladder with the light from the ceiling rapidly disappearing Gabrysia and Fallon had begun to contemplate their next move. But they soon realized they did not have one. They were at the mercy of the Drong leader who was obviously relishing his role as captor.

“Ah now,” he said, rubbing his hand across his chin and looking at them mockingly. “What will I show you first?”

He turned to his soldiers who also smirked. “What do you think guys? Shall I give them a fright or should we lead up to that?” His soldiers just laughed and the Leader spun back to face Gabrysia and Fallon. “I think we’ll take it gradually. No sense in scaring you half to death just yet. That would ruin some of the surprises.”

As the last strip of light faded the cavern was plunged into darkness. Within seconds it began to brighten and before a minute had passed they were again standing in what could easily have been a well lit chamber back in one of the forest trees.

“Oh yes,” the Drong leader said. “We too have our busy little light servants. Thousands and thousands of them. But you won’t actually see them. You see, once you get close and touch where you think they are, they go out and then you can’t see where they are or where they’ve gone.”

Demonstrating this he moved to the wall nearest the ladder and reached out to a protruding rock formation from which the light was radiating. As soon as his hand touched it the light vanished as if a switch had been snapped off and that section of the wall was plunged into darkness. It stayed that way as long as he kept his hand there. Immediately he raised it the light returned, faint at first then more brilliant.

“Cute eh?” he said proudly. And he ran around slapping the wall with his hands, switching off large portions of the cavern wall. Then he stopped and giggled as the light slowly reappeared.

“What are they?” asked Gabrysia. “Some sort of firefly?”

“How on earth should I know,” said the Leader. “They were here when we moved in. And as you can see you can never catch one of the lighters to examine him. They’re just there.”

They were apparently throughout much of the underground base. Gabrysia tried to recall if they were in the cell during her first night of captivity but she couldn’t. Probably she was too shaken to notice or to pay any attention.. Apparently the Drons used to spend hours trying to catch *illuminations* for days. Finally they gave up and while they still marveled at them they now accepted them as part of their lives below ground. There was one drawback though. The Drons had not had a night of complete darkness since they moved in.

“So much for surprise number one,” said the Leader. “We’ve got a few more for you yet.” He then pointed to a tunnel which was obviously not a natural formation. It had a

round entrance and was low to the ground so that anyone who went into it would have to do so on his hands and knees.

“You. Leafy.” The Leader pointed to Fallon. “In you go. Have a look at what we have in there. Don’t worry. Just have a look. You’ll be alright.”

Fallon hesitated. But when one of the soldiers prodded him with his stick he decided there was nothing for it but to do as he was told. He warily got down onto his knees and with a glance at Gabrysia and then at the Drong leader he slowly crawled in. As Fallon’s shoulders and then legs disappeared the Leader turned to Gabrysia. “As I said Queen Gabrysia there’s really no need to worry. Your friend will come back. He’ll be a little while though because that tunnel is fairly long.” He then went on: “You know, I don’t understand you Leafies. Why do you stay in the forest and never do anything exciting? There’s a lot of it and there are things you would not believe. You’ll see some later.”

Gabrysia looked at him carefully and again noted how grubby and uncaring he and the other Drons were. She was convinced none of them bathed or washed their clothes. Their living quarters might not be the cleanest, she thought, but that in itself was even more reason for closer attention to be paid to their personal hygiene.

“Kerry” she asked, “why don’t you and your group look after yourselves better? You all look so untidy and dirty.”

The Leader’s expression hardened. “Listen little Queen Goody Goody. Don’t start your lectures here. You’re in no position to criticize how we look after ourselves. We’re fine and we don’t need any advice from you. You’ve got enough on your hands looking after yourself. Remember where you are.” He then turned away briskly and drew his soldiers to one side where they had a discussion which Gabrysia could not hear.

While they were talking there was a blood curdling roar which made everyone in the cavern start. The roar was repeated and then a series of bellows followed in quick succession continuing for a time before stopping abruptly.

The Drong leader called to Gabrysia: “I think your friend will be back any minute now.” He slapped one of his soldiers on the back and said over his shoulder again: “You’d better stand back from the entrance. He’ll probably be coming back a lot more quickly than he went in.”

He had hardly completed his sentence when Fallon came flying out of the tunnel, propelling himself forward easily five meters beyond the entrance. He slid forward onto his chin, peeling a strip of skin off, and then jumped to his feet. His eyes were so wide they looked like they might actually pop out of his head and his mouth was gaping with saliva dropping from the corners. He was shaking and seemed on the verge of tears, “Are you alright Fallon?” asked Gabrysia rushing to his side and placing an arm around his shoulders.

“It’s...awful...huge black....god you won’t.....must be....how did you....” Fallon was plainly terrified. He was breathing quickly and deeply, but finally he stared at the Drong. “What on earth is it,” he stammered.

The Drong leader was smiling. “I think Leafy here ran into our little pet,” he said to his soldiers. They too were smiling though not with grins quite as broad and Gabrysia noticed they glanced at the tunnel opening from time to time.

The Drong leader added: “Did you see him? Was he friendly? He sounded pleased to see you. Weren’t you surprised to run into him?”

Fallon's gasping breath had calmed and he again had control of himself. "Surprised?" he shouted. "You're crazy. I could have been killed in there." He then faced Gabrysia. "In there," he said, "these people have a giant beast. It's huge. Must be two meters high. As black as night. It was on me before I knew it."

Fallon had been crawling through the low tunnel now knowing what to expect but fearful that whatever lay in front of him would not be pleasant. He knew the Drong leader had sent him on because of their earlier confrontation. It was his way of demonstrating who was in charge.

Illuminations provided the tunnel with light, though not as much as in the cavern. It was round like a pipe all the way and wound in a slight semi-circle. After about three minutes of edging along on his hands and knees he came to another cave. Much smaller than the one he had just left, Fallon also noticed there were even fewer *illuminations* which meant it was quite dim. He could not make out any specific features. There was a very pungent odor too. He was about to get to his feet when there was a mighty roar and something huge came charging at him.

Fallon's heart almost stopped and he nearly bit his tongue in half as the creature leapt at him. By instinct he ducked back into the tunnel, tucking his head down as far as he could onto his chest. A few minutes earlier he would have thought it impossible to turn in the narrow space, but somehow he did and without any attempt to look behind him he crawled as fast as he could back the way he had come. He kept his head down, not watching where he was going and simply kept putting one hand in front of the other and scratching his way out. He did not see the end of the tunnel. He was going too fast for that, with his head down and his chin on his chest. And all the time the horrifying bellows filled his ears.

When he lunged out of the tunnel into the cave he did not realize it until his hand slipped and he careened forward causing a painful abrasion on one side of his face and across his jaw.

"I'm lucky to be alive you idiot," said Fallon. "The only reason I am is probably that think is too big to get into the tunnel What the heck is it?"

The Drong leader said: "'You're the fool. Do you really think we would let a wild creature like that roam around down here, and then calmly climb down to join him? He's chained up. He can't follow you out because he can't even reach the entrance to the tunnel in his den. The chain stops him about a meter short." He went on: "Of course I forgot to tell you that."

"Like hell you forgot," Fallon snapped back. "You sent me in there knowing exactly what you were doing. You knew I would walk straight into that animal. You did it intentionally."

"Yes, I suppose I did."

"Why?" Gabrysia asked. "Why did you do it? Fallon could have been killed."

The Drong leader stuck his thumbs into his tatty breeches. "He needed a lesson. He's too smart for his own good. It's about time he, and you for that matter, realized that down here we are in charge. You do what we say. And that means no trying anything stupid like before."

Gabrysia was about to argue the fruitlessness of such petty exhibitions of power but changed her mind. She concluded it would be a waste of effort. The time was not right either. It would be appropriate later. Hopefully.

Gabryisia and Fallon were led by the Drong to the far end of the cavern where the Leader reached out and appeared to pull a small outcropping of the wall downwards. There was a scraping sound and a hidden doorway opened before them. It was a secret passageway, revealed by the rock face rumbling sideways as a sliding door would.

“Incredible,” said Fallon.

“How on earth did you do that?” Gabryisia asked.

“We didn’t,” answered the Leader. “It was here also when we got here. As I said, you would be amazed at the things we found.” He went on quickly: “Of course they means nothing to us. We just take them for granted.”

The two captives were amazed indeed at what they had seen so far. The cavern itself was stunning. Not to mention the *illuminations*, the network of tunnels that had obviously been made, and in Fallon’s case the mysterious giant beast. Now a hand revealing a secret passage. It was the sort of experience that one expected to find only in fantasy adventure stories. There was a sense of unreality to them. That they inhabited only the minds of those who could travel to distant levels of imagination. Everyone had the ability no doubt but only a select few were capable of actually doing it successfully.

Tales had been told and retold down through the centuries of unique civilizations or just individuals who had created wonderful worlds. But they were only figments of imaginations. At least Gabryisia and Fallon always had believed they were. They were no longer sure. Here they were in a very tangible world where such mysteries really existed. They were part of them. Or were they dreaming? They felt like reaching out and touching the cold stone face of the cavern to reassure themselves they were awake. Pinching themselves would not be sufficient.

But there was no need or time to do that. They were being taken into the passageway which was wide and high and stretched into the distance as far as they could see in a perfectly straight line.

As they progressed there was not the slightest sound apart from their footfalls. The Drong leader made no conversation and neither Gabryisia nor Fallon felt inclined to begin one. The line of children merely marched down the tunnel in silence.

After they had walked for about five minutes they again emerged into yet another cave. It was the most intriguing of all. It was filled with what seemed to be sculptures of identifiable shapes as well as images that appeared to resemble nothing familiar. Some were small and scattered over the floor of the cave while others towered almost to the ceiling. There were huge men and women dressed in strange garb, animals that crouched in corners or behind rocks, vessels such as urns and baskets, miniature buildings even, and representations of gardens complete with trees, ferns and flowers.

There were also odd shapes that Gabryisia and Fallon could not recognize as anything they had ever seen before. They were hard to describe. They were pointed, and blunt, square, and round. A few appeared to be similar to boxes with legs sticking out of them awkwardly at the sides. Others were large balls with heads protruding from them. Also there were just large feet and hands lying about.

Gabryisia could not contain her disbelief at what she was seeing. “Good heavens. What on earth is this?”

“I’m not sure we are on earth any more,” Fallon said. He looked about him at the strange objects littering the cave. They were scattered haphazardly as if a giant hand had cast them down caring little for where they landed. He bent to touch one of the unusual boxes

that seemed to enclose numerous artificial limbs. Instantly he recoiled with a strangled ugh! “My god,” he said. “It feels real. It can’t be.” Again he approached the object and touched it. “It is. This leg is real.”

Gabryisia joined him and felt another of the limbs. “It can’t be,” she said. Then she touched an arm jutting out at another angle. “Surely, they can’t be real.”

The Drong leader had been standing quietly to one side. “They can’t be. They can’t be. Make up your mind. Are they real? Or aren’t they?”

Gabryisia moved to another sculpture which had human heads around it. She studied it closely and once more lightly stroked it. “Even though it feels real I don’t believe it is. What are they Kerry?”

“We still have not been able to find out. They look real and they certainly feel real. But we’ve been here for quite a while and they have not changed. They are exactly the same as when we found them.”

“But were they like this all the time? Tossed around like this? It looks like an earthquake hit this place.”

“No, it can’t have been an earthquake. Nothing else is damaged. The cave is alright and we haven’t found any other place where things have been toppled over. Just here.”

“It’s very strange,” remarked Fallon. “Not only the fact that the heads and things look so real, but they are so weird. I don’t understand why anyone would want to create such things. Who would want to leave horrible things like these lying about? They’re dreadful.”

The Drong leader furtively glanced at his soldiers. “There is another mystery about them,” he said almost apologetically. “They’re not always the same.”

“What do you mean?” Gabryisia asked.

Another glance and the Leader said: “We found them pretty soon after we came. And like you we thought they were real. But they never trot or anything. So we figured they were imitations. Eventually we got used to them and didn’t really pay them any attention. Though sometimes we would come and have a look at them.”

He coughed lightly. “Each time we have come back they have changed. They have been moved. Today they have moved again.”

Fallon laughed. “They can’t move by themselves. Someone in your group must have a sense of humour. Unlikely as that seems. They probably sneak in here and change them around. And then sit back and have a good laugh at your expense.”

“No way,” said the Leader. “I thought of that. No-one has done that I can assure you. We’ve even stayed together in the main hall and then all gone to check. And they had moved.”

Gabryisia frowned. “Have you set up watches to see if you can catch them actually moving?”

“Sure. We had teams which kept guard for two whole days. Nothing. But then the day after when we went back to look again they were in different places.”

Gabryisia and Fallon once more fingered the objects and looked closely at them. They were either the real thing or the most incredible copies they had ever seen. The texture was just like human flesh. It was impossible to tell the difference.

“Well, I don’t care what you say,” said Fallon. “These things cannot move by themselves. Even if they are real there is no way they can move about in here by themselves. It is not possible.”

Gabryisia added: "Fallon is right Kerry. Obviously someone or something has to be responsible."

"There is nobody down here apart from us."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Of course," the Leader snapped. "Don't you think we would know if there was someone else living down here? We've been here long enough and there are quite a few of us moving around all the time. If there was somebody else here we would know it."

Gabryisia was not to be put off easily. "Listen Kerry," she said slowly. "Let's go over what we have here and see if we can come up with some sort of explanation."

"We have done that at least a hundred times. We have thought of every possibility and there is simply no logical answer. No answer at all, logical or otherwise."

"But what if there was someone else..."

Gabryisia did not finish before the Leader again snapped: "Impossible. That is not possible. No way."

Gabryisia persisted. "But, for the sake of argument let's assume you are not the only people down here. If there was somebody else where would they live? How big is it down here anyway?"

He paused and then finally said: "There is a network of tunnels down here that stretches for hundreds of meters. Probably twenty different tunnels. Major tunnels that is. There are quite a few small ones too but they are only short and all end in a dead end. The big ones seem to branch out in eight different directions basically and end up in another large cave. Then there are four tunnels leading from the smaller caves, and at least one or two of these smaller tunnels link the smaller caves together."

He squatted down on his haunches and took the stick from one of his soldiers. Holding it in his two hands he began to scratch out a diagram on the ground. The earth was packed fairly solidly and the Leader had to lean heavily to make the outline. The result was a large circle in the centre with lines radiating outwards in eight directions. At the end of each long line there was a smaller circle giving eight smaller circles in all. Each was linked to the ones of either side by smaller lines representing tunnels. The smaller circles also each had a shorter line poking out of it which led nowhere.

"I take it," said Fallon, "the large circle in the middle there is the cavern where we were taken from the dungeon."

"Right," said the Leader.

"And these?" asked Fallon, pointing to the smaller circles surrounding the main cave.

"They are smaller caves just like this one. They are all linked together and they each have four entrances. One of them obviously joins it to the main cavern and the two at the sides join up with the smaller caves."

"What about the ones sticking out here at the top?" asked Gabryisia. Pointing to the lines extending beyond the smaller caves but not linked to anything, she continued. "Do these connect with anything?"

The Leader seemed uncertain. He shuffled his feet and again looked at his soldiers. "Um. Well we think they probably go nowhere. They are all very short. Like the one Leafy went into when he met the beast."

"So you are not sure?"

"Well there are no *illuminations* so they just end most likely."

"But they could lead to other caves?"

“Maybe. But we reckon they just go a few meters and then stop. As I said there is no light. They couldn’t lead....”

Fallon interrupted him. “Show us one.”

“Just a minute,” Gabryisia said. “The figures do not add up. Kerry you said earlier that you thought there could be as many as twenty main tunnels with many more smaller ones. Here you’ve only shown eight major tunnels and another eight smaller ones which are in fact connecting passageways. Apart from the eight which you have not investigated. Where are the other bigger tunnels?”

One of the soldiers spoke: “There are two more caverns like the....”

The Leader quickly spun around and shouted: “Shut up fool!” He shoved the other Drong who almost fell over. “I do the talking. You do the muscling. What you never do is try to think.”

Fallon and Gabryisia exchanged looks. It was Gabryisia who again spoke: “SO, there are large caverns like your main hall. Where are they Kerry? What are they used for?”

The Leader had regained his composure. Facing Gabryisia he said: “Some of the people around me are thicker than these walls. He does not know what he is talking about.”

“Anyway,” he went on, “even if there are some more caves there is no reason why I should tell you about them Remember, you do what I tell you. I don’t do what you want.”

“There’s someone down here already,” said Fallon in a level tone, “who does not do whatever you say. These ghastly shapes in front of your own eyes show that. If you’re not moving them about, and if they can’t do it on their own, there is something else in your hideaway doing it.”

The Drong leader said nothing and Fallon added: “And worst of all is the fact that he, or they, know you are here. But you don’t know where they are.”

The Leader’s eyes widened. “What makes you think they know about us?”

“It’s obvious,” said Fallon. “You gave the answer yourself. You haven’t seen them. You have kept watch around the clock and as soon as you turned your back the weird events continued. Surely that indicates that while you were watching these things you were being watched.” He went on: “The interesting thing is they have not bothered to show themselves. And they have not bothered you either. Why?”

Nobody said anything. Fallon and Gabryisia faced the Leader waiting for some response. He simply opened and closed his mouth a number of times and licked his lips. The soldiers looked around anxiously.

Finally it was Gabryisia who broke the tense atmosphere. “Show us one of these passageways you say are dead tunnels.” She looked around the cave. “I can’t see anything like one in this place.”

The soldier who had been roughly chastised by the Leader before walked to a part of the save where a sculptured windmill stood propped against the wall. He put his hand on the rock face and there was a rumbling sound.

“Here,” he said. “It’s here.”

Fallon joined him and could see an opening behind the windmill. It was at ground level and was no more than a meter and a half across.

“It’s impossible to get in there without moving this windmill,” he called over his shoulder. “We’ll have to shift it.”

“You will not. Not unless I say.” The Drong leader stood his ground and scowled from the centre of the cave. “I told you before these passages go nowhere. You can see for yourself there is no light. And anyway they are too narrow.”

“How do you know until you try,” said Fallon. “It’s no worse than the one you sent me into. Apart from the absence of *illuminations*. But that was made up for by the surprise you had for me at the end of it.”

“No,” the Leader repeated.

“Why?” asked Gabryisia. She could not understand the Leader’s reluctance. She was unable to fathom why the Drong would not want to find out where the unexplored passage went.

“Kerry,” she said. “I don’t understand. You know there is someone else down in this underground world of yours. Surely you realize that now. As Fallon has pointed out if you are not moving these objects about someone else must be. So why don’t you want to discover who it is? Are you afraid for some reason?”

The Leader almost took a step backwards. It was as though he had been assaulted, or more appropriately insulted.

“I am scared of no-one,” he hissed. “I’ll take on anyone. I’ll fight the whole lot of you Leafies. And beat you all.” His face was reddening. “I’ve never been frightened of anyone in my life. I’ve done battle with bigger and better than any of you. I’ve licked two and three at once. How do you think I got to be the leader down here? I fought my way to the top.”

“I’m not talking about...”

“I said no. And when I say no, that’s it.” He marched over to the windmill and putting his hand on the wall closed the entrance to the passage. As he did so he glared at the soldier beside him. “I’ll teach you later not to cross me.”

He then turned around and strode back to the entrance of the main tunnel. “We’ll go back,” he said. “Now.” He waited by the opening as Fallon and Gabryisia followed by the soldiers passed him and entered the tunnel.

Back in the huge cavern he stopped and said to Gabryisia: “I’ve got one more surprise for you. This one I demand you see.”

At the corner of the cavern stood a large rock and when he reached it he called: “Come over here. Both of you.”

Behind the boulder, obscured by its size, was another passageway. Large enough to walk in to if slightly stooped it was also well lit.

“You can both go in this time. And don’t worry Leafy. There is no big black beast waiting for you this time. Go ahead. Have a look.”

The Leaf Children did as they were told. They stepped in led by Gabryisia. There was nothing unusual or special about it. In fact it was very similar to the others. Hard packed earth underfoot, plain cold walls but with no trophies adorning them. And *illuminations* lighting the way. It meandered for some distance in a long slow curve, always the same width, always the same height, and always silent. There was not a sound.

Neither Gabryisia nor Fallon spoke as they passed through at a steady wary pace. They mutely agreed the Drong leader was being truthful when he advised that no nasty surprise was awaiting them. They knew something would be there at the end, something he wanted them to see, but not necessarily something they would be looking forward to. They did not fear harm. Rather they were apprehensive and curious at the same time.

They followed the passageway in its circular route until finally they came to what appeared to be a dead end. The *illuminations* clearly showed they could proceed no further. In front of them was a blank rock face.

“What do we do now?” Fallon asked, looking around at the enclosing stone walls. “Maybe he just wanted to show us that these passageways do lead nowhere. This one certainly doesn’t go any further.”

Gabryisia was not so sure. “I don’t believe that was his intention,” she said. “He wanted us to come in here because there was something he wanted to show us.” She surveyed the wall directly in front of them. “He seemed pretty sure of himself back there, especially after the business in the other cave. Too sure of himself. He was almost gloating.”

“No,” she said, “there has to be something. Have a look and see if you can see anything unusual about these walls. I’ll check this one in front of us.”

They began examining the rock. There was nothing immediately obvious and the bright *illuminations* in the confined area actually made a close scrutiny more difficult.

“Fallon, black out some of the light for a minute please. We might see more if we have a bit of contrasting shadow.”

However the darkness caused by Fallon touching the wall on both sides with outstretched arms did not help.

“Run your hand along one side,” said Gabryisia.

Fallon did so and then exclaimed: “Hold it. I think I might have found something.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. But there was something smooth there. Smoother than the rest of the wall.” He moved back and again passed his hand along the rock. “Here,” he said. “I’ve got it.”

Together they looked closely. There appeared to be a tiny, shiny button slightly recessed in the rock. The *illuminations* almost hid it, but when a small section of them were blacked out the light a little further away made the object shine.

“Looks like a button,” said Fallon.

“Yes,” Gabryisia agreed. “Either that or just a damp piece of stone.” She felt it lightly.

“It’s doesn’t feel wet. I think it is a button of some sort.”

“Push it,” suggested Fallon. “See what happens. But be careful.”

Gabryisia placed her index finger over the hole and pressed. Nothing happened.

“Press it harder,” Fallon said.

This time Gabryisia leant heavily against the button with her thumb. There was a click and the rock which was the dead end of the passageway suddenly went black.

“Look out,” called Fallon. “Get back.” He reached out and pulled Gabryisia by the shoulder as he retreated a few meters. Then they stood side by side as a thin strip of light appeared at ground level, slowly deepening. The rock wall that had barred their progress was gradually rising in front of them, accompanied by a dull sound like an exhalation of breath.

The wall continued to rise until Gabryisia and Fallon could make out that there was another cave on the other side. Slowly it rose until at the height of the passageway it stopped revealing a well lit room.

The children did not move for some seconds and were startled when from inside they heard: “Who’s there? Who is it?”

Together, very slowly, they edged forward and peered into the cave. Squatting against the far wall to the left with chains around one ankle fastened to a ring in the rock was a dark complexioned child.

“Who are you?” he said springing to his feet. “What do you want?”

Fallon moved in front of Gabryisia in a defensive move and said firmly: “I am Fallon. This is Gabryisia. We are Leaf Children from the forest. Now tell us. Who are you?”

The boy smiled and took a clunking step forward. “Thank goodness,” he said. “My name is Venki.”

There was a stunned silence. Fallon and Gabryisia looked at each other and then back at the boy. He stood before them, his arms hanging by his sides, palms outward in a questioning pose. His eyes were wide and a smile was fixed on his face.

The silence continued until finally the boy aid again. “I’m Venki. From the forest too. I’m a Leaf Child. Where are the others?”

Gabryisia stepped around Fallon. She stared at the boy who was trying to see beyond them into the passageway. When she spoke it was with soft, carefully chosen words. “How long have you been here?”

The boy’s eyes darted back to her. “What?” he said. “Oh, I’m not sure. A long time. Come on, get me loose. Where are the rest?”

Gabryisia continued: “How did you get here?”

“The Drons caught me in the Dead Place and brought me here. Wherever here is. I’m still not sure. Underground I know, but I don’t know where. Why don’t you help....”

“Where in the forest did you live?”

“What is this about? Please help me out of these chains and let’s get out of here.”

“Just tell me where in the forest you lived and who were some of the others.”

“Oh, we lived in the trees not far from the stream. That’s the one that comes from the high place in the south and disappears into the ground in the north. We used to try to work out how a stream could come to such an abrupt end. Incredible. It just seemed to empty into the ground. I don’t recall you two at all though. But there was one who you must know, if you are really Leaf Children. He was a bit of a smarty when he was very young and I reckon he probably still is today. Bright, but a bit too smart for his own good. His name was Jason or Justin. Jason I think it was.”

Gabryisia and Fallon still said nothing.

“What’s the matter?” said the boy. “Don’t you believe me? What else can I tell you to convince you I am a Leaf Child? Haven’t you heard of me?”

“We’ve heard the name,” Fallon answered. “But then so have the Drons”

Gabryisia nodded. “The name is not enough. And the stream is well known too. Tell me more.”

The boy slumped back down to the floor. The smile with its row of large white teeth in the dusky face was gone. “What more than I tell you?” he said. “I used to be the leader in the forest. Who’s the leader now? Who did Torpah give the necklace to?”

It was those words that convinced Gabryisia and Fallon that the boy was indeed Venki, the former leader who had disappeared when he had gone to investigate the Dead Place so long ago.

They walked over to him and put their arms around his shoulders. “We/re sorry,” said Gabryisia. “We had to be sure.”

“What as it? What did I say?”

“Torpah. And the necklace. Only a Leaf Child would know that.”

“Thank heavens for that. Now where are the others?”

“There are none,” said Fallon. “Just us. And we are also captives.”

The boy called Venki smiled weakly. “And I don’t suppose you can get these chains off me can you?” He didn’t really expect a positive answer. “No, I don’t suppose you can. Anyway, where is our beg strong jailer Kerry? How come he let you in here?”

“He’s out in the save,” replied Fallon. “Gabryisia thinks he sent us into the tunnel so we could find you. It’s his way of showing off his authority.”

“Yes, that sounds just like him.”

“Venki,” Gabryisia said. “Can you tell us what happened to you in the Dead Place? We had heard you simply disappeared.”

The boy rubbed his eyes and cleared his throat. “There were two. They had been with us a few weeks. Simply appeared one day and asked for help. They could not tell us where they had come from. Only that they had suddenly found themselves on the island and couldn’t remember anything before that. As I say, they stayed with us a few weeks and were generally alright. A bit strange but on the whole not much different from what you would expect of a newcomer. Very inquisitive and curious of course. The one day they told one of the family they were going for a walk down the stream. They never came back.”

“So you went looking for them alone,” said Gabryisia.

“Not at first,” said Venki. “A few of us went out and looked around the jungle area. That’s when we saw the Dead Place. God, how awful. But we didn’t have time that day to do any more searching so we returned to the camp. It was the next day that I went out alone to have a look at it.”

“Why go without the others?” Fallon asked. “Seems a little foolish.”

“It was. However, at the time I didn’t want to risk any more. I thought I would go there, check it out quickly and then come back to the trees rechecking the jungle along the way. Unfortunately it didn’t work out quite as I had hoped.”

“What happened?”

“I got grabbed. That’s what happened. I’m still angry at myself. Even now. It is hot out there you know and after I had been looking for a while I sat down for a rest in some shade. I hate to say it but I dozed off. Next thing wham, bang, a bag over my head and here I am. It was the dumbest thing to do under those circumstances. Have you ever heard of anyone being so foolish?”

He looked from one to the other. Gabryisia could not hold his gaze and flicked a sideways glance at Fallon who had his head bowed and was blushing deeply.

“Yes. I can see you agree,” said Venki. “Well don’t try to hide your thoughts. They can’t be more critical than my own. I’ve been over and over it and the result is the same. I was just plain stupid.”

Fallon could stand it no longer. By this time his face was as red as a beetroot. “It’s horrid out there,” he blurted. “It’s like an oven. It’s only to be expected that if you trudge around and then spend hours in the Dead Place among those rocks and hills that you will become exhausted. It’s only natural you would rest and close your eyes for a while. Anyone would.”

Venki was taken aback by Fallon’s short outburst and looked hard at him. Fallon had his eyes averted and when Venki saw the expression on Gabryisia’s face he understood.

“Yes, I suppose you are right,” he agreed pensively. “I had not considered everything I suppose. But when you put it like that it sounds reasonable. Maybe I shouldn’t be so critical. It really could happen to anyone. Thank you Fallon. You’ve taken a weight off my mind.”

“I wonder what happened to the two missing children,” said Gabryisia to change the substance of their talk.

“Oh don’t worry about them. They’re alright,” Venki answered. “You see, they were spies sent by the Dongs. Very clever of them. I’ve seen them many times since I have been here. Had a few laughs with them actually. What else can you do when you’re in my position?”

“That’s right,” said the Drong leader. He was standing at the entrance, shoulder against the wall with his arms folded across his chest. “Absolutely correct.”

The Leaf Children looked at him, a grin creasing his grubby face, “There’s not much else you can do is there Venki boy?” he repeated. “You soon learn who’s boss and to do what you’re told. If you don’t you end up like him. He’s been a naughty boy so he’s being taught a lesson.”

Venki’s animosity was plainly evident. “Yes. Kerry here likes to throw his weight around a bit. He likes to be the big important Leader and demonstrate his authority.”

“You should have behaved yourself.”

“You should drop dead.”

“You should control your tongue. You’ve just earned yourself another week.”

“How long have you been chained up in this hole?” Fallon asked.

“I’m not sure,” said Venki. “I guess it must be a few weeks this time.” He glared at the Drong leader. “When you’re on your own in a place like this where there is no night and day to divide the time you soon lose track.”

“Sixteen days. But you’ve got another seven from today,” said the Leader.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Gabryisia said. “You can’t do this Kerry. It’s inhuman. Let him go.”

“I can do it. I am doing it. And he’s stay here until he learns to do what I tell him. Don’t worry. It’s not as bad as you think. We come and see him from time to time and he’s well fed.”

“It’s still not right Kerry,” Gabryisia persisted. “Nobody deserves to be treated like this. What did he do?”

The Leader did not reply immediately. He looked around the cave, pushed himself away from the wall and hitched up his breeches, then called back down the passageway: “Is everything alright back there?”

There was a short affirmative answer and the Leader turned back to Gabryisia. Fixing his stare on the hunched Venki he said: “Down here life is not all that easy at times. It can be difficult and if anyone doesn’t do what he’s supposed to it can be difficult for the others.”

“You mean, the others might see what you’re doing is wrong,” interrupted Venki.

The Leader continued without taking any notice of the remark. “We live very closely and therefore we have rules that we must live by. Anyone who steps out of line is punished. He stepped out of line. That’s all there is to it.”

“Right. I stepped out of line,” said Venki. “And I will continue to do the same as long as you keep me prisoner in this place. Incidentally, by stepping out of line he means I tried

to talk some sense into the others. I tried telling them their way of life was wrong and that they should ignore this puffed up little tyrant.”

“You’ve done it too often,” the Leader said. “Far too often.”

“You’ve been in here before?” asked Fallon.

Venki gave a hollow laugh. “Oh, this is my home away home. This is my sixth time in this jail, isn’t it? Or is it the seventh? No matter. What’s a sentence between friends, eh?”

“My god,” Fallon exclaimed. “I can’t believe it. How can you stand it?”

The Drong leader wheeled around and shouted down the tunnel: “Ready there. We’re coming out.” He turned back to face the Leaf Children. “You’ve had your surprise. We’re going back.”

As Gabryisia hesitated and opened her mouth to speak, the Leader held up his hand. “Enough. We’re leaving.”

Gabryisia and Fallon slowly moved to the entrance and before disappearing Fallon said to Venki: “Don’t worry. Two now. More soon.” Then they were gone, leaving the boy hunched alone against the cold stone wall, the chain from his ankle coiled in a rusty heap by his side.

Back in their dungeon later with the guards again outside the entrance Gabryisia and Fallon sat silently. Finally, Fallon whispered to Gabryisia: “We have to get out of here. We have to escape. I wonder where Nikko and the others are.”

Chapter Seven

“Petrified or not, it is a tree alright,” said Simon.

The seven children were gathered around the trunk having either already felt the hard surface or now doing so. It was like a solid rock pillar extending from the floor of the cave to the ceiling. Blunt branches stuck out from the sides and of course there were no leaves.

How a tree could have survived, let alone once thrived, in the underground environment the children could not imagine. There was no water and there was nothing to suggest there ever had been. There were no dry channels in the floor and everywhere else they looked there was hard dry stone. Nothing remotely suggesting moisture of any kind.

“I don’t understand how this tree could ever have grown here,” said Nikko. “There is no water and nor is there any light. Well, not enough to sustain a tree like this.”

“There must have been once,” said Simon. Like the others he knew well enough that to survive and prosper plant life required ample water and light. Without either a plant withered and died. Naturally there were some unique varieties which flourished in water without a great deal of ultra violet light, such as jungle undergrowth. And there were some specimens which managed to live in amazingly arid climates. But no matter how small the quantity of light or water the fact remained there was some. Here in this underground cave there was none.

“There had to have been some at one time or another in the distant past,” Simon repeated.

“This tree is petrified which means it is hundreds of years old. It also means that there could have been water down here then. Everything is completely different now naturally.”

“The only other explanation is that the tree does not belong here,” said Josh. “That it was brought here from somewhere else.”

“Don’t be dense,” said Simon. “That’s impossible. How could anyone transport a solid rock tree of this size down here? It’s absurd.”

“Agreed,” Nikko said. “We have no way of knowing that this place was like a century or more ago. These tunnels could have been underground rivers for all we know.”

“Maybe it’s a magic tree like the one we saw before,” said Jordon. “Maybe if we wait around a while it will disappear too.”

“Feel it brat,” said Jason, grabbing Jordon’s arm and pulling him to the tree. “Does that feel like a mirage to you? It is solid rock. We could stand here and watch it for another hundred years and it wouldn’t go away.”

Jason snickered at the youngster’s embarrassment. “Next thing you will suggest is that it is the same tree we saw up there and that miraculously it dropped down through the earth into this cave, pulled the ground in over its head and hid from us.” He looked around the group waiting for them to join in the amusement at Jordon’s expense.

It was Porky who spoke first. “Leave him alone Jason. He’s only a kid. And anyway with the things we have seen so far I for one would not be too surprised if something like that did happen. After all, we have found a man-made underground camp hidden under rocks that are empty and flip open at the pull of a lever. Why shouldn’t a tree do the same thing? Maybe there is another lever around here somewhere and if you pull it the tree will pop up out of the cave and stand on the outside.” He went on: “At least that would explain how the tree was there one minute and gone the next.”

“Alright, alright,” said Nikko. “Let’s not fight among ourselves. Jason, try to be a little more tolerant of Jordon. Porky’s right. He is too young to understand some things. But I agree, it is most unlikely that there is a secret handle somewhere that would activate this tree and send it up through the ceiling. It is too big and heavy for that. It would require enormous weight and power to even lift it off the ground. It’ll just have to remain a mystery for now.”

What they had to concentrate on, said Nikko, was finding out if there was another tunnel which would lead them to discovering who or what occupied the underground network, and hopefully Gabrysia and Fallon.

They scattered and examined all the walls, high and low. Within a few minutes Danielle had located an opening. It was about three meters from the ground and in an alcove. On the ground was a flat rock that looked like a stepping stone as to get into the opening would not have been possible without it. No other openings were discovered.

“We’ve got no choice,” said Simon. “We have to go in and see where it leads. There is no other way out of here so it is either that or we go back the way we came. What’s the decision Nikko? Do we go in or not?”

Nikko nodded. “We go in. We have no alternative if we are to continue our search for the others. But please, let’s be careful.”

Nikko as to go first with Josh bringing up the rear. Porky cupped his hands so that Nikko could stand on them and be heaved up onto the stepping rock. From there he would be able to crawl into the opening.

“Hup one, two, three,” said Porky and lifted Nikko into the air. Either Porky was stronger than he thought or Nikko was lighter than he guessed, for Nikko was tossed at least a meter higher than the top of the stepping stone. The result was he landed with a heavy thump, firmly on his heels.

All of a sudden the entire wall containing the alcove, the stepping stone and the opening rumbled sideways.

“Jump,” cried Simon. “Nikko, jump off.”

Nikko clung to the moving wall and turned around to see where he should leap to. But he stayed where he was and thrust out his arm pointing to the left of the children. “Look,” he yelled. “Look at the tree.”

The others followed the direction of his outstretched arm and were stunned at what they saw. The tree was rising from the ground of the cave atop another stone column and disappearing into the ceiling.

“I told you. I told you,” screamed Jordon tugging at Jason’s elbow. “I told you it was the magic tree we saw before.”

The children stood wide-eyed as the tree steadily climbed up out of the cave until in its stead stood a round stone column. The tree had disappeared through the roof of the cave. The moment it vanished the cave wall that had rolled sideways, taking Nikko and the stepping stone with it, came to a jolting halt. What it had uncovered was a large tunnel wide enough for three or even four children to walk side by side and at least three meters high.

“Good heavens,” breathed Danielle. “What have we stumbled on here? Who invented these things? And why?” She paused, still gazing at the place where the wall had been. “There is no question. The Drongs could not have done this. We are up against something of far greater power and awesome knowledge.”

Nikko quickly jumped down of the stone and ran to join the others in the centre of the cave.

“That must be it,” said Josh. “That has to be the tree we saw from the top of that hill.”

“And this is where it went to,” joined Porky. “No wonder we couldn’t find it. It was below us. It was down here underground. I wonder how it works. I mean, how the tree goes up and down. And the wall go backwards and forwards like that. I thought those rocks were pretty good but this is fantastic. Have you ever seen anything like it? Just fantastic.”

“Porky,” said Simon. “Calm down. And stop running around like that.” Porky was half way round the stone column for the second time and was preparing to head for the tunnel when Nikko caught him by the arm.

“Porky,” he said. “Porky. Stop for a minute. You are not thinking. Remember where we are. You’re right, the tree and that sliding wall are fantastic. But Danielle is right too. Someone made them. Someone much, much cleverer than we are. And we don’t know yet if they are friendly or not. So I think it would be best if we assume for the time being that they are not friendly. We could be in great danger. This is their home and we have come in uninvited.”

Porky stopped and stared at Nikko. Then in turn he looked from one of the Leaf Children to the other. All at once he realized what Nikko was saying. They really could be in grave danger.

“What should we do then?” he asked. “We can’t leave now. We have to try to find out how these things work. And there might be more fantastic things in another part of this place. We can’t just go.”

Nikko still had hold of his arm. Gradually he loosened his grip and then gently he put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Listen Porky,” he said softly, “I agree these things we’ve seen are wonderful and we really should spend time investigating them. There is a lot we could learn. But the time is not right. Maybe we can do that later. For now we have something more important to do. We have to try to find Gabrysia and Fallon. They could be suffering this very minute. We’ve come this far and we have to go on.” He patted Porky’s shoulder. “I know you want to find them and make sure they are safe. Don’t you?”

Porky dropped his head and relaxed his tense shoulders. “You’re right. Of course I want to help Gabrysia and Fallon. Wherever they are. I’m sorry. These things are just so incredible. I have never imagined anything like them.”

“None of us has,” said Jason, “but there’s a time and a place for everything. This is not the time to try to fathom out how they work. This is searching time and I say we go on. Straight away.”

Everyone nodded their agreement and with a final squeeze of Porky’s arm Nikko headed for the tunnel entrance and looked down the long bright passageway. They were about to enter it when behind them from the direction in which they had come upon the case there was a loud roar. Then suddenly another roar. More frightening which made the children turn in fear.

“What on earth was that?” Danielle asked. “Where did it come.....” She was cut short by a third roar that was louder than the first two and which brought goose bumps to the back of the children’s necks.

“Run,” called out Jason. “Run. Down the tunnel quickly. Come on. Run for your lives.”

The children turned and ran as fast as they could along the tunnel. The roars continued louder and louder. On they raced, looking behind them but not seeing anything as the horrible roars echoed around them.

Suddenly there was a scream, and little Jordon who had been keeping up with the six other children despite his size, catapulted heels over head and landed in a heap against the hard rock wall.

“Help!” he cried. “Help me! Help me!”

Josh stopped in his tracks. In a single swift movement he bent down and hauled Jordon over his shoulder and was off again. The others too had paused and now the group sped as a team along the passageway. On they ran until their lungs felt hot and their legs grew tired. The roars continued behind them and the children thought the tunnel would never end.

Just as that fear entered Nikko’s mind the passageway stopped. Abruptly. The children were lucky not to fall to their deaths for the end of the tunnel was a sheer cliff at the edge of a huge cavern.

For some seconds they stood gasping for breath, gazing at the drop. But then behind there was another almighty roar.

“What are we going to do?” cried Jordon. “We are going to die. We’re all going to be eaten,” and he started to bawl loudly.

“Over here,” called Danielle. “There’s a ledge. It’s our only chance. Quickly.”

The ledge was very narrow. So narrow the children would never have attempted it normally. But these were not normal times. Another urgent roar, closer than before, and the children knew what they had to do.

With Danielle leading they stepped on to the narrow sill one by one. With a twenty meter drop below them they moved along the ledge, pressing their bodies to the wall. They moved step after step, feeling their way with their toes, too scared to look down.

Simon was bringing up the rear and was only about four meters along when he shouted: “Oh my god! Move! Move!”

The others looked back and there standing on the edge of the cliff was a giant black animal. It stood easily two meters high and was jet black. Its eyes were huge and bright green and they glistened as the animal started at them. A green tongue lolled out of its mouth and saliva dripped onto the earth in front of it. Its tail, long and thick, switched back and forth, up and down. Its head swiveled around and then the eyes glared at them again. It gave two deafening roars and took a threatening step towards the narrow ledge.

“Hurry,” screamed Simon. “Move. Quicker. Quicker.”

The animal put one paw on the ledge. It withdrew it and tried the other front paw. This too it pulled back. Then it gave another frightening roar and stood looking after the children, the whole time its tail flicking angrily behind.

“I don’t think it can follow,” called Danielle. “The ledge is too narrow. It wants to but is angry because it can’t.”

“Keep moving,” said Simon. “Get further away.”

“We can’t,” Nikko yelled back. “We’ve gone as far as we can. There’s no more ledge left.”

Danielle had stopped at the very edge with Nikko close by, followed by Jordon holding onto his breeches and whimpering. Then came Jason, Josh and Porky. Finally Simon joined them. The seven children clung desperately to the face of the cavern still afraid to

look down and fearful of not watching behind to make sure the beast was not following them.

It wasn't. It sat, like a cat waiting to a mouse to emerge from, a hole or from, behind some bushes. One false move and it pounces, rapidly ending the life of the errant rodent.

"What is it?" asked Josh.

"I don't know," Porky answered. "But whatever it is I don't like it one bit. It look like it could eat us all for dinner and still be hungry. Look at the size of t."

"We're trapped," cried Jordon. "We're going to die."

"Hush Jordon," Nikko said. "We're not going to die. We're safe where we are. See, it can't follow us."

That was true enough, but the youngster was alert enough to reply: "But we can't go back either. We're stuck here,"

"He's right Nikko," Jason said. "We might be safe now but we can't stay here forever."

"Everyone look around," Nikko said. "See if there is any way we can move from here. But for goodness sake be careful. Don't move quickly and watch what you are doing."

They had temporarily escaped the beast but he did not want anyone panicking or slipping off the ledge accidentally. The drop to the ground far below, littered with ugly sharp be rocks, would certainly fatal.

The ledge they were perched on was less than a meter wide. Fortunately it was solid rock and did not crumble. Fortunately also the cave's wall was at a slight angle so the children were able to lean against it and, if careful, should not topple off. It, too, was solid with no flaky pieces. As Jason said, they were safe for the time being. But they would soon have top find a way or down.

"There's nothing around that can help us," said Danielle. "The only was out is the way we came."

"Well, we're not going that way," Josh added quickly. "It would be suicide."

Nikko cautioned not to panic and suggested they all try to sit on the ledge with their backs against the wall to rest. So with extreme care, one by one they turned around and lowered themselves so they were sitting with their legs dangling over the side. Jordon was last and had to be coerced and aided by Nikko and Jason together.

Constant glances made certain the beast stayed where it was and did not advance onto the ledge. Luckily for the children the animal decided the shelf was not wide enough for its body and remained crouched glaring with it huge green eyes and switching its tail from side to side.

"OK," said Jason. "Where do we go from here?"

"There's nowhere we can go," Porky said. "With that thing back there watching us and waiting for any opportunity to grab us we can't escape by that route. Certainly we can't jump or climb down to the cave floor. And without wings we can't fly up to the ceiling. Nor that that would do us any good anyway. There's no opening up there either. So it looks like we are stuck here."

"We can't just stay put here," said Jason. "We have to find a way off this ledge and away from that animal."

"I don't know," said Nikko. "I just don't know. Let's think."

Revising all options Nikko was frustrated. The others were right when they said the group could not retreat along the ledge with the beast at the other end. Looking down he also agreed it was out of the question to try to climb to the cave floor. It was too far down

and there were no apparent hand or foot holes. Anyway, the rock face was too steep. Upwards was the reverse of down. A continuation of the rock face that led nowhere. There seemed no answer to their predicament.

Nikko looked at the others sitting silently. Danielle on his right seemed in control of her emotions and he was impressed with the way she was handling the situation. In fact, he realized that of his six companions she had from the start displayed the most commonsense. He remembered Jason's laughing comment back in the forest when he had described as "just a girl". He now acknowledged that his remark did not do her justice. She had strength and could be relied on.

On his other side young Jordon was cowering, plainly in shock and fear. He would have to be watched. The youngster should never have been allowed to join the search party, and reflecting Nikko believed it would have been better to waste time earlier and escort him back from the jungle to the trees. But then everyone had twenty-twenty hindsight, he reminded himself. It was no comfort. The problem was with them and they would have to make sure Jordon did not cause too much trouble in the testing time that lay before them.

Jason was Jason. Strong-willed and impulsive but a good ally to have in tricky circumstances. If he kept a tight rein on him Jason would be a good right arm.

If Jason was the right arm in terms of physical reliability then Simon was certainly the left. He was bright and logical and had showed himself to be willing to accept responsibility. He also demonstrated a loyalty that was important.

That left Porky and Josh. For Nikko they had started on the journey as a humorous duo. Comedy in stereo. Porky had been the laugh getter and Josh the straight man who parroted the wit. But with the various incidents and developments had come a certain differentiation which indicated that Josh was the sensible of the two. Not that {Porky was unreliable or untrustworthy. Nikko had no doubt that the amusing overweight boy would be a tough team member. It was just that so far it seemed Josh was more likely to respond quicker and more intelligently to events as they occurred.

So overall, Nikko was confident that his six companions could present a fairly strong force to be reckoned with should they have to confront a serious problem. And right now they had what Nikko considered a serious problem. Not far from them was a wild beast that gave every indication of being most awkward. Added to that was the difficulty that they themselves were in a geographically precarious position. It was not an enviable situation to be in. To say the least. A rock and a hard place – absolutely.

Nikko faced Danielle. Raising his eyebrows he asked: "Any ideas?"

"NO," she answered matter-of-factly. "I wish I could offer something, but I don't have a single suggestion. We're in a tight spot I think."

"You can say that again."

Despondence settled over them like a cloud. There seemed nothing to add to the crisp comments offered. There were no ideas on how to extricate themselves from their situation and it was certainly a situation that nobody would have wished to find themselves in.

Minutes passed. The children sat carefully, balanced on the narrow ledge with their legs hanging over the edge and the backs of their heads rested against the stone wall behind. The animal at the edge of the cliff continued to watch them through angry eyes. It no longer roared, but its tail was ever active as though it had an impatient motor which

controlled it alone. The impression it gave was that it was confident that sooner or later its prey would have to come within reach. And when it did nothing would save it from, the drooping jaws and massive teeth.

“We have to do something,” said Jason. “We can’t go on sitting here like idiots. That thing back there is just waiting for us to walk over to it and surrender. What are we going to do?”

“What do you suggest?” Josh asked.

“I don’t know precisely. But we have to get away from here somehow.”

“But how? It’s all very well to say we have to get away. We all agree with you on that. But how do we do it?”

“I said I don’t know Josh. Don’t start picking. Think of something instead.”

“If you can’t think of a way out of this how do you expect me to? Why don’t you do some constructive thinking yourself instead of attacking me?”

“I am not attacking you. I am simply saying we have to do something. Don’t be so sensitive.”

“I’m not being sensitive. But lay of me.”

“Alright, alright, alright” said Nikko. “Don’t start arguing among yourselves. That won’t do any good.”

“All I’m saying,” said Jason, “is that we have to come up with some way of getting down off this ledge and away from that beast.”

“And all I’m saying,” said Josh, “is that I don’t have the answer. I wish I did, but I don’t.”

“Right,” said Nikko. “That’s understood then. No more bickering.” He went on: “Simon, what do you think?”

Simon had been listening to the exchange without looking at either Jason or Josh. He kept his head bent but his expression clearly showed he found the confrontation unnecessary and a waste of time.

“I think we are all starting to get a bit edgy,” he said. “No doubt the animal can sense that. If it hasn’t already it soon will.” He continued: “Logically there looks to be no way out. Back is out of the question, we can’t go any further, up is impossible, and down scares the daylights out of me. But having said that down is the only way.”

“Down?” said Porky. “You mean climb down that cliff? That’s nearly twenty meters. How can we get down?”

“I don’t have the *how* Porky. I am just saying that it seems to be the *where*.”

“OK,” said Nikko. “If we assume for the moment that down is our only way what are the means we should consider?”

It was quickly decided they could not jump. It was too high and if they weren’t more seriously injured legs at least would be broken. And that would be just as inconvenient. No ropes meant they could not abseil down the incline. Again it was too high to think of lowering each other one at a time. A human chain, also, was not possible. They looked at one another with blank expressions.

Down was ruled out.

“Why don’t we try to drive the beast away?” said Danielle. “That is one thing we have not considered.”

“Off you go,” said Jason. “You go first. Wave your hands around and tell it to shoo. I’m sure it will do as you order it.” He paused and then said. “Come on Danielle. Just how do you think we are going to make the thing go away?”

“We have our bows and arrows Jason. Maybe we could make it leave with those.”

“It’s worth a try,” said Simon. “Maybe if we all shoot at it it will go away.”

“Let’s do it then. But only one of us first. We don’t want to waste all our arrows.”

Simon was the nearest and was one of the forest’s best archers. So it was decided he should fire a few arrows at the beast to see what reaction he got.

“Aim for the eyes,” said Nikko. “If you hit it anywhere else it will do no good. The thing will probably not even feel it. But if you hit it in the eyes the dye might blind it.”

Simon removed an arrow from his quiver and slowly fitted the feathered end against the thin string. He lowered the shaft against the bow and let it drop slowly to rest on his thumb knuckle. Aiming it at a point a meter above the animal’s head he stretched the string taut and brought the arrow with its ball of red dye down until it pointed directly at the right glistening eye of the beast. Releasing his breath steadily he held his aim. When all of his breath had been silently expelled he opened his fingers holding the string and let loose the arrow.

It flew straight and struck the beast squarely in the right eye. It made a dull plop sound and as the ball hit it burst and red dye splashed all over the animal’s face. It gave a sort of growl and sprang to its feet shaking its head violently.

“You hit it,” cried Porky. “Right in the eye. Great shot.”

The animal was not blinded however and after growling menacingly and continuing to shake its head backwards and forwards which apparently dislodged most if not all the red dye it stood and stared at the children. Then it took a step forward and placed one paw on the narrow ledge.

“Quick,” Josh shouted. “Shoot again. Hit him again.”

Simon took another arrow from his quiver and this time with more urgency fitted it into position. He took aim and fired. The arrow struck the beast a glancing blow on the side of the head. It did nothing but add to its anger and after withdrawing its paw temporarily it stepped forward again.

A third shot by Simon hit it again in the right eye. It roared and shook its head tremendously. So violently it began to stagger. With one paw still on the ledge and continuing to shake its head the beast started to lose its balance and topple sideways to the left and the brink of the cliff.

Almost immediately it realized what was happening and tried to step back to the wider area of ground. But Simon had taken out a fourth arrow and was aiming carefully at the beast’s wide eyes. This time his target was momentarily motionless and Simon held his breath as he let the arrow fly. It was a perfect shot and struck the beast in the other eye.

Instinctively it lifted its head and bellowed. Then it shook its head sharply left and right. As it reached the furthest point to the right its huge body jack-knifed and with its front paw a few centimeters off the ground the animal started to collapse. It was obvious to all what was happening, not least the animal itself.

It tried putting its raised paw back on the ledge. However, it was no longer in the same position and the paw thumped down with the animal’s full weight behind it on the very edge where it gave way and the beast crashed down, slid to the left and finally rolled over the cliff, plummeting to the craggy rocks below. As it fell it roared loudly and its body

twisted grotesquely trying in vain to right itself. The sound it made when it hit the bottom was a sickeningly dull thud followed by complete silence.

High above the children stared down at the black shape sprawled in a misshapen form across the rocks. Blood was already running from the beast's nostrils and mouth, and from the distance separating them to the children it was not red but black. It oozed over the rocks staining them in a growing patch.

"Thank heavens," sighed Danielle. "We're safe. Great shooting Simon. You've saved our lives."

Simon was still kneeling on one knee on the ledge looking sideways over the cliff. He had not moved since loosing his fourth and last arrow and he was shaking slightly. He said nothing but lifted his gaze and stared over his shoulder at Danielle for a long time. Finally he dropped to both knees. His back was hunched and his head hung limply very low. His eyes were watering and his mouth was a mere grimaced slit.

Falteringly he said: "I was...terrified...absolutely terrified. That was my...last arrow....and if....I had missed..." He trailed off and shook his head slowly from side to side.

Porky gently laid his hand in the middle of Simon's back. "Come on," he said. "It's over now. It's gone and it's thanks to you that we are all safe. You were fantastic." He rubbed his friend's shoulder blades and added: "I would not have had the courage to stand my ground. Let alone try to shoot straight."

The others all agreed. It had been an example of confidence, strength and above all reliability under stress.

"You were great Si," said Josh. "Great."

"As Porky said, I don't think any of us could have done the same," added Danielle. "I think I can speak for all of us when I say how grateful we are. You really have saved us from a horrible situation."

Nikko could clearly sense the feelings of comradeship among the group and immediately felt a little out of it himself. For the first time since they had left the camp in search of Gabryisia he again felt he was an outsider. He would not feel comfortable showing the same degree of sentiment so he merely gave a half wave of his hand and called: "Thanks Simon."

Jordon was leaning forward over the edge with his mouth hanging open. In the silence that followed their congratulations of Simon, Jordon suddenly gulped and with wide eyes beamed: "Look at it down there. It's dead. Smashed on those rocks. See the stuff leaking from its head. I thought we were going to be eaten alive."

"Well, you're not going to be," said Danielle leaning over and gently pulling the youngster back from the edge. "We're all safe and we can now get off this ledge."

"Right," said Porky. "Let's get the heck out of here." With that the line of children inched their way back to the entrance of the tunnel and the edge of the cliff.

"So far so good," said Porky again. "Where to from here? I reckon we have no alternative but to go back to the scared tree."

"That sounds appropriate," joined in Josh. "Scared kids to a scared tree." He paused. "But what then?" Where do we go after that?"

Nikko suggested they decide that when they reached the cave with the tree. The important thing to do at the moment was to get away from the dead end tunnel to a place where they could rest and try to figure out their next move.

Once they were back in the cavern, after a slower walk along the tunnel which was much longer than they had imagined as they sped down it with the beast in pursuit, the children headed for the safety of the tree and almost as one slumped down and leant against its huge somehow reassuring trunk.

“OK,” began Jason. “We’re here. Now what?”

Danielle opened the discussion. “Obviously there are two choices facing us. We can go back up the ladders and outside and start again looking for other entrances. Or we can try to find out if there are more tunnels down here that might take us somewhere other than that cave we just left. Clearly there is no point in arriving back in *that* place.”

“Yes,” said Porky. “I didn’t see any entrance or exits from the place. Of course I didn’t examine it very closely. I had other more important things on my mind. But nothing caught my eye.”

“We can’t go back outside,” said Jordon simply.

“No.” Nikko did not move from where he was sitting but he looked around the cave to see if there was another opening. “It would be a waste of time to go back outside. We’re down here now and we should keep looking.”

“Where?” Jason asked.

Nikko hauled himself up and strolled over to the wall directly in front of where he had been sitting. He ran his hand over the cold rock as if searching for another lever that might reveal another opening. There was nothing but he traced a palm widths line along the wall for about five meters. He then stopped and turned to the group.

“I think we have to check this whole place,” he said. “There might be another secret opening somewhere.” The others got to their feet and it was once again Danielle who was first up. Nikko smiled at her and nodded slightly.

The seven children spread out and one by one they stretched their arms and began feeling the walls of the cave. They searched for minutes but nothing was found. They ran their hands along high above their heads and the got down on their knees and gingerly felt the stone face there. Still nothing. After half an hour of fruitless examination they moved back to the tree and once again sat with their backs against the trunk in silence.

For a long time nothing was said. Then Josh spoke up. “It looks like we will have to go outside again after all. There is nothing down here. We’ve searched and searched and there is definitely no other way out of this cave.”

“It certainly looks that way,” added Porky. “But if there are no other tunnels apart from that one which ends in a cliff why would anyone dig this one out?”

“Maybe just for the tree.”

“Could be,” mused Josh. “But why stick the tree down here in the first place?”

“It’s a lookout remember.”

“That’s right,” said Danielle. “We forgot about that. This tree is supposed to be a lookout. Or we think that’s what it is supposed to be anyway.”

“How is it used?” asked Porky. “I don’t see how you can climb it when it is up. Anyway, why hide it? Why not just leave it outside and use it as a lookout up there without all the trouble of making some contraption that brings it back down here underground? I don’t see why someone should go to that much trouble to hide a tree that you would expect to find out there anyway.”

“There must be a reason,” Jason said. “Someone has gone to an awful lot of trouble to do precisely that. So there must be a reason for it.”

“But what?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Maybe you get inside it,” said Jordon. “Maybe when you get inside there are steps which lead up to the top. From there I bet you could see for miles around the Dead Place. It would be a super lookout then.”

“Smart boy,” Jason answered. “For once I think you might have hit on something. Let’s see if you are right. Let’s see if there is an entrance to this tree here.” Jason stood and began checking the trunk of the petrified tree closely.

He was joined by the others and it was not long before Simon who had not uttered a word since his ordeal with the creature in the other cavern located a recessed button similar to those beside the rocks on the surface.

“Here,” he said simply. “I’ve found it.”

The others crowded around. They stood looking at the button and Nikko gave the instruction to push it. Simon complied and immediately a panel in the trunk about a meter wide and a meter high sprang open.

Jordon pushed past the others and stuck his head into the tree. His little voice echoed outside in a deep tone. “There are no steps. But there is a ladder. And it doesn’t go up. It goes down.”

“Let me see,” demanded Jason and pulled the youngster by the scruff of the neck. “He’s right. The ladder does go down. There is nothing going up at all. It is just solid rock.”

When he had withdrawn from the opening his place was taken by the others one after another. They all voiced surprise at the fact that the ladder inside led beneath the floor of the cave they were now standing in.

“Every time we find something new it is more confusing than the last,” Jason said. “First, we discover the Dead Place and the imitation rocks. We thought they were pretty incredible, but then we found this place down here.”

“Then it was the tree,” interrupted Porky. “And if that was not enough what about the hidden passage and how it was concealed. Really fantastic.”

“The monster was the worst,” said Jordon. “We nearly died.”

“And now we’ve discovered that the tree itself is hiding a staircase that leads beneath our feet to another mysterious world probably,” continued Jason.

“Well, what are we standing around here for?” Josh asked. “Let’s get going and see what is down there,” and with that he moved towards the opening in the side of the tree.

“Hold it,” said Nikko. “Wait a minute Josh. Don’t go rushing into anything. How do we know there is not another creature down there? The last thing we need is to drop down into another unknown world which could be worse than here and be confronted by another wild animal. Or more than one. So let’s just think it through and decide carefully what we are going to do.”

“You’re not suggesting we don’t go down are you Nikko?” asked Josh. “We have to.”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t. I’m saying we should prepare ourselves for what we might find.”

“How?”

“Well for a start Simon is our best shot with an arrow and he hasn’t got any left,” Nikko said. “I think we should share out those that we do have left.”

“Good thinking,” said Porky. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“Also, I don’t think we should rush anywhere all together. We were all caught on that ledge in there and it could have been disastrous. There was nothing we could do and we were very lucky to get out of it as well as we did. We might not always be so lucky.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I think one or two of us should check it out down there first. If it’s alright then the rest can follow.”

“And if it’s not alright?”

“Then the others up here can come down and help out, or they can escape without being hurt themselves. Either way we won’t all be in a jam at the same time.”

“From the way you’re talking,” said Jason, “it sounds like you are thinking of going down first. Who else is going with you? Simon? Or are you going alone?”

“How would you like to come with me Danielle?” asked Nikko.

The question surprised her. Like the others she had expected any advance party to include Simon or at least one of the boys. Not her. And certainly not she and Nikko alone.

“Is that wise?” Jason enquired. “You don’t know what you are going to find down there,” he paused and looked intently at Nikko. He then shifted his gaze to Danielle. “Don’t think I don’t doubt your ability Danielle. You know how I respect you. But we are not in the forest. And I think you will agree that our experiences so far are clear indication that we can expect to come up against anything down here. Even nightmares are coming to life.”

Porky and Josh nodded in assent but said nothing. It was time not to take risks.

“Will you come?” repeated Nikko. He had listened to the cautions and from the beginning had expected opposition. But he wanted Danielle with him even if the rest did not see it his way.

“I’ll come,” Danielle replied.

“Good. While we are gone I want the rest of you to stay alert up here. When we’ve made sure it’s all clear we’ll come back and get you.”

Nikko checked his clothing made sure he still had some water left in his bottle. When he was satisfied he was ready or spoke again. “If we are not back, if you don’t hear from us in thirty minutes, get back to the forest.” He said. “Don’t hang around and don’t come down.”

“Now wait a minute Nikko.” Jason was obviously not happy. “Surely you don’t mean you want us to leave you if you get into trouble?”

“Jason. If we get into trouble there is no sense in making it worse by you and the others joining us. I know I said earlier that you might be able to help out if we encountered any difficulty. But that really only would apply in simple cases. If anything serious happened and we were in real danger we would not want to make it worse by doing anything that would endanger all of us. Understand?”

“No way! If you’re not back in exactly half an hour I’m coming down that ladder to find out why.”

“Me too,” said Porky.

“And me,” added Josh.

Simon who had been very quiet during the exchange cleared his throat. “Nikko, you can’t expect us to run out on you. We don’t do it. You’ll have your half an hour, but after that we’ll be coming down.”

Nikko could see there was no point arguing any further. He had been overruled, overwhelmingly, even if he was the leader. At first he was disappointed but he had to admit there was no questioning the loyalty and bravery of the Leaf Children. It was admirable.

“Thirty minutes then,” said simply.

First into the tree was Nikko stepping in with his left foot while gripping the outer rim firmly with both hands. Then he reached in, took a tight hold of the ladder and eased his hunched body inside. With a final look at the others he began the descent, stopping briefly a few rungs down to make sure Danielle was alright above him. The column descended in almost total darkness except for the light from above and some more from far below. The ladder dropped about thirty rungs to a point where there was solid earth beneath his feet and an opening similar to the one in the cave above. Nikko did not venture outside straightaway but waited until Danielle was directly above him, just a few rungs away.

“Ready?” he asked in a whisper. “Wait until I call you, then come on out. But not before, Danielle. Please wait until you hear from me. If anything goes wrong get back up and out as quickly as you can.”

“I understand Nikko,” replied Danielle. “Don’t worry. I’ll take my cur from you.”

Nikko poked his head out of the opening. Then he pulled it back in. Very quickly.

“Shhhh,” he whispered urgently. He put his index finger to his lips and continued motioning to Danielle not to make a sound. For her part Danielle kept very still and quiet, but she raised inquisitive eyebrows.

Nikko said nothing but shook his head sharply continuing to hold his finger to his lips. “Shhhh,” he said again. He bent his knees and carefully peered outside once more. What he saw made him catch his breath.

The column which was supporting the tree and which the two children were hiding inside was apparently standing in a gigantic cavern. However, the opening through which Nikko was looking was not at ground level but some considerable height in the air with stone stepping blocks leading from it.

Nikko could not see exactly how far it was to the ground although he estimated it was at least another thirty to forty meters. It looked like the column was a giant needle thrusting out of a dais atop an impressive staircase. Around the walls of the cave, or at least the one and a bit walls he could see, were cages hanging on what appeared to be intertwined vines or ropes. In the cages were living creatures. They huddled silently as mute sentinels.

There must have been hundred of them and from what Nikko could make out each cage seemed to contain a different creature. He could not clearly see all of them but some he recognized. There were cats and dogs of various breeds, birds of all sizes and colours, and what looked like rodents and reptiles.

There were also some he did not recognise. Huge and small and again all different colours, some with long hair, others which were quite bald. One cage right in front of the opening in the column contained a large black beast just like the one which had terrorized the children in the cave above. But it seemed to be even larger and with an even more ferocious and snarling grimace, the green eyes glaring and the green tongue lolling out of its jaws, flanked by two gleaming yellow tusks of teeth. It was that sight which had first

caught Nikko's attention and which caused him to pull his head back into the stone column and warn Danielle to silence.

Now he was again looking out at the strange sight and this time he realized as he watched that none of the caged creatures moved. Suddenly he knew why. They were not living creatures as he had originally imagined. They were dead. Stuffed or something, but quite dead. It was like a primitive museum.

Nikko eased himself out onto the flat dais. The entire cave was hung with cages. The stepping stones fell to the floor below where there were no cages.

Nikko looked around the walls and then at the ceiling. He was craning his neck when he heard from behind him Danielle call his name faintly. "Nikko? Nikko? Is everything alright? Nikko?"

He returned to the opening, bending slightly, and said: "It is OK. You can come out. But you won't believe what you are going to see."

Danielle quickly stepped from the confined space and raised her head to stare in awe at the scene before her. "Good heavens," she exclaimed. "What is this place?"

"I think we're in a museum of some sort," replied Nikko. "None of the creatures looks to be alive and there's no smell at all. They must have been stuffed."

"There are hundreds of them," said Danielle. "Hundreds. Animals, birds and some things I can't tell what they are."

"And there doesn't look like there are two of anything. That's why I think it must be a museum or something. It's incredible isn't it?"

"Look at that there Nikko." Danielle pointed to a cage in which was a bird about the same size as they were. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful? It's got every colour of the rainbow in it. And that bright red head shines as if there was a light on it. It's stunning."

"Our hungry friend's big brother is here to," Nikko said. "See there. He must be almost twice the size of the one upstairs. I hope he has no older cousins roaming around down here."

Together the children walked around the dais marveling at the caged creatures which surrounded them on all four sides. From time to time they exchanged comments and pointed out surprising attributes of individual specimens. It was indeed like being in a museum. The creatures were certainly real and whoever had prepared them for their endless existence in the cages had done so with meticulous care.

T, stood or perched in what seemed entirely natural poses and their expressions were incredibly natural. Danielle and Nikko would not have been surprised if any of them had suddenly come to life and begun moving or screeching.

After completing a circuit of the dais the two children returned to the top of the steps and began the long climb to the bottom where they stood almost touching, gazing around them.

As Nikko had noticed before there was nothing on the floor of the cave. It was clear of rocks and looked as though it had been swept clean. A number of tunnels led from the cave, some rather narrow while others were larger than those they had encountered so far. Danielle moved towards one which had a square entrance obviously cut out of the hard rock. It did not appear to be a tunnel as such rather a small chamber. As she neared it she could see two shapes at the back, concealed in partial darkness. When she reached the entrance she gave a gasp and brought her hand to her mouth.

"Nikko," she called. "Come here. Quickly."

Nikko ran over to her side and stopped. He too took a sharp intake of breath and stared at the objects.

Standing upright at the back of the chamber were a boy and a girl. They were dressed the same as Danielle and Nikko but were covered from head to foot with a thin layer of dust. They had smiles on their faces but appeared quite lifeless.

“Nikko,” Danielle said. “These are Leaf Children.” Then she added. “”They’re specimens. They have been collected. Just like all those creatures hanging up there is cages.”

Nikko swallowed hard. He was frightened and could not hide it. “Who is down here?” he said quietly. “What sort of thing would do this?”

Instinctively Danielle and Nikko reached for each other’s hand and stood looking at the two children standing side by side at the rear of the chamber.

Chapter Eight

Gabrysia and Fallon were lying on their sides alone one wall in their dungeon. They had spent an uncomfortable night talking for a long time but eventually succumbing to weariness and mental exhaustion.

They had stretched out on the cold ground at right angles and despite the constant light which Gabrysia now knew came from the *illuminations* they had dropped off to sleep. But as the hours passed it became much colder and they crept closer until they were side by side drawing warmth from one another's bodies. Like this they slept fitfully for about four hours until they were jolted awake by the laughter of the guards standing outside the entrance. The children sat up rubbing their eyes and blinking in the ever present brightness.

"Like two love birds," snickered one of the guards. The other three joined him and laughed as they watched the two children yawn and slowly start another day as captives deep underground beneath the Dead Place.

They were not sure how long they had spent in their subterranean prison as the *illuminations* which remained on all the time made it hard to keep track of the time. They had in fact been in the odd environment only two days but already were disoriented. They estimated two twenty-four hour periods had elapsed but had to admit it could quite easily have been less, or more. Past logic told them that a period of sleep naturally separated one day from the next. But that was under normal circumstances and these were far from normal. It could well be that their experiences had been so traumatic, such a mental upheaval, that sleep had overcome them ahead of the usual schedule. Instead of a whole day having passed it could conceivably have been only twelve or eighteen hours.

In their present predicament however, while it may have been galling not to know whether they were awake in the middle of the night or the middle of the day, it mattered little in real terms. Their situation remained unchanged. They were still being held prisoner by a band of Drong children, led by an irrational boy who seemed likely to move in any direction depending on how the whim took him.

It was not an enviable position to be in especially as they had no way of knowing where their would-be rescuers were, or indeed if there were any searchers still out looking for them. Certainly they hoped to be rescued and returned to their familiar life in the trees but it was far from certain whether this would be soon. It was also a matter for deep conjecture whether such a release would be accomplished without a great deal of fighting and injury.

Gabrysia and Fallon had no experience to rely on in trying to guess what might happen. Neither had ever before been involved in an incident where a rescue had been attempted. Since their arrival on the island long ago, so long ago all memory of it had been erased, they had had no cause to become involved in a similar action.

There had been one or two occasions when Leaf Children had wandered away from the safety of the forest and were never found by search parties that went looking for them. But it had always been believed they had been carried off by Torpah to the distant land they talked of sometimes around the warm fires in the winter time. As the missing children were never found the others made up stories which they would prefer to be true. After a time these tales became accepted, particularly when the Leaf Children sat around the fires as the nights fell early.

Fallon had been one member of a search party but they had found nothing. There was no reason for the others to think he too had not simply disappeared. The Dead Place was mysterious enough with trees that were visible one minute and gone the next. He knew he had been kidnapped but Nikko and the others didn't. It was possible they searchers had given up thinking he also had been carried off. What other explanation could there be? If they searched everywhere and no trace was found the most likely conclusion would be that he had met the same fate. His disappearance had been under high suspicious circumstances. Fallon could just imagine Simon telling the others how one second he had been sitting against a rock and when he looked again he had vanished. Nikko might be the only one to question the conclusion though he would no doubt be swayed in time. Their only hope lay in the fact that Gabryisia had been kidnapped by the Drongs. That had been witnessed. So the Leaf Children would be searching for the Drong camp as distinct from two missing children, and hopefully they would go on looking until they located it. Fallon had to smile when a thought struck him.

"What are you thinking Fallon?" Gabryisia asked. "You seem happy for some reason or other."

"I was just thinking how ironic it is," replied Fallon. "You know the saying about leaving no stone unturned when you are looking for something. In our case let's hope Nikko and the others don't overlook the stones. That is literally the first answer to the riddle."

"What do you mean?" asked Gabryisia.

"Well, I was dozing against the big stones when I was grabbed. So was Venki. So the Drongs must have been hiding near them. As we are underground now my bet is they have burrowed under the rocks to get down here. If Nikko and the party search carefully enough around those rocks they might find the burrows." Fallon stopped for a moment and then added: "That's if I'm right of course."

"Let's hope whatever is necessary to happen does," Gabryisia said. "We have to get out of here and we have to make sure Venki comes with us. That's another problem we have to take into account Fallon. We can't leave him here."

"No. If he stays cooped up like that it will harm his health. From what I've seen of him he doesn't strike me as a person who gives in easily. He'll go on being a thorn in their side. And that Drong is such a maniac he could do something stupid."

Gabryisia nodded and almost to herself said: "We really must do something. But what?"

For a long time the two of them sat without saying a word. The guards had apparently gone after the snide laughing remark, content to leave the prisoners unwatched and free to discuss their predicament without fear of being overheard.

Gabryisia suddenly smiled to herself and faced Fallon. Her eyes were bright and in a cheerful tone she said: "They also say there is a silver lining to every cloud. And there had been some good to come out of this episode."

"What on earth is it?" asked Fallon. "Here we are trapped in some underground dungeon with the possibility of never being found and you say there is a bright side to it. You'll have to explain that to me."

Gabryisia's smile broadened. "You," she said. "You are the positive side. Do you realize you have been talking non-stop for hours yesterday and again today. Fallon, you have become a conversationalist."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I..."

“It’s true. Really. You have done more talking down here in the last day or so than you have ever done before. And it’s wonderful.”

“I guess I have. Maybe it’s because of everything that’s happened. I didn’t realize. I hope it hasn’t annoyed you. I don’t want to....”

“Fallon, don’t be silly. It’s good to hear you talk. You have ideas and you express them. You must not revert to your protective shell again. When we get out of here keep talking. Talk and talk and talk.”

There was a noise at entrance behind them. Turning Gabryisia and Fallon saw the Drong leader standing casually in the centre of the opening with his arms crossed and the now expected lopsided grin on his face. “Yes Leafy,” he drawled. “You go on talking. But don’t waste your breath talking about when you get back to the forest. You won’t be going back there until I say.” He went on: “Also it is not good for morale down here if you go around talking about getting out. Escaping or anything. Remember your friend Venki and what happened to him. The same could happen to you if you start causing trouble.”

The Leader had not moved as he spoke. He kept his arms folded against his chest and his eyes bore into Fallon with obvious dislike. Fallon returned the gaze unblinking.

“What makes you think we will not be rescued?” he asked. “There are others out there looking for us and sooner or later they will discover the burrows under the rocks. When they do we and Venki will certainly be freed.”

The Drong’s arms dropped to his side and the grin vanished from his grubby face. “How do you know about the entrance?” he demanded. “Who told you?”

It was Fallon’s turn to smile. He was surprised but inwardly pleased at the Drong’s reaction and he was determined to get as much mileage out of the slip as possible. The Leader’s confirmation of the burrows was the first chink in his armour and Fallon now concentrated on searching out others.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said calmly. “It was pretty obvious you know. We figured it out long ago. And the others will have done the same by now.” He turned to Gabryisia and with a wink that could not be seen by the boy in the entrance added: “The next thing he’ll want to know is how we know about the tree.”

Gabryisia took up the line easily. “A tree is a tree and we know all about them. The forest is our home. But out here? That’s a different story and was easy right from the start.”

They turned to face the Leader and Gabryisia said: “Really, it won’t be long now Kerry.”

The Drong leader stared hard at the Leaf Children. At first his expression was one of alarm and uncertainty. It then changed to anger. “You’re lying,” he said. “I don’t believe you.” Then he called to his guards who were standing just in view around the corner and pointing to one said: “You. Go and check the tree opening outside. Make sure it’s covered and out of sight. Quickly.”

As the soldier turned to go the Leader added sternly: “Be very careful. Keep a good watch out. There might be other Leafies around.”

A very slight smile crossed Fallon’s lips. A second chink had been discovered.

“Kerry, what do you intend doing with us?” Gabryisia wanted to shift the point of the confrontation, to keep the Drong leader off guard. She didn’t want to give him time think carefully on their comments.

Walking away from Fallon's side so that he could not concentrate on them both at the same time, Gabryisia continued: "Surely you don't expect to keep us prisoner here forever."

The Leader's eyes followed her across the room and then darted back to Fallon for a few seconds before settling on Gabryisia once again.

"I don't think you'll be going anywhere for some time," he said. "Certainly not as soon as you seem to imagine."

"What are you going to do?" Fallon asked from the other side of the room where he had moved to. "Have your guards there stay with us every minute of the day? They'll soon get tired of that. And anyway what do you hope to achieve by all this? All we would be are trophies. You'd have to feed us, watch us, and worry about what we are going to do next. That doesn't sound particularly clever to me."

"Listen Leafy," the Drong said. "You've seen for yourself already we don't have to mount watch around the clock to make sure you behave yourself."

"You mean lock us away in some cave where we're no use to anybody? Very clever. Oh yes, we are obviously no match for you. What do you say Gabryisia? Should we give and submit now?"

"Don't be unkind Fallon," Gabryisia said in a mock serious tone. "Kerry here has a problem and he's doing his best to solve it. Go ahead Kerry. Tell us what you plan to do with us. I'm sure you have a very intelligent plan."

The Drong leader was livid. He was visibly shaking with rage and it was almost possible to imagine his face would explode it as so puffed and red.

"Come on Kerry boy," baited Fallon. "Let's hear your brilliant idea. Tell us what you have in store for us. Is it the rack? Boiling oil? Are you going to put us away in one of those secret tunnels you wouldn't show us? What is it going to be then?"

The Leader exploded. He lost all control and began shouting at the top of his voice and at the same time waving his arms frantically in the air and changing from one leg to the other.

"You'll pay," he screamed. "Pay! Pay! Pay! You can't make fun of me like that and get away with it. You'll be sorry. Both of you. I'm going to make you regret what you've said." He went on mumbling threats of punishment and pain and promised never to let them out of the underground world, his kingdom as he called it.

"You think you're smart because you line in the trees and have all those toys and things. You make fun of us and look down on us like we are dirt. Why don't you clean yourself up Kerry? Why don't you be a good boy Kerry? Why don't you do what we tell you Kerry? Well, no more. I've beaten you this time and you are both my prisoners and you're going to stay that way. And you'll pay for every rotten word. You'll pay alright."

Finally he stopped for breath, his arms limp by his side with his hands opening and closing. Spittle had gathered at the corners of his mouth and his eyes were damp. His face was no longer red, the blood apparently drained leaving it ashen.

Gabryisia and Fallon were stunned by the outburst, sudden as it had come and the intensity of the anger and hatred. They had expected a reaction, had provoked it, but its severity and depth when it came had taken them by surprise.

"You'll pay," said the Drong again. "Oh, you'll pay. I'll make sure of it." He was now quickly recovering and regaining his composure. Soon he would be once again in charge and on guard more so than before.

Fallon did not want this to happen. He did not want to let the opportunity slip by without a further probe for information or a weakness.

“So,” he said. “It’s the dark mysterious tunnels is it? You’re going to feed us to the hyenas are you? That’s par for the course for you I suppose.”

“The tunnels are the Keepers’,” the Leader retorted. He stopped immediately. The cave was quiet. There was not a sound as the Leader stared at Fallon for a long time with an expression of disbelief and loathing. When he spoke it was in a hoarse rasp. “Damn you. Damn you to hell.” Then he turned on his heels and walked quickly away without another word, leaving the remaining soldiers open mouthed outside the entrance.

“We’re in for it now,” said Gabryisia after a time. “He’s as mad as a bull. Was it worth it? Was it really worth it do you think?”

Fallon did not answer straight away. Then he asked: “What, or who, are the Keepers I wonder?”

The Drong leader was furious with himself. He had been tricked into revealing far more than he had intended or wished to the two Lead Children. The boy had taunted him into spontaneous reactions and he had as a result given away too much.

The burrows had been kept hidden for a long time and until now they were known only to those who lived underground. He was annoyed that now some outsiders also knew of them. But the knowledge could be managed. The captives could simply be held where they were. As for the Leaf Children outside, finding the openings that too could be managed by locking the spring mechanisms for a time until the danger passed.

The business with the tree was of greater concern. If the Leaf Children were to be taken at their word the whole underground network was at risk of being discovered. And that could be disastrous. The whole section would have to be blocked off. As soon as his soldier returned from checking the opening he would give the order or see to it himself.

But most worrying of all was his mention of the Keepers. That was very dangerous indeed. He was the only one to know of them. Up to now. His loss of control for one brief moment had placed everything in a highly dangerous situation. It must go no further or all would be lost. If necessary the two captives would have to be sealed off, even more isolated than that troublesome Venki.

As he hastened along the passage away from the dungeon the Drong leader slapped his thigh and again cursed aloud. He must put the emergency security plans into operation immediately. “Where is that soldier?” he said, and quickened his step.

Back in the dungeon Gabryisia and Fallon sat closed together in the farthest corner out of the hearing of the guards standing at the entrance watching closely and clearly trying to overhear the conversation. They spoke in whispers so low they had to repeat many of the sentences they directed to each other.

“What do you think they are?” asked Gabryisia.

“I don’t know for sure,” Fallon replied. “But Kerry was visibly shaken as soon as he had mentioned it. Did you see his expression change? I think he could have happily strangled me.”

“You must be careful Fallon. Don’t take any more chances like that for a while. We got quite a bit out of him, more than we could have expected rally, but we have made him hopping mad in the process. We don’t want to push him too far.”

“I agree. He’s in a dangerous mood now. But at least we now know two things for sure. Those rocks outside do hide entrances to this place so we are definitely somewhere

underground in the Dead Place. Second, the tree is another opening. God knows how it works but it is an opening. And that increases the chances of Nikko and the others finding their way in here.”

“I hope you’re right. But I also hope that if they do locate the openings they move carefully.”

“They will,” said Fallon. “Nikko is very cautious. He weighs things up very carefully. In a way it’s good that he’s new to the place. It means he is wary of things we might take for granted. He thinks things through very thoroughly and is not afraid to sit back and ask questions and discuss points before venturing on. In this case better than Jason I feel.”

“Good,” said Gabrysia. “What we need now more than anything else is a cool, steady head. They must not be impulsive.”

There was a pause and the children looked back at the guards to make sure they could not be overheard. The three of them were standing together at the entrance still watching them carefully, but apparently not trying to listen any more. They seemed reconciled to not being able to hear the conversation.

“Coming back to that other remark by Kerry,” said Gabrysia. “Any ideas?”

Fallon lowered his voice even further. “Not really. But I don’t reckon Keepers are animals. If they were why would be get so upset? We know there is at least one beast locked up down here. Others would not be that unusual. And there is no reason why he would try to keep them such a secret. To the contrary he was very disturbed at having let it slip. It has to be something very secret and very important. What do you think?”

“I don’t know either.” Gabrysia’s eyes narrowed. “Fallon, do you think there might be other people in this place? I mean not Drons, but someone we’ve never heard of?”

“I don’t see how. Who could there be? There’s only us and the Drons.”

“Well, we haven’t seen everything on the island. Maybe we and the Drons are not the only ones who live here. I know it sounds unlikely but what if there were others? If they lived underground all the time no-one would know they existed.”

“Nobody could stay down here forever. Even the Drons have to go outside sometimes. After only two days I can understand why. And anyway, why would they choose to live here and avoid all contact? It’s not logical.”

“I guess you’re right,” said Gabrysia pensively. “It doesn’t make sense. So what are they if they are not animals and if they are not people?”

Fallon shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Finally he said: “I just don’t know.”

He was concerned over how the situation had developed. He did not want to worry Gabrysia unduly but the point was he was growing anxious that there had been no sign of the others in the search party. He did not really expect them to come bursting in and carry them away to safety, giving Kerry a black eye into the bargain. But he thought there could have been some sign or news of them. Even if it meant the Drons being alerted that something unusual was going on elsewhere in the underground world.

But so far there had been nothing. Many hours had passed since his capture but the Drons had seemed unconcerned that he and his friends would be found and rescued. In fact, all seemed under control. No doubt they had sentries posted or had other means of detecting intruders. It was reasonable to assume that sooner or later unwelcome visitors would be noticed. He hoped it would not be too long before Nikko and the rest would penetrate far into the network. He was growing edgy and wanted to be out of this unnatural environment. He was missing the fresh air and sunshine and the green trees

with their musical leaves. This was no place for a person who lived with living nature all around. Down here in this subterranean wilderness all was cold and lifeless.

“Fallon. Fallon, where have you been? What were you thinking?” Gabrysia was talking to him, bringing him out of his daydream.

“Oh I was just wishing we were out of this place and back in the forest.” Fallon smiled and added: “It won’t be long I know, but I just hate sitting here so helplessly.”

“I hate it too,” said Gabrysia. “I feel so useless. If we could do anything that might get us out of here I would. But for the moment I guess we are stuck.”

“We could try to overpower the guards,” Fallon said. “There are only three of them and the two of us. Maybe we could distract them and then tackle them. We might be able to do it.”

Gabrysia did not agree. If they failed they would be an even worse jam. The Drong leader would certainly vent his anger on them and they could end up in very serious straits. There were problems also if they succeeded. What would they do after they were out of the dungeon? Where would they go? The only way out that they knew about would lead them straight to the Drons in the main chamber. And they could hardly take on the entire base.

“No Fallon,” she concluded. “For the moment at least we had better try nothing like that. We’ll have to wait for a more opportune time. When it comes we’ll know. Anyhow who knows, maybe we’ll be rescued and away from here before we have to do anything on our own.”

“You’re right of course,” said Fallon. “It’s just that I want to do something. Anything but sit around waiting for that crazy fool to go off his head. He bothers me. The whole setup here bothers me.”

“It’s uncanny really,” said Gabrysia. “Weird. I still can’t understand why the Drons have chosen to live underground. Out in the middle of the Dead Place. It’s dirty, claustrophobic, cold. My goodness it must be freezing in winter. It’s utterly unreal. They could easily live outside. If they genuinely don’t want to share the forest why not the jungle? It’s not ideal by any means but it’s better than this horrible warren. It’s almost as if they set out to find the most isolated, desolate, uncomfortable place to settle.”

“They found it,” said Fallon.

“But why?”

“Who knows. They all seem a bit strange to me. That Kerry is around the bend. We know that. The rest are all out of the same mould. They look a bit crackers. Dirty, filthy, grubs.”

“Some people are different from what you might call the normal. Maybe it’s because of a physical disability or an attitude to everyday life that sets them apart. And quite often they band together or at least gravitate to the same area. There they make their own life, governed by their own rules and everyone is happy. They don’t bother others and they don’t allow outsiders to interfere with them. The differences are accepted. Tolerated at least. But how often do you find such a large group of people suffering the same abnormality? In this case a particularly odd behaviour which goes beyond the usual antisocial. Who have turned their back on everything that is right and good.”

“You’ve put your finger on it Gabrysia. The Drons are determined to be antisocial. They weren’t forced into it. They sat down and elected to be wretched. They then went out and

did all they could to add to that wretchedness. This base is one of the trappings. It suits them admirably. They could not have chosen better.”

Gabrysia without being aware of it had been running her fingers through her hair, combing out the knots, shaking out the tangles. Her tresses hung over her shoulders and down her back ending in tight little curls. She continued the motion. Then she stopped and looked at Fallon who was sitting quietly watching her.

“Listen to us,” she said. “Two old philosophers. Anyone listening would have to wonder what we were on about. Sitting here pretending to understand the whole world. In reality we can’t even look after ourselves. Look where our philosophising landed us. In a pretty position.”

“I know what you mean,” answered Fallon, “but I still wouldn’t use the word pretty. This place is far from attractive. It’s awful.”

Gabrysia nodded her agreement. She thought it the worst place she had ever been in. There was no green and no other bright colours she was used to outside. The entire base, or that much of it they had seen, was bland earthy brown. No flowers, no trees or shrubs, not even moss. In fact, there was no life at all. If the barren land above was the Dead Place this dreadful prison was it equally inanimate basement.

As any girl would Gabrysia was imagining how it would look if plants were brought in and if there was water and natural light. It would still not be anything like outside but it would be livable for short periods. She looked around turning her head in quick broad arcs and caught Fallon examining her intently.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “What are you looking at e like that for?”

Fallon didn’t reply straight away. He kept looking at her for a while and then said: “It’s something I meant to ask you about yesterday. But in the middle of everything I forgot. I just remembered.”

“What? Is it important?”

“Maybe not. It just struck me as a little strange at the time, that’s all.”

“Well, what is it? I’ll answer it if I can.”

Fallon kept his eyes on Gabrysia. “It was soon after I was brought here. Yesterday. You asked me about the search party.”

Yes, I remember. What of it?”

“Well, when I told you Jason was not in chare and that Nikko was you said ‘good’. In fact, you made a point of saying it was good a few times. It struck me as odd that’s all.”

“That I should prefer Nikko to Jason as leader?”

“Yes.”

“He’s got a calmer, cooler head on his shoulders Fallon. We both agreed on that not long ago. We need a steady hand in charge now.”

“I know all that. But you see that’s the point. I know it. I spent time with him in the forest, in the jungle, and then in the Dead Place. I had time to see him operate.”

Gabrysia remained silent and Fallon kept his eyes on her. “But you,” he said. “only had a very brief time with him in the forest. Minutes really. Hardly sufficient to accurately judge his character. You were kidnapped almost straight away. Yet in a critical situation like the one we’re in at present you immediately welcome him as leader of the party that will either rescue us or fail in the attempt, perhaps condemning us to a long, long time down here.”

Still Gabryisia said nothing. She stared back unblinking. Ultimately Fallon dropped his gaze to the floor and began fidgeting with a small pebble. "I just wondered why you prefer Nikko to Jason. You've known Jason a long time and he is smart and fearless. I thought he'd be the obvious choice to get command when you were not there."

"Jason is all those things," said Gabryisia at last.

"So why Nikko?" Fallon persisted.

"Fallon. He is better. He is the right person to be in charge. I can't explain it to you now. You'll have to trust me. Soon maybe you'll learn why."

"What do you mean? Why can't you...."

"Later," she said. "Later. Trust me now. Please."

Fallon wanted to pursue the matter but decided for the moment to let it rest. Perhaps in time he would raise it again. But for now he realized Gabryisia would be drawn no further. He was still curious though and determined to ask more questions and to find out the reasons for Gabryisia's faith in the unknown Nikko.

However, even if Gabryisia had been willing to discuss it further they were not given the chance. They suddenly became aware that one of the guards had entered the dungeon and was standing quite close by.

Fallon turned to face him squarely and asked sternly: "What do you want?"

It was the soldier who had shown them the hidden tunnel in the other cave, and for his troubles had been severely rebuked by the Drong leader. He stood stock still a few paces away expressionless and his club held at his side like he would a walking stick.

"Well, what do you want?" repeated Fallon.

The Drong looked back at his two comrades and then to Gabryisia. Another glance over his shoulder and he faced Fallon. When he spoke it was disjointed, frightened and hasty. "You want to get out. He's going to make it very hard for you if you stay. We've been here a long time. Your other friend can't last much longer where he is. You can't be rescued. The beasts prowl the routes."

Fallon was impatient. He disliked the Drongs and he was not about to stand around chatting with one of those whose job it was to keep him penned up like a criminal in a cave that was fit for animals only.

"What the hell are you talking about you blithering idiot?" he railed. "Can't you talk sensibly? Are you all backward or something? Maybe you've been down here too long. Live with a fool long enough and you begin to act like one."

Gabryisia stepped forward and put a hand on his elbow. "Wait Fallon," she said. Then to the Drong: "What is it you're trying to say?"

Fallon broke in. "He doesn't know. They're all stupid. He probably wants to scare us. He's talking about wile animals prowling around and what his master is going to do to us. Just ignore him Gabryisia."

He took hold of her arm to lead her away but she held back and said again: "What do you want to tell us? I'm listening."

The Drong was now uncertain. He glared at Fallon and it was clear he was hurt and angry.

"Look," said Gabryisia. "Try to understand. We've been kidnapped for no reason and kept under guard without any privacy for the last two days. We've also been threatened and frightened by wild beasts and told we'll never see out home again. It's only natural we'd be upset and not too happy with you people."

She squeezed Fallons's arm and went on: "We know you are only doing what you are told and we don't blame you for our situation. We've seen how Kerry treats you and can understand why you're afraid. But so are we. And we're sorry for being rude to you." Gabryisia applied a little pressure to Fallon's arm again and prodded him. "Aren't we Fallon?"

Fallon swallowed hard and in a low choked voice said: "Umm." Then: "Yes. Yes we are."

"So what is it you wanted to tell us?" asked Gabryisia.

The Drong again looked at his friends in the entrance. He turned back to the Leaf Children and studied Fallon closely. Then he faced Gabryisia and said: "We can help you. Get away. But we want to come too."

He was obviously frightened and agitated and once he had spoken doubt crept into his eyes and it as as if he instantly wished he had not uttered the words. His hand holding the club shook slightly and his eyes darted from one of the captives to the other.

Suddenly he burst out with: "If you tell him what I said I'll deny it. We'll say you made it up. There are three of us. It's our word against yours. He'll believe us."

"We won't tell him," Gabryisia said. Very clearly and precisely she said again: "We will not say anything to anybody. Not a word. Don't worry."

The Drong looked at his friends and then waved them over. However, they shook their heads and looked back down the tunnel. Their message was clear. They intended staying where they were as lookouts guarding both the prisoners and themselves. The soldier turned back to Gabryisia and spoke quickly: "There is a way. But it's dangerous and you can't do it alone. You have to take us with you. Otherwise we can't help you."

"Agreed," said Gabryisia.

"Where and how?" asked Fallon.

"Not now," said the Drong. "He'll be back soon. He must not find me in here. I'm not supposed to talk to you. Later, tomorrow, we'll talk again. I have to go."

"Hold it," demanded Fallon. "We can't wait until tomorrow. He's not coming back straight away. Tell us now. We have to prepare."

The soldier turned and walked urgently back to his friends at the entrance. He peered down the tunnel and then called: "Tomorrow. Or the next day." Then he turned his back and ignored them completely.

Gabryisia and Fallon returned to the corner of the cave and stood close together. "What do you make of that?" asked Fallon. "Is it a setup do you think?"

"I don't think so."

"I don't trust these people. It could be a setup. To trick us into thinking we can get out. Then wham. We're shoved into some den with wild animals. Or Keepers or whatever.

"I don't think so. He was terrified. Frightened stiff of being caught. I don't think he was put up to it."

"So if it's not a plot, what are we going to do? I don't want to wait another day. Or more. Anything can happen in that time."

"We have no choice. We have to wait for him to make the next move. If we pressure him he might back off. And we don't want that."

"What if mad Kerry decided to toss us in a dungeon and throw away the key in the meantime? It'll all be over. These guys won't be able to help us then."

“So we have to make sure we don’t upset him any more,” said Gabryisia. “We must not force him to take any drastic action.”

“You’re not saying we should be nice to him are you?” Fallon had no intention of crawling to the Drong leader. Even if it did mean punishment he was not going to lie down and let himself be kicked.

“Not nice,” said Gabryisia. “We just have to make sure we don’t rile him. As you say, he’s mad already and would not need much to push him over the edge.”

Fallon gritted his teeth. “That’s precisely what I’d love to do. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to shove him off a cliff. A very high one with a long, long drop to the bottom so he could think things over in his mind as he fell. He needs a but of a sock that fellow.”

“Don’t let him get to you Fallon,” Gabryisia cautioned. “And whatever you do don’t sink down to his level. That’s one thing we must never do. If we act like he does we’ll be no better than he is.”

“He can’t be allowed to get away with the things he’s doing. Someone has to stop him. Otherwise he could get even worse.”

“Fallon listen to me please,” said Gabryisia. “It is important for a person to retain his dignity. When all else is lost dignity is the only thing left. No-one must throw it away casually. It is too easy to stoop low. It is much more difficult to stand and fight against the temptation. But at the end of the day it is worth it.”

Gabryisia rested her hand on Fallon’s. “Kerry has lost his,” she said. “He traded it in for a form of authority or power. He had that power now, but he won’t have it always. And when it’s gone he’ll have nothing. His dignity will be gone too Fallon.”

She let the words sink in and offered no further insight into her own thoughts. She felt strongly about dignity and it hurt her to see people she was fond of succumbing to the temptation of instant satisfaction. Revenge had its place in her life. But she was against sacrificing her principles to get back at someone who had done her an injustice. This had at times worked against her and others had wondered at her apparent calmness in the face of personal loss. But inside her gut had churned and she had had to fight the natural drive to get her own back. The urge to retaliate in kind was instinctive, she knew, but for her the overriding urge was one of maintaining her composure and not lowering her standards. She had lived by those principles all her life and there was no question of her now abandoning them. Now would she abandon those whose friendship she cherished.

“I hope you’re right,” said Fallon. “I guess I know you are. But if you are wrong and if that Drong is as stupid and as impulsive as I think he is we had better be prepared for some tough times ahead. To be quite frank I fear what he has in store for us.”

Chapter Nine

The seven Leaf Children were bunched at the opening of the small alcove in the chamber of specimens. They had been standing together for some minutes without moving. Their eyes had not shifted from the two figures in the rear of the alcove which stared vacantly back at them with fixed lifeless smiles. Jason, Simon, Porky, Josh and Jordon had joined Nikko and Danielle from the cavern above after Danielle had scaled the ladder and told them to hurry down.

As they emerged from the column supporting the petrified tree one by one they gasped at the hanging cages and their contents. A warning call by Nikko brought them slowly to the bottom of the stone steps they reluctantly descended with turning heads and gaping mouths. But once they faced the alcove the wonder of the cages evaporated and they stared in awe and fear at the two human statues gathering dust before them.

There was no doubting they were human. There was also no doubt they were Leaf Children. This was obvious by their dress and general appearance. None of the rescue party recognized either so it was estimated they had been preserved below the surface for some considerable time. Yet there seemed to be no deterioration in the skin. To the contrary if not for the dust the children appeared remarkably fresh, as though they were placed there earlier in the day.

The very thought was repulsive to Nikko. The word *placed* caught in his throat and he felt sick to his stomach. That somebody could regard a human as a collection item was inconceivable. What could possibly have such little regard for life as to place a human among the many animal and reptile and bird specimens hung about the chamber. The fact that they had been in some way preserved left Nikko with an aching hollow feeling deep in his gut. Bile percolated into the reaches of his throat, forced up by anger, and he had to turn away before it overflowed.

As he hastily moved to one side Josh, ever inquisitive, asked: "How did they do it? How did they make them like that?"

It was Simon who responded with a chastising: "For god's sake Josh. Who cares? There are two Leaf Children there in front of us who have been collected like specimen butterflies, mounted and put on display. It doesn't matter how it was done. The point is it has and it's disgusting."

Josh wanted to defend his query but recognized the inadequacy of anything he might have said. Instead, he dropped his head and mumbled simply: "I know. I'm sorry."

Porky was not so easily put off. He too regarded those responsible as less than human and said as much, but he was also interested in what had been done to the two children.

"And I'm going to have a look," he said and strode into the alcove and over to the figures. He stood squarely in front of them and looked deep into the blank eyes. The boy's were wide and incredibly still shone with a moistness that for a brief moment gave the hint of an expression. However it was an artificial gleam and on closer examination they stared at a distant point, far away in time. The girl's stare was fixed on another point, but equally distant from the reality of the cave.

"There's nothing there," said Porky. "Absolutely nothing. The body is as good as new but the soul has gone. They are only outer shells with nothing inside."

He stood looking them up and down. Then he reached out and touched the girl lightly on the face. The dust pales his finger tips and flaked to the floor. He caressed her hair,

sending a shower of powder over his wrist. He moved across to the boy and placed his hand on the upper arm. He held it there for a few seconds and then turned to look at the others behind him.

“Somehow their flesh is warm,” he said quietly. He looked back into the boy’s eyes and then the girl’s. “If I didn’t know better I’d say they were alive. Comatose or in a deep trance. But alive.”

The others joined him in the small alcove and more dust fell to the floor as one after another they felt the limbs and faces of the figures. Nikko remained outside and watched. Young Jordon noticed his absence and turned to watch him, alone in the opening framed by the hanging cages and with the stone staircase rising behind him. He walked over and looking up asked plaintively: “What are we going to do Nikko?”

Nikko cleared his throat before replying. When he did his words were husky and there was a tremor in his voice. “I’m not sure Jordon. I don’t know any more. Before this I planned to go on exploring these tunnels and caves in the hope of finding Gabrysia and Fallon.” He paused. “I really expected to find them safe and sound. Probably held by the Drongs but alright just the same. But I’m not sure any more. I am afraid. I’m afraid of what might have happened to them.”

“What do you think has happened to them Nikko?” the little boy asked. “Do you think they might be dead? Like these two?”

Nikko looked down at the youngster and put a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t know. I hope not. I do hope they are alright Jordon. But even if they are I think time might be running out for them. I think they are in mortal danger and we have to find them before it is too late.”

Together they stood outside the alcove watching the others inside. It was Jason who turned and called: “What are you doing there Nikko? Why don’t you come in and have a look? We might learn something.”

“No,” answered Nikko. “I don’t have to. I’ve learned all I need from where I am.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jason.

“Nikko says Gabrysia and Fallon could be dead too, or if they’re not they might be soon if we don’t find them,” said Jordon. “He says we have to find them soon or it might be too late.”

The others all turned and it was Simon who said: “He’s right. We have to go on looking. The more time we spend here the longer it will be before we find them.”

Slowly they all walked out of the alcove and crowded around Nikko and Jordon.

“Where to?” asked Josh.

Nikko looked at each of them in turn. “Those two children in there are proof that we are not up against the Drongs only. Whoever is down here is not someone any of us have come across before. They are special. And they are dangerous. So before we go any further we have to decide one thing. Do we go on and risk ending up like them?” He pointed to the figures.

Before anyone answered he went on: “All along we have assumed the Drongs had Fallon. We know they took Gabrysia. We saw that. WE did not see Fallon taken. He simply disappeared and we assumed it was the Drongs. I am not certain any longer. The Drongs have not been responsible for anything we’ve seen so far. It’s all too advanced. If that’s so, there is someone else down here. And they collect things. Even humans. This place is a museum. There is no doubt about that.”

“I will be honest with you,” he continued. “I am afraid. I am afraid we might not find Gabrysia and Fallon, and I am afraid of what we’ll find if we do.”

“But we have to keep looking,” Danielle said.

“I think we have to,” said Nikko. “But we all have to decide. We have to examine what we face and then we all have to agree. This is not for me to decide alone. It concerns each and every one of us. Each of us faces the unknown. So each must make up his own mind.”

“I’ve said what I think,” said Danielle. “We have no choice.”

The others agreed and it was decided they would not put the two children in the alcove out of their minds, if they could, and concentrate on finding another way out of the cavern. Once again it was a matter of checking the walls for hidden devices that would open passageways. It was becoming a routine for the group and they had the procedure down to a tee. They fanned out and searched high and low, mindful of the animals hanging above their heads but with keen eyes scrutinizing every crack and crevice.

They were in the process of doing this when there was a scraping sound from the rear of the stone steps. They had not reached that area and had purposely left it to last as there was only a narrow gap between it and the wall of the cavern. Having not long before been considering the dangers that confronted them, they were alert almost to the point of being jittery. As soon as each heard the sound he looked to the others and as one they raced back to the foot of the staircase.

“Quick,” said Jason. “In here,” and they huddled together in the corner next to the stairs and directly below the dais supporting the column.

“Shhhh,” said Nikko.

There was a lull and then the scraping sound was repeated. A few more seconds passed and the group heard footsteps on the other side of the staircase. They continued around to the front and then one by one rose above them. The children pressed their backs against the stone and held their breaths as the footsteps rose to the top.

From the dais they heard a muttering but the only words that were audible were “...already down.”

They waited half a minute, a minute, two minutes. Finally the footsteps began to descend.

“Let’s grab him,” whispered Porky.

“There’s only one and it has to be a Drong,” added Josh in support.

Nikko nodded and pointed to the twins. He then motioned for them not to tackle the suspect where they were. Instead, he indicated, they should wait until he had reached the floor of the save and headed back behind the staircase. Then Porky should go around to the left and Josh should hurry in the opposite direction. That was they would surprise him on the blind side from the front as well as from the rear. Simon and Jason would back up Porky and he and Danielle would be behind Josh. Jordon was to remain where they were. They all nodded.

The footsteps ended at the base of the staircase and there was a moment before they moved off again to the right in the direction from which they had originated.

“Now,” said Nikko.

Porky, Simon and Jason moved off silently to the left and Josh, Nikko and Danielle to the right, careful to make sure the Drong, or whoever it was, could not see them coming from behind.

Josh could see nothing and urgently waved the other two on. Almost running they rounded the side of the staircase and saw a Drong soldier almost at the point of turning the corner into the narrow gap. As they saw him he saw them and stopped in his tracks momentarily before spinning and running out of sight.

“Now Porky,” Nikko shouted and with Josh and Danielle sprinted for the corner. Before they reached it they heard a scream and a scuffling sound. As they rounded the bend they saw Porky, Jason and Simon piled on top of the struggling Drong. He was trying to call for help and Jason had his hand firmly clamped over his mouth and only muffled burbling escaped.

“Hold him,” said Simon.

“I am,” answered Jason. “I’m trying to keep him quiet.”

“Here, I’ve got his arms. You keep hold of his legs,” said Porky.

The Drong continued to fight on his back but once the other three Leaf Children added their weight all resistance vanished and he lay still, looking up at them with opaque, scared eyes.

“It’s a Drong,” said Josh. “I knew it.”

“Of course it is,” panted Jason. “Where the hell did he come from?”

Simon tore off his jacket and began ripping it into strips. “Hold him,” he said. “In a minute I will have a gag We can cover his mouth and then question him. We should tie his hands also.”

This done the Leaf Children releases their grip and stood back as the Drong struggled into a sitting position with flickering and obviously frightened eyes.

“Well, well, well,” said Josh. “What do we have here? I do believe it is a Drong soldier.”

“I think you are right,” Porky said. “He’s not much of a soldier though. More of a green cadet I’d say. Stomping around like that. Not very smart of him was it?”

The Drong strained to free his hands and tried to stand but Porky quickly shoved him in the chest and he lost balance, toppling over onto his side.

“That’s enough,” said Nikko and put his hand under the arm of the bound Drong. He helped him to his feet gently but firmly and forced him against the wall. “We’re not going to hurt him. What we want is information.”

The Drong soldier was questioned from all sides. Every one of the Leaf Children fired queries at him and there were a number of times when Nikko had to intervene and insist they were put to him one at a time. The Drong was reticent at first to even concede he was a Drong but he soon realised there was no point in denying it. There was no doubting it as not only did he look like one of the unkempt band Jason soon recognised him as one of the soldiers he had seen in the forest a few days before. So it was reluctantly that he admitted who he was. Once that had been accomplished he was more forthcoming with information.

The children learned that there were about forty Drons camped in the underground base led by Kerry. They had been there for more than a year and had become accustomed to the unusual life style. Not all of them were happy with it but they felt there was no alternative. The Leader had insisted they settle there rather than above ground in another part of the forest or the jungle. He had argued they were safer from intruders and until now he had been right. So the rest had gone along with him on that basis as well as out of fear. It seemed the Drons were afraid of Kerry and his unpredictable moods which

sometimes erupted and resulted in a bashing for one or more of his underlings as he liked to refer to them.

The children also learned that there were two captives being held. Gabryisia was certainly one. The other was a boy and from the description it appeared that it could well be Fallon. There was a sigh of relief from the group at this encouraging news.

The most vital information the soldier gave them was that so far there had been no inkling that their defence had been penetrated. They had apparently entered through the secret openings completely undetected. When pressed as to why he had been wandering around the specimen cave the soldier was vague and muttered something about “just checking”.

Simon was not satisfied with the explanation and pressed harder. “What do you mean, just checking?”

“I was just making sure everything in here was alright, that’s all.” the Drong replied.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” asked Simon.

“No reason.”

“So why check?”

“No reason,” the Drong said again.

“Were you planning to go outside?”

“No. We’re not allowed to do that on our own. We have to go out in groups only.”

“Why?” asked Nikko.

“Kerry says,” the Drong hesitated. “He says it is safer that way.”

Nikko turned to the others. “That makes sense. On their own they might be caught. In numbers they could probably defend themselves.” Then he faced the soldier again and asked matter of factly: “Why did Kerry tell you to check out the tree?”

“To see if they were telling the true....” He stopped in the middle of the word. Realising what he had said he dropped his eyes and then lifted them again and looked around the group.

“To see if who was telling the truth?” asked Nikko in a low voice. “Gabryisia? What did she say?”

The soldier did not answer. Defiantly he kept his mouth closed. Finally he said: “I just came here to check things out. I was told to do the rounds. I’m not going to say any more.”

“OK,” said Jason. “I think you’re right. We’re not going to get any further information out of you, so now we’ll just make sure you don’t make any trouble for us.”

He walked a few paces away and looked up at the hanging cages. Without turning his head he called over his shoulder: “Nikko, what about the one with the huge black beast in it? I think we can get him in there. That would keep him out of the way and he would have company.”

“Yes,” said Nikko. “But that one nearer the dais would be easier. And there is a little more room in it for him with that snake or whatever kind of reptile it is. What do you think Danielle?”

Danielle looked at the cages. “Ummm,” she drawled. “It doesn’t really matter does it? He’ll be in there only for a day or two. It we’re lucky. If I had to choose I’d say the snake.”

“OK. The snake cage it is then. Come on fellows give us a hand to get him up there.”

The soldier flattened himself against the wall. He looked at Nikko then at Danielle and back to Nikko. "You wouldn't," he said.

He was pulled away from the wall by Porky and Josh and pushed a few paces down the gap. When they had reached the turn the soldier spun around: "Listen," he said. "If I tell you, you have to promise not to put me in that cage."

"That depends," said Jason. "It depends on what you tell us. If it's not what we want to hear you can count on a few days up there for sure."

"Alright," said the Drong. "Alright. Kerry sent me here to make sure the tree was down and that it was covered on the outside. That's all."

"What made Kerry give you the order?"

"The Leafy said something about a search party, you probably, finding the openings under the rocks. Then the girl said you knew about the tree too."

"And the tree is more important than the rocks?" Nikko asked. "Why?"

The soldier hesitated. But when Jason glanced up at the cages he went on: "It is only through the tree you can get here."

"And here," asked Nikko, "is the only way inside. Right?"

"It's the main passage, yes," the Drong answered. "Look. Please. I can't tell you any more. He'd kill me if he knew I told you this much. Just let me go. I won't say anything. Don't put me up there. I'll go outside and hide in the jungle. But please, let me go."

Simon bent down and picked up the remnants of his jacket. Handing the tatters to Porky he said: "Take these and our friend here over in the corner there and tie his legs. Josh, give him a hand please. Then come back here. I think we'd better all have a talk about what we're going to do."

The twins hauled the Drong over to the far wall and roughly forced him to the ground. He did not struggle as his feet were bound and the knots on his hands behind his back checked to make sure they were secure. Only then did Porky and Josh leave him alone and return to the group.

Jason was in mid-sentence as they approached. "...leave him here. And we can't take him with us. He would have to be watched constantly and he could cause a lot of trouble."

"He could do the same out there," said Simon. "How do we know there are not more openings? He could easily climb back in and warn the others."

"He's right Jason," Danielle said. "Letting his loose outside could be much worse than keeping him with us. At least down here we know where he is. Up there, who knows?"

Josh broke in. "I gather you're trying to decide whether to release him up top or hold him with us. I say it's too dangerous to let him go. But why not do as we threatened? Put him in one of the cages. Those things won't hurt him. They're all dead."

"And that way," added Porky, "he can't do any harm at all. And we'll always know where he is. I go along with Josh."

"So do I," said Simon. "It makes the most sense. What do you think Nikko?"

Nikko thought for a moment. Then he glanced at the Drong sitting in the corner watching them anxiously. He could not hear what they were saying, but he knew he was the subject of their conversation. "I don't see any alternative," said Nikko. "We can't take the risk of letting him go."

"Right," said Josh. "Let's do it then."

"Before we do," said Nikko. "there is one more question we need an answer for. Josh, you and Porky bring him back here please."

When the Drong was standing before them again Nikko spoke to him slowly and clearly. "You know we've been trying to decide what to do with you. Some want you put outside. Others say I should lock you in one of those cages. It could help you if you answer one final question."

The Drong nodded solemnly and waited. He hoped his fate lay outside in the Dead Place. He would be off into the jungle in no time at all. The further away he was from the base the better.

"My question is double barreled," said Nikko. "I want you to tell us how you got in here, and then I want you to draw a map in the ground of the tunnel network."

The Drong was unsure of how to respond, If he refused he would probably end up in one of the cages and that was not something he relished. The thought of spending any time cooped up with one of the creatures kept as specimens was horrifying. On the other hand, if he told all he knew there was no guarantee he would be freed. But there was the possibility and he decided to grab any straws that seemed to be offered. After all, for all he knew the Leaf Children could be captured and refuse to say anything about him. The options were possible escape and time in a cage in the specimen cave.

He looked Nikko squarely in the eyes. "I'll tell you how to get out of here, but you'll have to promise to let me go or I won't draw the map."

"No promise," said Nikko, and untied the Drong. "You're in no position to try to bargain. Now give us the information. We haven't got time to waste."

The Drong did nothing for a time and then walked over to the wall directly below the middle of the dais. He reached out and thumped it with his fist and stood back as a section opened inwards as a secret bookcase would revealing an opening about a meter wide. Inside another staircase led down and away from them. And nearing the top of the stairs were four Drong soldiers.

"Look out," called Jason. "Drons."

But instead of retreating further into the cave Jason launched himself at the oncoming Drons with a piercing yell that took them by surprise. Taking their lead from him Porky and Josh followed suit and rushed down the steps grabbing hold of two of them. The three Leaf Children and three of the Drons tumbled down the staircase and landed in a heap at the bottom. A cloud of dust billowed around them as they rolled to and fro clasped in one another's arms. The scuffle was so intense it was impossible to see who was who, who was on top one minute and pinned the next.

Meanwhile the remaining Drong did not know what to do. He stood his ground unsure of whether to go down or to continue up. Simple mathematics won a his brain registered that ahead of him there were four Leaf Children while below escape more likely lay. Just as he was adding up his chances Simon and Nikko were working on the same question. And as the Drong wheeled and took his first step down the staircase, Simon and Nikko descended their first. It was a race to the bottom.

As the Drong reached the last step he looked over his shoulder to see how far behind his pursuers were. They were at least ten paces away and he would probably have easily managed to lose them in the underworld tunnel network that was so familiar to him but not to them had it not been for one of the other Drons and Porky rolling into his path. They collided with his legs at ankle height. Their momentum barring progress the inevitable happened, and he dropped in a heap to be smothered by Porky and two of the Drong's comrades, one having freed himself from Jason.

In a remarkably short time Porky was jerked to his feet, held in very firm hands by two soldiers. His right arm was pushed high up his back which pained him and his breath was cut off by a forearm across his windpipe. As he choked he heard one of the Drongs shout: "Stop. Get back. Back, or we'll break his arm."

Jason was standing by himself to the right of Porky. Simon, Josh who had scrambled to his feet, and Nikko were directly in front. They were not able to go to Porky's aid. They were forced to stand where they were, helpless, unable to even take a pace forward lest it provoke the Drongs.

The soldier who had been held above shook himself loose from Danielle and leapt down the steps two at a time, joining his comrades. He glared at Porky and Nikko. "Right," he said. "Stay exactly where you are. Not a move or he gets it." He turned to his friends and said: "They were going to put me in one of the cages. They forced me to show them the opening. But I wouldn't give them any more information. No matter what they did."

The other Drongs remained silent. Finally the one holding Porky around the throat instructed his colleague next to him: "Get the small one up there. Quick. Bring him down here."

Jordon was dragged down the steps, quickly followed by Danielle.

"Over here. To me," called the Drong behind Porky. When Jordon was next to him he suddenly released his arm from Porky's neck and shoved him forward. In the same movement he grabbed Jordon in a similar hold with his left arm.

"Back," he cried as Nikko advanced. "Get back. Don't try anything stupid or he'll be sorry." He took two steps back, pulling a struggling Jordon with him and called his comrades to his side. Then he told the Leaf Children: "All of you. Get back up the steps into the cave. When you're there, stay there."

"You," he motioned to the Drong who had been captured earlier. "You go with them and when they're out close the opening."

"Not without him," said Nikko pointing a finger at Jordon. "Let him go. He's just a kid."

"No," said the Drong. "He's coming with us. He's our hostage. Don't try to follow us or he'll get hurt. Now, get going."

Reluctantly as they had no alternative the six Leaf Children moved back up the staircase. When they reached the top they stopped.

"Out," demanded the Drong accompanying them. "Look, get out here," and he impatiently marched ahead of them into the narrow gap.

"Now," called Jason and sprang at the Drong knocking him against the wall. Josh and Porky immediately joined him and pinned the Drong's arms. Nikko turned back to the staircase with the words in his throat, ready to barter an exchange. But they never came out. The cave below him was empty. The Drongs had disappeared. And so had Jordon.

"They're damn good and that's all there is to it." Later the Leaf Children were regrouped at the foot of the staircase in the empty cave. The sides were sheer, even and bore no signs of having been tampered with, though there were occasional light patches. The floor, while dusty, was level and almost perfectly square like a scrupulously measured room. The children may have absorbed these interesting aspects had it not been for more pressing and personal matters at hand. One was being alluded to by Simon.

"It's no good making excuses," he said. "We had the numbers, the high ground and the element of surprise. And we still lost. That means they are very, very good."

“Let’s not praise them too much,” retaliated Jason. “If you go on much more Simon we’ll have to wonder whose side you are on.”

“Just what does that mean?” bristled Simon. “Are you accusing me of something?”

“Of course I’m not. Just stop telling us they are better than we are.”

“They showed us Jason. I’m trying to point out that we are up against a pretty good team. I think we have more of a battle on our hands than we bargained for.”

There was no time for further arguing or comments because Danielle gave a cry of alarm. “Arggh.” She clasped a hand to one eye, the whole of that side of her face smeared with a bright yellow liquid.

“Danielle, what’s the matter? What happened?” asked Nikko. Then *whap*, something struck him on the back of the head. He slapped his hand top the spot and as he drew it away he saw his fingers too were stained bright yellow.

“Take that Leafie,” the voice came from above and to the right of them, and when they looked up they saw two Drongs crouched in an opening half way up one wall of the cave. “How do you like that, eh? Here’s another one,” and with that the Drong let loose another arrow which narrowly missed Josh.

The Leaf Children backed off to the opposite side of the cave where they were out of range as two more arrows spilled their dye on the ground well wide of the intended marks. For a short time there was a stalemate of sorts. The Drongs in the upper level looked down in annoyance and the six Leaf Children stayed where they were and pondered their next move.

Nikko it was who started their impromptu plan in motion. There were only two Drongs, he said, which meant the other two had gone elsewhere taking Jordon with them. The logical conclusion was they had gone for help. Reinforcements could be expected to return and that did not augur well. The options before them were to retreat up the stairs again, which would not really solve their problem as they would soon be back where they started at that rate, or find another way out. And that posed problems as well. There was no need this time to have to search for hidden tunnels. Three of them led from the cave and were large and well lit. But which one?

None of them had seen where the Drongs and Jordon went. They could have taken any of the tunnels, and if the Leaf Children chose the same one the chances were they would soon meet head on with reinforcements coming back. There was no point asking the soldier in their charge. Since his recapture earlier he had shut his mouth tightly and refused to open it. He had become a definite liability. He was no help and one of the group, Porky, had to concentrate on keeping him under control even though his hands were retied behind his back.

The question of staying where they were and fighting it out was obviously not considered at all. That would plainly be foolhardy. So the only option which remained was which tunnel to take. This reasoning took very few minutes and while they spoke softly of it the Drongs in the opening above taunted them and once or twice fired more harmless arrows. “Ignore them,” advised Nikko. “They’re playing for time. They were told to delay us here until the others come back. Don’t be drawn into their trap.”

“Where were the Drongs and Jordon when we saw them last?” asked Simon.

“There,” said Josh pointing to the other side of the steps.

“Right,” said Simon. “In that case I say we don’t take the tunnel over there. They probably used it as it was the closest to them. Instead we take the one just here.”

They all nodded their heads in agreement. “What’ll we do about them up there?” Porky asked. “I’m a bit tired of this abuse they have been hurling at us.”

“Nothing,” said Nikko. “Nothing at all.” He turned and walked to the tunnel. At the entrance he rounded and called back. “Bye. See you.” Then he continued in with his head held high and the others following, each bidding the same casual farewell.

The Drongs said nothing and as soon as they were out of sight the search party stood close together against the wall and listened. They could hear nothing. In single file they moved off, Nikko in front and Porky and the Drong at the rear. The tunnel was wide with *illuminations* lighting the way and again showing the sides to be smooth and unmarked except for the odd area of a lighter shade.

The children continued on for almost a hundred meters before they came to a fork. Again they had to decide which turn to take. After a short deliberation they chose the left. The right led further away and they did not want to find themselves utterly lost in the network that was fast becoming a confusing maze. At least the left fork headed in what they considered to be the better direction for now.

Another fifty meters and the tunnel abruptly ended. Or at least at first it appeared to. However, while the passageway as such with its *illuminations* continued no further it did not end altogether. Branching to the right the tunnel travelled on but the light faded gradually meter by meter and the children could see that ten paces into it the tunnel was in darkness.

“Now what?” asked Jason. “Do we go back to the fork and take the other turn?”

Nikko did not answer right away. He looked into the tunnel, bringing his lids so his eyes were slits, and tried to focus on the gloom. He could not make out things clearly but the tunnel seemed to continue beyond the last of the *illuminations*.

He straightened and faced the Drong. “What’s in there?” he asked.

The Drong just stared back blankly.

“Be sensible. What’s in there?” Nikko repeated.

The Drong remained tight lipped.

“Alright,” said Nikko. “You go first,” and he pulled the soldier by the sleeve of his jacket and pushed him into the tunnel. The Drong stumbled a pace and stopped. His hands behind his back he refused to move.

“Go,” instructed Jason. “Go on. Move.”

The Drong would not budge. He was no longer lethargic though. His pupils were large and he gave little jerking movements of his head.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Jason. “Can’t you understand plain English? I said move. So move,” and he reached out to push the boy in the chest.

“Not in there,” the Drong blurted. “I’m not going in there.” He avoided Jason’s thrusting arm and ran back into the opening to be barred by Josh and Simon.

Nikko spun him around. “What are you afraid of? Why won’t you go in there?” Then he added: “Is something in there?”

When the Drong remained silent Nikko grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close so their faces almost touched. He could feel the Drong’s sour breath. “Look,” he said. “I don’t have time to waste with you. Either you tell us what you know or I’ll tie your legs and we’ll toss you in there and leave you. I no longer care what happens to you. It’s your choice. Make it quickly.”

A moment’s pause was followed by the Drong uttering a single word. “Keepers.”

Nikko released him. “Keepers?” he queried. “What are keepers?”

“You were asked a question Drong,” said Jason. “Answer it.”

The Drong backed away and stammered: “I don’t know. I don’t know what they are. I am not supposed to know they even exist. None of us is.” As he went on he became less intelligible. “I overheard Kerry mention them once when he was talking to himself in his room. Something about Keepers and museum. And secret powers and things. Then he saw me and got really mad. Said I was hearing things and that he had been talking about guards asleep on duty. But he wasn’t because I saw him again in another part of the base. He went into a tunnel like this secretly and when he came out he was scared. He was trembling. Again he mentioned them. When he was mumbling to himself.”

He then went on to describe how immediately after that Kerry had declared all tunnels like this one to be off limits. It was forbidden for anyone to enter them. He had been very insistent and said there were monsters in them and that anyone who went in would end up like the two Leaf Children in the museum.

“You mean these Keepers, or whatever you call them, are responsible for the creatures and those children in that cave?” asked Simon.

“They must be,” the Drong said. “None of us are. Only monsters could do that.”

“And you’ve never seen one,” said Nikko.

“No-one has,” the Drong replied. “Never.”

Jason had been watching the Drong as he spoke. He was not satisfied with what he had witnessed.

“I don’t believe a word of this,” he said. “It’s rubbish. Keepers. That grub Kerry talking to himself. Mystery monsters no-one has seen. Monsters with super powers. It’s all too ridiculous.”

“It does sound fantastic Nikko,” suggested Danielle.

Nikko had listened carefully. He noted also Jason’s and Danielle’s remarks. But there was a museum and he was convinced the Drongs were not responsible for that.

“If they weren’t, who was?” he asked.

“Even if someone else was I don’t believe it was some monsters from outer space, or underground space for that matter,” persisted Jason. He shook his head. “All this talk here is a trick. More wasting of time so we’ll be caught.”

“Either way,” interrupted Simon. “We had better decide soon. Those Drongs saw which way we went and they’ll be along pretty soon. We’d better make up our minds. Do we go back to the fork or go in there?”

Just then they heard a yell from far behind. The words were unclear but it was obviously the Drongs. There was another shout and the word *fast* rang along the corridor.

“It’s been decided for us,” said Nikko. “We can’t go back now. Come on. But be careful. Move slowly and stay close together.”

The Leaf Children and the Drong, urged along by Porky, entered the dark tunnel. As they passed the point where the last *illuminations* shone they could hear footsteps running down the tunnel in their direction. Five more steps and they were enveloped in the darkness that seemed to swallow them.

It took some minutes to become somewhat used to the complete lack of light but they could make out the outline of the walls and see that the tunnel continued before them unbarred. It curved slightly to the right and then again to the left. Twenty cautious paces

in the children could hear nothing except their own heavy breathing. There was no sound of pursuers.

“God it’s black,” whispered Josh who was near the front, behind Jason and Nikko and just in front of Danielle.

“Stay close,” reminded Nikko. “And watch your step.”

In single file the party edged on/ Thirty paces. Thirty-five. Forty. Still the blackness offered no let up. If anything it seemed to be even more dense.

Without warning shapes materialised out of the walls, more as images in the mind than actual visions. With only muffled resistance the children and their Drong prisoner were swarmed upon and dragged to the ground. There was a pungent odour and the darkness was complete.

CHAPTER TEN

Nikko's head ached and his arms were so heavy to move them even slightly was an effort. His eyes felt like they were stuck with glue and he strained to open them. Gradually one lid fluttered open. Then the other. Slowly his eyes blinked open into light. It had a pink tinge and initially made his eyes water. But it was welcome nevertheless. Not only because his head throbbed but because the last thing he remembered was an all-embracing black cloud. The soft light seemed to ease the ache and bring relief. It was a sort of distant but vital return to life.

He was in a cave and soon realised he could feel warmth. That was not expected because since he had entered the subterranean system he had been struck by the cooler temperature. At first he had put it down simply to the vast contrast between the unsheltered heat of the Dead Place and the constant protection of the unnatural underground environment. However, he had soon discovered it was more than that. The temperature was much lower below ground. It was obvious and Nikko was a little annoyed he had not understood it immediately.

But now he was definitely feeling warm. Too warm in fact, he was becoming slightly uncomfortable. He blinked quickly and began to sit up from his lying position. Straps on his arms and across his chest tightened and he found he was under firm restraint. His legs too were fastened with a strip of hide that he could see was threaded through inverted pins in the earth.

The other Leaf Children and their Drong captive were spread eagled as he was in a straight line by his side. They had not moved and were presumably still unconscious. About five meters to his left a fire had burned itself out and dark red embers glowed emitting a rich heavy heat. For a few minutes Nikko stared into the red and black coals and was transported back in time. The tantalising combination of colours was mesmerising. They burned into him and flickered in slow motion before his eyes. The warmth covered him and he could sense it seeping into the soft flesh of his face. But he could not turn away. He stared unblinking at the embers and pictures formed in his confused memory of a time and place he had left far behind.

He saw a small white house surrounded by leafy green trees and shrubs which frames the corners and sides. They formed a living barrier between the lawn in the front of the cottage and the main road which passed outside. The house was made of wood and had green trimmings and a quaint green awning reaching out over a set of reddish brown brick steps. At the top of the steps a tier of green blinds fell in front of high French doors leading to the living room. The steps, no longer the main entrance to the house, had a number of pot plants on them with colourful blooms adding a splash of brilliance.

The main entrance was at the side of the house beside a tiled patio on which stood a rustic round table and three slatted stools and which was surrounded by white flowering vines. A small garden grew in an L shape beneath open windows on one side. Beyond the steps a carport extended further with a sundeck on top. All down the side of the carport large trees spread their leafy branches.

Nikko had a fleeting glimpse of himself in his mother's arms sitting at the table. His father knelt in front with a camera taking pictures of the two people he loved most in the world. Then the vision faded and was replaced by the inside of the living room of the house.

It was large and joined with the dining area, but at the same time stood separate with a modern linen sofa creating a partial division. Again the basic colour inside was white except for a brick fireplace and brown mantle piece above, and heavy mahogany furniture placed functionally about the room. Tasteful pictures, artefacts and oriental cabinets, chests and rugs added a worldly touch. A fan whirled nonchalantly in the ceiling.

Again Nikko saw his mother was sitting patiently feeding him in a high chair as his father watched the television. He himself fidgeted endlessly and while the image was only of the rear of his head he could imagine food smeared his face. Music played in his ears and Nikko turned his head to look towards the adjoining kitchen where a radio perched on top of a refrigerator in the corner. The pots on the stove bubbled noiselessly and a pleasant aroma filtered out of the room.

Nikko's mind sped quickly through other rooms – the bathroom with its green tiles around the tub and the big red and black Chinese fan mounted on the white wall, matched by the red knobs on the cabinet doors and red odds and ends by the sink. The bedroom with its two large single beds pushed together and the standing mirror next to the dressing table with its drawers filled with a multitude of female necessities. The reading room next door where the bookcases provided endless enjoyment. Finally his own room.

Nikko could see every square inch of the room as clearly as if he was standing there in person. His cot up against the wall with a large poster of Mickey Mouse and friends riding in a jaunty car and laughing and gesticulating with their funny three fingered hands. Other posters hung on other walls and a row of louvers opened onto the outside garden at the rear of the house. A pine chest of drawers stood under the louvers and on top were toys and bottles, a comb and a brush. Some of his toys lay undisturbed in his cot.

A tear welled up in Nikko's eye and he recalled once before in the forest when he had thought of his home. This was his home and these were his personal belongings. His life was playing before his eyes. The tear blurred his vision and when he blinked it away he saw once more the glowing embers of the fire and he felt their warmth on his face.

He was back in the cave. His home and his mother and father and all that was familiar and dear to him were far, far away. More tears rose in his eyes and the embers became more and more indistinct as the salty drops overflowed and rolled down his cheeks.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kerry was growing increasingly impatient with developments. Control could slip through his fingers if he was not careful. He must be strong, consolidate his position among the Drons and force his prisoners to submit. The key words lingered in his thoughts. Control. Strong. Consolidate. Force. They were familiar labels to him as he ran through them again.

Control meant power, the authority to make certain others did as they were told with the least possibly resistance. It meant satisfaction in watching them perform those duties while he sat back and directed instructions at random. It also means he could order punishment or even carry it out himself and gloat at the fear he saw in their faces.

Strength was necessary to hold on to that control, to maintain the position of superiority. He had in the beginning used his strength to take over the role of Leader of the Drons by mastering his opponents in combat. He was strong, determined and cunning and by combining all three he had conquered a number of aspirants to the position. Since then he had grown no weaker. But he had developed new levels of determination and his deviousness was to be envied by those of a like mind. There was not another person in the base who could match him any of the spheres.

Over time he had definitely consolidated his leadership and while there may have been ash thoughts of rebellion among a few it did not grow into anything more threatening than a faint wish. On the single occasion when a young Dron had expressed dissatisfaction and had spoken of support to curb excesses, force had been brought into play and the hoped-for united reaction had rapidly dwindle. The presumptuous Dron paid for his outspokenness with a thrashing that ensured peace in the camp ever since.

Until recently that was. The feeling of agitation had started with the capture of the Leaf Child Venki. It had been a real coup for Kerry when he found the Leafie, quite by accident, pacing along the border of the Dead Place completely alone. It was as if he had been sent in answer to a dream.

Previously all contact with the Leaf Children had been on their own territory in the forest where they had the advantage of known ground and numbers. There had been hard fought battles that resulted in many scratches, black eyes and bruises. But never a prisoner taken. Now here was a Leaf Child, the leader himself no less, wandering around on his own well away from the protection of his supporters. Kerry could not believe it. Indeed his first thought was that it was a trick to draw out the Drons. An ambush would be sprung and prisoners taken. But a search of the jungle around the Leafie had failed to locate anything suspicious. Still Kerry waited and finally the Leafie ceased his pacing and walked into the Dead Place. Incredibly he walked straight to the sunken region with its fake boulders. With the heat and sun beating down he sat and actually leaned against one of the boulders and fell asleep. It was all too easy. The Dron trap was sprung and he had his first very important prisoner.

With the Leafie under a heavy guard, and none the wiser as to exactly where he was other than in captivity at the pleasure of his arch enemies, Kerry was hailed as a hero almost. It was as though he had single handedly gone out into the desert and fought a David and Goliath duel, bringing back the giant over his shoulder. He revelled in the praise naturally taking full credit.

Of course the prison was far from model from the very outset, but that caused Kerry little concern. He merely clipped him around the ears a few times and tied him up. This too seemed to impress his followers and he strutted about the network with his chest to bursting point. However the euphoria did not last long. The Leafie continued to speak out against him personally. He seemed to take great care not to make any derogatory remarks about any of the other Drongs, but persistently criticised the Leader's attitude, manner and whole philosophy of existence and relationship with the Leaf Children.

It was not too long before Kerry senses that the other Drongs were listening to what the Leafie was saying. They somehow found reasons to pass by him or to work near where he was being held. None spoke to him and obeyed the instruction he had given. Nevertheless there was an air of potential disobedience, so Kerry had taken added precautions. The Leafie was gagged at all times except when he was permitted to eat. But that too showed signs of failure. Once his gag was removed Venki would begin his incessant banter about the foolhardiness of the Drong lifestyle, mixed with even more damaging remarks about him personally.

There was only one solution. The Leafie would have to be kept entirely separate from the rest of the group. Hence his incarceration in the cave remote from the main chamber. He was tied hand and foot and chained to the wall. Later his bonds were removed but the chains remained and only a chosen few soldiers were allowed to go near him, and then only when necessary. His criticism continued but its effect was somewhat lessened, though the very fact that he had to be isolated did little to help the situation. Since that time, long ago, the uneasy feeling in the pit of Kerry's stomach had continued to gnaw away at him.

And now there was the threat that the Drong's secret base had been discovered. Or so he had been led to believe. He was still not sure despite the other two Leaf Children's reference to the rocks and the tree. It could have been a bluff. If it was it had been effective as he had reacted far too quickly and even mentioned the Keepers. That was most unwise. Reluctantly he admitted he had been outwitted.

The first precaution was to ensure the rocks above were securely in place and their spring mechanisms locked. The tree also would have to be held below ground. One of the soldiers had been despatched to make sure of both, but he had not yet returned and that too bothered the Leader. An hour had passed and it should not have taken that long.

Again he cursed: "Where the devil is he?"

He was in the main chamber sitting on his stone seat while groups of Drong children sat around the sides talking quietly among themselves. They had nothing to do as they were all on alert after Kerry had come charging into the cavern from talking with the two prisoners. He had marched in demanding to know what everyone was doing and immediately critical of every answer. Having done the rounds he went straight to his seat and remained there. And he had been in the same position for almost an hour.

As he was casting these points around in his mind into the chamber rushed two of the Drongs who had fought with the Leaf Children not long before. Kerry sprang to his feet.

"They're here," one of the Drongs panted. "They're here. In the base." He and his comrade stood bent over, their hands on their knees and gasped for breath. The one who spoke dropped to one knee and hung his head gulping for air. They had run as fast as they could all the way from the cave beneath the museum.

“Who’s here?” shouted Kerry from the platform where he stood erect, fists clenched at his sides.

The kneeling Drong raised his head and drew in a deep breath. As he exhaled he wheezed: “Leafies. Leafies have broken in.” The sentence ended in a coughing spasm which wracked his body and forced him onto his other knee.

Kerry ran to the two soldiers and pointing to the other one he demanded: “You. Tell me what happened. Where are they? How many?”

“They were in the museum,” he stammered. “About ten of them. They had caught Donny and were about to come down the steps when we surprised them.”

“How did they find the panel?” asked Kerry..

“Donny showed them.”

“He what?” Kerry was livid with rage and looked over the heads of the two soldiers behind them. “Where is he?”

“They’ve got him,” said the soldier. “We freed him. Then they caught him again.” He sucked in more air and went on. “We were patrolling. It was so sudden. There were about the of them and only four of us. We did our best.”

Kerry’s voice was low. “Where are the rest? What happened to the other two?”

“We left them back there to hold them. To try to delay them while we ran here for help.”

Kerry spun around and called to the Drons who were now looking on anxiously. “You four groups. Come with me. Come on. We’re going to catch those Leafies and teach them a lesson they’ll never forget.”

The soldier who had collapsed to his knees suddenly jumped up. “Where is he? The kid. What’s happened to him?” And he ran back to the tunnel he had come from. He was out of sigh only a few seconds before reappearing pulling young Jordon along by the scruff of the neck.

“We dot one,” he said.

“Of great,” said Kerry. “You got one alright. A midget. What a prize.” He dismissed him with a wave of the hand and instructed two soldiers to hold the boy in the chamber until he and his posse returned.

As they left Kerry turned back to the group remaining. “Stay on your guard. Keep a good watch out.” Then: “And be more careful with the dwarf than these two were with the other Leafies. Do not let him get away.” With that he trotted into the tunnel followed by the others holding bows at the ready.

His intention was to hasten as quickly as possible to the cave where the two Drong soldiers had remained. If all had gone well the Leafies would still be there and they would overpower them with superior numbers. After that he would bring them back and hold them, or maybe shortly use them as hostage to bargain with the Leafies back in the forest. It was an idea he had been toying with since capturing Gabryisia. He would keep a few of them, but trade the rest. Maybe. For the moment it all depended on the next half hour or so.

The tunnel leading to the cave was a long winding one that zigzagged back and forth without any passages leading off it. It was wide, high and had paintings at infrequent intervals on the walls. Like those in the main chamber the colours had pales and the outlines were indistinct, but it was still possible to identify the subjects of the drawings. Once again they were mainly animals, reptiles and birds though there were also humans depicted throwing sticks and firing arrows. But unlike better known primitive cave

paintings those in the underground Drong base never showed the human as being dominant. While he was always pictured free the animals and other creatures were never shown being killed or captured. Rather, it was they who with their piercing gazes and proud poses seemed somehow superior.

Kerry and his followers were not concerned with the paintings though as they proceeded through the tunnel. To be honest they had never remarked on this aspect of the adornments on the walls. They had either not noticed it, or if they did, considered it insignificant. They apparently went about their tasks with a single mindedness that excluded deeper contemplation of their artistic surroundings.

For ten minutes they jogged along the passageway at an easy gait. The Leader might not have been the most intelligent of persons but he knew from experience the best way to enter a battle was fresh and not exhausted. He could have run faster and covered the distance much more quickly, but the other Drons were not as fit as he was and they would have arrived in a condition no better than the two soldiers who had come to warn them. And there was no point in that. Their superior numbers would be no advantage then. While he was excited at the prospect of a confrontation and additional captives he curbed his instinctive desire to pick up the pace.

Finally five minutes from the end of the tunnel they across one of the Drons walking slowly towards them head bowed. As soon as he saw them he broke into a sprint and began calling out: "They've gone. Quickly. Come on."

Without stopping Kerry raced passed the soldier leaving the others trailing behind. Some actually slowed to ask the soldier questions but a sharp order from ahead brought them on again. Soon they all emptied into the cave to find Kerry talking earnestly with the other soldier at the foot of the steps.

"How long ago?" he asked.

"Fifteen minutes most," said the soldier. "We held them for a while. But then they just walked off down there." The soldier pointed to his right indicating the tunnel on the opposite side of the cave. Then he added: "We didn't try to follow because there's nowhere they can go anyway."

"How do you know that?" demanded Kerry.

The soldier held his gaze and answered: "I know some of these tunnels end in dark holes. I've seen them on patrol. I've never been in as you ordered. But I've seen them."

Kerry looked him hard in the eyes and when he was satisfied the soldier was telling the truth he turned to the others. "Alright," he said. "We've got to hurry or we might lose them. Follow, but stay behind and do exactly what I say. And that means only what I say."

The posse swarmed into the tunnel in a bunch behind the Leader, jostling and puffing and for many with leaden steps and rubbery knees. With their wind broken it was only a few meters before they began to string out. Ahead Kerry neared the fork in the tunnel and he turned to look over his shoulder at the straggling group of Drons trailing out behind.

"For God's sake," he yelled. "Hurry up. Come on. Hurry you lot."

When he reached the corner he did not slow down but rounded to the left and again shouted back. "Fast. Fast." He then raced on as fast as he could until he reached the end of the illuminated tunnel. There he stopped and breathing heavily looked about him carefully examining the earth at his feet and then peering into the passage that melted into

darkness. He straightened up as the rest arrived panting and holding their sides with both hands, bows hanging uselessly by their sides.

“What happened to them?” asked one of the soldiers.

“They must have gone the other way,” said another.

“They wouldn’t go in there.”

“Would they?”

“Of course not,” said the Drong who had spoken with the Leader in the cave. “Don’t be stupid,” but he shot a glance at Kerry who was again looking into the dark entrance.

Kerry looked back at them. After a pause he said: “They must have taken the other turn. Move. We’ll check it out.”

The others began to return back down the tunnel more slowly than before. Kerry followed them with occasional glances towards the entrance of the dark tunnel. He seemed unsure. Reluctant to leave.

Meanwhile in another part of the underground base Gabryisia and Fallon were standing impatiently in the centre of their cave dungeon. For some time they had been under close guard and they were growing anxious. Since the Drong leader had stormed out threatening dire consequences they had heard nothing and had been confined to their small space to contemplate their possible fate.

At intervals the soldier who had propositioned them with the prospect of escape had disappeared for minutes on end only to return more agitated each time. The captives believed he was worried and fearful his Leader would find out his traitorous intention. The last time he had gone he had huddled with his two companions before running off down the passageway. So far he had not come back.

“Something must be going on,” said Fallon.

Gabryisia nodded. “I think something is happening. The guards seem to be pretty worked up.”

“Do you think that mad Kerry is readying some awful punishment for us?”

“He could be but I doubt if that’s the reason for the unease out there.”

“Why? It could be you know. All that running around.”

“No,” said Gabryisia. “Did you see those guards? How they have been acting?”

“Sure. They’re pretty excited. Running around in circles. Getting into huddles.”

“Yes. But they haven’t been looking in our direction at all. I reckon if they were getting anything ready for us they would be looking in our direction. If only out of curiosity to see how we’re reacting.”

“But they haven’t,” agreed Fallon. “You’re right. If anything they have ignored us. They are more concerned with something else. What could it be do you think?”

Gabryisia merely shook her head. She had no idea. Indeed, that had been one of the dilemmas facing them since their capture. They had been very good at posing questions or supposing variations of possibilities. But as for answers, that was something else again. Their track record in that respect was hardly enviable.

Her days of captivity raced by her in a flash and her experience was repeatedly punctuated by unanswered queries. It seemed the only constant in a sea of uncertainties. It depressed her and for a brief moment it drained her of hope for the future. Her immediate past crept in and like a foul thick mist it obscured the rays of brightness. Never before had her thoughts been so concentrated on a negative almost to the total exclusion of happiness or at least stability. It was a frightening feeling and though she

tried to block it from her mind and introduce positive thoughts the unsettling uncertainty of it all, the veil of hopelessness, refused to go away. It was as if a heavy weight bore down on her shoulders and strong fingers pressed at her temples until a throbbing pulse crept down her body, stiffening joints and tensing muscles.

She flicked a sideways look at Fallon and in the unguarded instant he too showed the telling signs of stress. He was quick to notice the movement but not quick enough to hide his feelings. Gabrysia plainly saw the tension, the toughness in his face. But he then broke into a broad grin and looking directly into her eyes he said: "Well, at least we haven't been carted off and fed to the lions. So there's hope for us yet." Then he looked away but added: "Maybe all the fuss is because Nikko and the others have found their way in and are now on their way here."

Gabrysia smiled and put a hand gently on his arm. "Fallon, thank you," she said. "But I think we had better be honest with ourselves and with each other. Even if they have found this place, unless they send for help there are only a few of them. They will be hopelessly outnumbered. The chances of their winning a battle down here are very remote."

"You never know," Fallon said. "Nikko is definitely smart and the others are good. Jason is as cunning as a fox and Porky and Josh are strong. Simon is...."

"Fallon. It doesn't matter how good they are. There must be thirty or forty Drong down here. Even if they are only a quarter as intelligent their numbers made up for the difference easily."

"But..."

"And on top of that they know the layout of this place, whereas the others will be completely in the dark. It just can't work. Miracles like that are for books only. They don't really happen."

Fallon was very quiet. When he spoke after Gabrysia had finished his voice was soft but strong. "What you say is probably true. You know more things than the rest of us. Certainly more than I do. But I also know that outside our island Torpah is just a bird and magic necklaces exist only in the imagination. Trees like ours with leaves that sing beautiful music are only figments of fertile minds too. But given those things cannot help us now in this situation I know something else. Where there is a firm determination and a will to succeed there is a chance of success."

Fallon paused and then went on. "I'm scared. You know that. And our position is very tricky to say the least. But we can't give up hope. Not now. Not later. Never. As soon as do that we have lost and Kerry has won. And not Nikko, not Jason, not Simon, not anyone will be able to save us. Because we will have beaten ourselves."

There was a long moment of silence when neither Leaf Child spoke. Almost as if in sympathy with the sentiment in the dungeon there was no noise outside either. Times seemed to stand still.

Finally Fallon broke the spell. "I'm sorry," he said mildly. "I should not have spoken as I did."

"No," responded Gabrysia. "You had every right to say what you did. And what's more Fallon you made good sense. Very good."

"I forgot for a while there. But I really do think we have to be positive. Or optimistic perhaps."

"Yes. More importantly though I forgot. Thankfully you remembered."

Fallon averted his eyes. Even though he may have spoken the right words he still recognised his position and in deference to Gabryisia he did not press the matter any further. Instead he waited for her to make the next move.

However, it was not Gabryisia who made the move. It was the Drong soldier who had been scurrying to and from the cave's entrance. While the two captives had been talking he had apparently returned to his post and now literally rushed at them and grabbed Gabryisia by the upper arm.

"Now," he cried. Fallon instinctively broke his grip and was about to follow this with a shove when he was surprised to find himself thrust aside by the soldier with apparent ease. Before he could regain his balance the soldier hissed at him: "Don't be stupid. We're going."

At this point the two other soldiers outside the entrance began beckoning urgently and the Drong ran to them and they exchanged words hurriedly. Then the head soldier ran back to the captives. "We either go now, right this minute, or not at all." He looked squarely at Gabryisia ignoring Fallon and raised his eyebrows. "Now," he repeated.

Gabryisia did not hesitate. "Now," she said and raced to the entrance of the dungeon. There she stopped and called back to Fallon who had not yet moved. "Fallon. Let's do it. We've got nothing to lose."

Fallon waited a split second and then moved as if jerked by a sprung rope. He grasped the Drong soldier in charge by the elbow and dragged him to Gabryisia's side. "Which way?" he demanded. "How do we get out of here?"

The Drong shrugged out of Fallon's grip and again addressed Gabryisia. "It's a real maze down here and I'm not certain exactly where all the tunnels go. The only sure way out is the way he's gone with the others. We can't go that way."

Gabryisia calmly said: "Where's he gone and why?"

"Some of your friends have found their way in," said the Drong. "He's taken a posse to find them. They don't stand a chance. There are too many of us."

Gabryisia and Fallon exchanged a quick knowing look and then Gabryisia said: "OK. But I don't understand what you say about the maze. Isn't the network pretty straightforward? Kerry drew us a map which showed the tunnels in a circular layout with interconnecting smaller passageways."

The Drong snorted. "No way. That's a lie. It's very complicated with tunnels going everywhere."

"Damn," swore Fallon. "We should have known."

The other soldiers were shifting their feet in an agitated manner and the one in charge again stated: "Now. We have to go now."

The Leaf Children nodded and the five of them moved off down the tunnel, slowly at first but soon at the run. Once more they threaded their way past the dim wall paintings and mounted trophies on both sides. Suddenly Fallon stopped and reaching up pulled two bows and quivers of arrows off the wall. Gabryisia saw what he was doing and eagerly accepted one set of weapons handed her by Fallon. The three Drons initially thought of stopping them but then apparently decided not to protest and after a pause of barely a few seconds the party continued their flights towards the main base chamber.

About fifty meters from the end of the tunnel they halted and the head Drong soldier turned. "In the chamber there are a few soldiers but we can take care of them. Wait here and don't move until I call you out." He then motioned to his comrades and they walked

briskly on. The Leaf Children stood where they were. They were pleased to be out of their cave prison with the promise, or possibility, of freedom ahead of them, but still they were on guard against another immediate possibility: that the Drong soldiers could be leading them into a trap.

It seemed unlikely for now. Both Gabryisia and Fallon believed, hoped, inwardly prayed there was no deceit and that the Drons genuinely wanted to also flee from their own particularly captivity. Nevertheless they were going to take no chances. If the Drons were prepared to betray their Leader there was perhaps reason to think they would betray them also. So for the moment Gabryisia and Fallon would allow themselves to be led away while at the same time keeping their sharp wits about them. Being led away was one thing. Led astray was quite another.

The minutes passed and still they held their position in silence. Finally from a distance came a call. "Alright. You can come out."

Fallon took a step forward but Gabryisia held him back. "Wait," she whispered. "Wait a bit longer."

Another minute lapsed. Then another. In the distance a shape appeared but they could not make out the features. The person was running and as he neared Gabryisia and Fallon saw it was the head soldier. He came up to them and breathlessly asked: "What are you doing? For heaven's sake, let's go."

Suddenly Fallon lunged forward and grabbed him around the neck with his left arm. Simultaneously he used his right hand to force the Drong's left arm up behind his back, effectively immobilising him.

"Not so fast," he said. "Just to make sure we'll go like this if you don't mind. Don't fight it or I'll break your arm."

The Drong protested but once he found there was nothing he could do he relaxed and said resignedly: "OK OK. Come on then. We don't have much time." With that he was frogmarched along the tunnel with Fallon behind and Gabryisia to one side.

At the end they stopped and looked into the chamber. It seemed much larger than the last time they had seen it. Gabryisia put this down to the fact there were people crammed into it before. Now she couldn't see anyone. Then from an obscured passageway Jordon rushed out and called: "Gabryisia. Gabryisia. You're here." He was followed immediately by the two guards who, when they saw Fallon had their comrade in his grip stopped in the tracks and raised their sticks over their heads.

The soldier in front of Fallon held up his hand. "It's alright. It's alright. "Then to Fallon and Gabryisia he added: "You can see everything is safe. Let me go. We have to move. For God's sake please. He could be back any minute."

"Let him go," said Gabryisia. Fallon released the Drong and stepped back.

Young Jordon was standing at Gabryisia's side. "They tied up the others," he said. "In the tunnel over there. Are we going to escape Gabryisia? Are we?"

"Yes Jordon, we are," Gabryisia replied. "Are you alright. Did they treat you alright?"

"Sure," the youngster said. "They just made certain I didn't run off. Where are Jason and Nikko and the others? Are they with you? I can't see them."

Fallon explained they did not know exactly what the situation was. Only that they were somewhere else in the base and that Kerry and the Drons were searching for them.

"And we're going to help, right?"

"Well, at the moment we are supposed to be finding a way out of here."

“Not before we lend a hand though. First we’re going to help the others aren’t we?”

The Drong soldier in charge stepped forward. “No. We have to get out of here before Kerry returns or we are sure to get caught and we’ll all be for it. Let’s go.”

Fallon waited until the soldier was about three meters away from him. Then he said: “We’re not leaving just yet. Jordon’s right. We must help our friends before anything else.”

“No,” the soldier screamed. “No. We have to go. If not you’ll have to go back to your cell. And that will mean trouble for you.”

“Not for us buster,” said Fallon. “You maybe. But no worse for us.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We are already in a spt. But when I tell Kerry about you letting us go do you could escape too, what do you think he’ll do?” Fallon smiled.

“He wouldn’t believe you,” the soldier replied though he was clearly disturbed.

“He’d believe those others you left in the tunnel over there. They mustn’t be too happy with you and your buddies. I reckon you’ve got a problem.”

The three soldiers exchanged anxious looks and obviously realised they were trapped. There was no doubt they could not retrace their steps and cancel out their actions. On the other hand if they joined forces with the Leaf Children and were later caught, as they feared they would be, the consequences were too horrific to even contemplate. They had no choice. A third alternative was the only one open to them: they would have to try to escape outside on their own.

They reached this conclusion it seemed all at the same time. As one they spun around and raced out of the chamber down two separate tunnels. Almost immediately the leader ran back out of the tunnel he had entered alone and with a frightened look at the leaf Children he dived into the passageway taken by the other two soldiers. He did not know it was the same one but the Leaf Children considered that at the speed he was moving he would catch the others up quickly.

“Before we go,” said Gabryisia “there is something else we must do. Release Venki.”

“Of course,” said Fallon. “God. I had actually forgotten him.”

Ten minutes later they were back in the main chamber, Venki still with the chain fastened to his ankle with the other end tucked into his breeches. With the help of the others he had been able to tear it out of the wall. The fastening to the ankle would be bothersome but he was free and the feeling was enormously exhilarating.

“You’ve got no idea how good this feels,” he said. “To be out here and not cooped up in that jail. It might just as well be an oasis in the middle of a desert. I think I was starting to go crazy in there. Of course I couldn’t let King Kerry know that or he would have used it against me. As far as he knew I was enjoying it in a funny sort of way. I kept baiting him every time I saw him and it made him as mad as a coot. It used to drive him almost crazy wondering what he had to do to shut me up. In a way that’s what kept me going. I tried not to think of escape. Just how to pass the time, make it go faster. Or just different to reality I guess. Funny what happens to you when you’re locked away on your own for a long period. You can like yourself when you’re with others, but once you are alone you get tired of yourself. It makes you wonder if others seem you in the same light also.”

Venki looked around the small group standing in the giant cave. He burst into laughter suddenly and slapped Jordon on the back. “And you soon learn that when you are given the opportunity you talk too much. Far too much.”

Another chuckle and he continued: “So. You said there were friends down here in trouble. Well, we’d better be off then. We’ve got a bit of outwitting and rescuing to do, haven’t we?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Nikko opened his eyes he could not see a thing. The pink aura had gone as had the embers and he could not tell if any of his friends were beside him. He was in total darkness and he thought his past recollections had been nothing but a dream. The pink fused with flowers in the garden of another musing and the embers filled the fireplace in a familiar sitting room. He shook his head and the images separated into distinct differences but quickly vanished altogether.

What replaced them was his awareness of a low but persistent humming or buzzing sound that came from no particular direction but seemed to be everywhere at once. Remembering the restraints that had held him down before Nikko cautiously tried to sit up. Nothing prevented him. There was no strap across his chest and his arms and legs were free to push him into a sitting position. He fingered his ankles and wrists and ran a palm across his jacket to make sure there was nothing there. He detected no ridges and no soreness and again he wondered if it had all been a dream.

Slowly the soft buzzing noise intensified so that he had to take notice of it. He looked about him but could see nothing. The black emptiness had faded to a dark grey and he strained to peer into an indeterminate distance trying to make out any shape or form that would bring him back into the real world. For at present he was beginning to ask himself if he was in a real world. He could not accurately recall what had happened to him or even when it might have been. With the others he had been feeling his way along a dark passageway when he had been overwhelmed by some unknown thing or perhaps it was only a sensation and then all realism disappeared into darkness which was followed by pleasant but strange dreams.

Again he looked to his side to see if his friends were stretched out on the ground as his memory pictured them. He reached his arm sideways and drew his hand across a hard dirt floor. Flat but empty. If it wasn't for that confounded noise he might be able to think more clearly. It was getting louder and now seemed to come from very close. For the first time he started to worry that it could be a warning of harm or injury. Out of the corner of his eye he senses a quick movement like a shadow flitting across an already darkened background. Then another, almost in the same place.

"Who's that?" he exclaimed. "Who's there?"

On the other side more shadows skipped across a gap. Two, three, four in quick succession.

The buzzing suddenly ceased. All was deathly still and Nikko held his breath and jerked his head left and right but caught sight of no further movement. His eyes were wide but blind and his ears tingled with excitement and the strain to detect even the slightest sound. It was an eerie feeling and one which Nikko was fast wishing he could shake off. If a pin was to drop on the earth floor it would shatter his eardrums so keen was his attention. But there was not a sound to be heard.

All of a sudden without warning he was knocked back to the ground, his head thumping painfully on the packed earth. There was a high pitched scream that sent the adrenalin racing through his taught body at such a feverish rate Nikko thought his veins would burst and the liquid spurt in geysers to the unseen ceiling. His legs were pinned and his arms were stretched in a crucifix so that he was utterly immobilised with a weight pressing his whole body.

The incessant creaming continued and it was only seconds before brilliant white light exploded over his head and he had to instinctively shut his eyes tightly. When he opened them his amazement was complete.

The light was the same as that he had seen in the forest some days before. The Drong leader had then tossed a silver ball into the air blinding the Leaf Children while Gabrysia was snatched and carried off to unknown captivity. However it was not the Drons this time who had stunned with the incredible light. Nikko could not believe his eyes. He was literally covered with creatures he had never imagined in his wildest dreams and dozens of them filled the cavern he was in.

They were about ninety centimetres tall and covered from head to foot with long, sleek black fur, though there were patches which were bare. The crown of each was bald so that they appeared to be wearing skull caps. So too were their elbows and knees. The fur was grey where the eyebrows would have been and their eyes themselves shone bright yellow. The creatures, while small in stature, had enormous splayed feet but their hands, also naked of fur, were tiny and incredibly delicate.

Nikko looked about startled. The creatures were everywhere, standing in clusters on the floor of the cavern, perched on craggy rock juttings and ledges along the walls and peering from behind boulders and crevices in corners.

The high pitched screaming stopped and the creatures peered at Nikko as he was held firmly but without force flat on his back. In the silence that followed Nikko's fear gradually dissipated and was replaced by curiosity.

Eventually he spoke. "What are..." He choked. Then again, more clearly, he asked: "Who are you?"

The screaming started again but a sharp glare from one of the creatures standing near his head brought instant silence.

"Who are you?" Nikko repeated. "Please. I don't mean you any harm. Where are my friends? What has happened to them?"

The creature near his head pre-empted more high-pitched screaming by peering around the groups, his yellow eyes gleaming. If it had been possible to discern an expression Nikko would have guessed it to be stern. As it was however the shiny black fur and the absence of any noticeable mouth or even nose made that impossible.

Slowly the creature turned and looked down at Nikko. The yellow eyes seemed to soften slightly. "You have absolutely no cause for alarm Leaf Child." The words were beautifully formed and if the pitch was very high it was melodic and pleasant to listen to. Nikko was stunned and his surprise must have been obvious because the creature went on: "And nor should you be anxious for your friends. They are unharmed, in the best of health and receiving the utmost care."

Nikko was by this time flabbergasted. The sight of the creatures and the articulate vocabulary of this one left him almost speechless himself. Not entirely though and once more he asked; "Who are you?"

"Ahhh," said the creature, and gently rubbed his eye with a forefinger on which gleamed a ring of gold. "You are of course surprised that I should be able to speak your language so well. I who look so different. Well as you can hear I do indeed speak your tongue, and many others too. As to who I am, I shall introduce myself to you shortly. But first, please excuse our poor manners. You must be uncomfortable in your present position."

At a glance from the creature the others leapt from Nikko's body in a single movement and joined a group standing nearby. Nikko sat up and the creature slowly walked around the stand in front of him his motion graceful and noiseless.

"That must feel better for you," he said. "I apologise for the roughness of our greeting. There are occasions when one has to be cautious even if indications point to there being no need." He then stated: "I am Fusan, Elder of the Deep. I am a Keeper, as are we all."

Nikko felt like pinching himself to see if he really was conscious and sitting in a cave surrounded by odd hairy creatures who either screeched loudly or spoke impeccable English. And all of this far below ground, under a sweltering desert in a warren of tunnels thought to be defended by a bunch of ruffian Drong children. It was all too much.

As he sat silent the creature spoke again: "As I said before young man do not be troubled. You are perfectly safe with us. It is those outside who search for you that you should be fearful of. It is they who mean you harm."

Nikko knew the Drongs meant him no good but they were after all of his own kind. On the other hand these creatures, Keepers as they called themselves, were alien to him and might just as well have been from outer space.

"You are indeed troubled," said the Keeper Fusan. "It shows in your eyes. They are the most expressive part of the body. They can never conceal the feelings of the heart. The hand can be steadied. The voice too can be controlled. But the eyes always speak the truth, the inner truth. To judge a person look into his eyes and you will see good or evil, strength or weakness."

He gazed unblinking at Nikko and went on: "Your eyes are pale but clear. They tell me you good and honesty in your heart. They also clearly show doubt and fear. What can we do to allay that fear?"

Nikko spoke more quickly than he thought he would be able to. "What have you done with my friends? Why aren't they here?"

"As I assured you before they are well and unharmed," replied Fusan. "Shortly you will rejoin them. Do not worry. For now you should be trying to decide how you are going to help your other friends who are being held captive down here."

"I thought Gabrysia and Fallon would be here," exclaimed Nikko. "There was nowhere else they could have been taken. Once we came up against those Drong soldiers I knew I was right."

"There are three Leaf Children. Not two. One is certainly female. The others are male."

"Three?" said Nikko surprised. "Who is the other one?"

Fusan blinked for the first time. "His name I cannot tell you. But he is dark and has been held for a considerable time, much of it in serious discomfort. You must help him to escape also or it will not go well for him."

"Why haven't you done something?" Nikko asked. "From what I can see there are a lot of you. You could probably easily win a fight."

"That is not possible," Fusan answered.

"Why not?"

"It is not possible," the creature again said. There was a finality in his tone which suggested nothing would be gained by repeating the question.

Nikko ran his eyes around the chamber. He could see now there were scores of hairy creatures everywhere, high and low. They stared unblinking at him, silent and betraying no expressions in their bright yellow eyes. But they gave no sign of threat and Nikko

soon shifted his concentration to the cavern they shared. It was large and there was nothing to distinguish it. There were no special markings on the walls, no visible tunnel entrances. Just an ordinary cave.

“You have more questions Leaf Child,” said Fusan. “You are free of course to enquire of is anything and I will do my utmost to answer as best I can. But first you will forgive me. I would like to know your name.”

Nikko looked back to the Keeper. “I am called Nikko.” Then he added quickly: “Nicholas really, but my mother and father call me Nikko. And my friends.”

“Then I too shall call you Nikko if you will allow me,” said Fusan. “It is a happy name and we do want to be your friends. Now what would you ask of me Nikko?”

“Who are you?” he said. Then he added: “I mean, who *are* you? Where do you come from?”

“Why, we are Keepers and we are from where we are,” answered Fusan.

“No, I mean where do you originally come from? Before here?”

“This is our home. We have been here for all the time we have known. There is no before.”

“But you must have come from somewhere else,” said Nikko. “You’re not like us.” It was out before he could catch his tongue. Trying to recover and make amends for the slip so as not to cause further offence Nikko rushed on: “What I mean is you’re so different. Not weird but strange. I mean @I’ve never seen anything like you before. Not so unusual. I mean...”

“Pause young Nikko. Let me finish your thoughts for you.” Nikko was reddening around the neck and his cheeks were hot with embarrassment. “We are not like Leaf Children and nor are we like those who call themselves Drongs. At least for that we are thankful. Where you are soft and bare we are cloaked in fur and our voices are foreign. Is that what you are trying to say?”

Nikko dropped his eyes to the floor of the cave.

“Do not be embarrassed my friend,” soothed Fusan. “It is true is it not? We are indeed different. And remember you are different to us as well. My family here are equally fascinated with your appearance. Change places with any of them and you will understand we have every reason to ponder on your strangeness. As you do ours.”

Nikko looked at the creature and realised the truth in what he had said. He supposed he would look like an alien to someone he himself considered an alien.

“You see,” said Fusan, “the eyes are also the lights which lead to understanding and compassion. They are beacons that illuminate the dark passages of fear and ignorance. But when closed they shut out the light and cause blindness which can, and too often does, lead to misunderstanding and hurt. Wisdom comes with age. Time will demonstrate that to you.”

There followed a long silence as Nikko once more gazed about him at the creatures huddled in groups. They looked different to him from when he had first seen the, somehow they now seemed quaint and even mischievous though friendly. There was no antagonism in their bearing before to be sure but not they actually looked like inquisitive yet shy children. He returned his gaze to Fusan.

“How old are you?” he asked suddenly.

“Older than you by far I fear,” Fusan laughed lightly. “I am not sure you would comprehend Nikko. Let me say that when the land above us ran with streams and lofty

trees reached for the sky I was past that inner sensation of wonder at such sights. In your language I would be deemed ancient. But as a Keeper I trust I have more time yet to experience the tang of life.”

“When the land had streams and a forest?” remarked Nikko. “It still does. Except for the Dead Place. Surely you don’t mean when that was” He stared at the Keeper trying to see past the fur and deep into the sparkling eyes. “You can’t be. That would make you hundreds of years old. It’s impossible.”

“My young friend,” said Fusan. “Remember. By your own words we are different. You should not be so surprised that difference extends to areas other than more outward appearance. We are Keepers of the Deep and the Deep has existed for a long, long time.” Nikko could not image the consequence of what he had just heard. Old age was his mother and father. A long time was measured in hours or days. To think in terms of centuries was to reach for the unimaginable.

“Why are you called Keepers?” Nikko was trying to regain some semblance of reality to grasp something he could take hold of and accept.

There was another rare blink and Fusan answered: “We keep the maze. That is our charge and our ambition.”

“Do you keep the cave with the cages and animals? And the Leaf Children too?”

A faint whistle rose in the cavern and Nikko noticed the creatures were slightly agitated.

“Yes.” The whistling continued and Fusan did not attempt to quieten it. Instead he looked squarely at Nikko and went on in a sombre tone: “We keep the cave and those inside it. They should be looked after. Unfortunately we do it not well enough. The occasions we do it are becoming less and less frequent. The Drons use it often. Therefore we are limited in our care. And it concerns us.”

“Why do you collect those things?” queried Nikko. “Especially the children. How could you? It’s awful.”

Fusan’s voiced changed again. Now it was level; and his words were measured. “Do not falter Nikko. We are responsible for their care only. We are not responsible for their being there. They were given to us.”

“Who brought them to you?” asked Nikko. “I don’t understand. Do you mean the Drons? Surely it wasn’t the Leaf Children.”

“No it was not the Leaf Children or the Drons. I think you may have come to the wrong conclusion. Our displeasure with the Drons in this case is not for having been responsible for bringing the items to the maze, but for obstructing us in our duty to care for them.” Fusan continued his unswerving stare. “Nikko, those animals are wonderful creatures. Especially the children. They are cared for as best we can do it. Please do not say it is awful. You will offend us.”

“But it is awful,” repeated Nikko. “It is a dreadful museum. And the two children are the worst of all. Who could do such a thing? Who?”

The noise in the cave had increased and was now an unnerving whine that caused Nikko to look about him once more and to realise that he had indeed upset the Keepers. He was about to offer an apology of sorts when Fusan cut him short with a hastily raised hand which at the same time silenced the onlooking groups. “Let there be an end to this talk. Clearly the time is not right to discuss it further, at a later juncture we can speak of it again perhaps. But for now I think it is right you should see your friends. They too will be anxious for you.”

“Yes,” said Nikko. “I think I should. Where are they?”

“Be patient young friend,” cautioned the old Keeper, “and do not be alarmed.”

Without another word he turned and held his arms out from his sides in a wide embracing gesture. A sudden and piercing screech rose up and Nikko had to quickly clasp his hands tightly over his ears in an attempt to block out the sound. But he could not and just as he was certain his eardrums would burst the screech rose to an even higher pitch and he began to feel dizzy. He tried to open his eyes which had also instinctively closed but found it was impossible. He struggled to rise to his feet but his legs would not obey. The dizziness intensified and in a few seconds white specks of light danced across his vision and then all was black and empty.

The murmuring of a brook touched his senses and Nikko relaxed releasing the tension in his muscles to listen to the sweet calming music as the water trickled over the stones and gurgled in tiny eddies before continuing its journey to other stones and more whirlpools. The stream ran behind a school next to the big playing field where the boys and girls competed in their individual games or sat in huddles snickering and glancing at one another.

While the girls jostled and giggled during their netball the boys mostly squatted with squinting eyes and dirty knuckles concentrating on the position of their bright marbles. Hierarchical importance was won and lost almost daily in rings scratched in the earth of a thousand school yards. Pockets that clinked and bulged in the mornings could be emptied by early afternoons with the losers earning jeers that rang in their ears long after the bell had been sounded and the school bus had left the station. Moonies were popular. Starries were common. Agates were prized. Blood agates were like badges of honour. Owners were somebody. The one with the most, especially with the filed groove to prove it was genuine, was king of the hill. The smaller the agate the more sought after it was. Anyone who lost an agate was consoled even by those who belonged to an opposing gang. It was as if a close member of the family had died or a champion athlete beaten on the line. Sympathy was deserved. The taws were fired with impressive accuracy though occasionally one would ricochet off course and be lost in the grass, or worse, the stream. Nikko was experiencing such a personal loss. His agate had dribbled down the bank and into the murky water by the edge. There was a gasp and as Nikko approached the stream he knew immediately the precious marble was lost forever. Still he searched and others joined him calling advice and pointing in a dozen directions at once. Their shouted instructions became louder and more urgent.

“Here! Here! Come on! Hey Nikko!”

The voices jolted Nikko abruptly into the sudden realisation that what was happening was not reality but a dream. He had never been to a school and agates were unknown to him. The dream faded but the voices persisted and Nikko opened his eyes to see Porky bending over him peering down and calling his name.

“Nikko! Come on now! Come on Nikko! Wake up!”

Nikko’s lids fluttered and he looked up at his friend and smiled.

“He’s ok,” called Porky. “Jason! Nikko is alright. He’s awake.”

Nikko looked around and saw coming towards him Jason, Danielle, Josh and Simon. Josh and Danielle were smiling broadly while Simon had a startled look on his face and Jason showed all the signs of thoughtfully arranging his expression into one of almost casual non-concern.

“Thank goodness,” said Danielle. “Nikko, we were all so worried about you. We didn’t know what had happened. What did happen? Where have you been? Are you sure you are alright?”

“Hold on Danielle,” broke in Josh and he clapped Nikko on the back in an exaggerated fashion with a grin that widened so that it risked splitting his face into two parts. “The poor chap. Let him get his bearings first. How are you Nikko? Alright? We were worried you know.”

Nikko was better for seeing his friends again. “I’m fine thanks Josh. Just fine. A bit dizzy still but otherwise ok.”

“That’s typical of you Josh.” Simon was standing next to Porky and he retained his startled look though it had slackened a little. “You tell Danielle to give Nikko a breathing space and then you launch your own battery of questions.”

Nikko smiled and assured them all he did not mind their concern. In fact he was quite pleased of it and while he did not say it in so many words he was touched by their interest and concern for his health.

Jason had joined the group crowding around him and with little expression either in his face or his voice he asked: “Why the dizziness?”

Nikko slowly got to his feet and brushed the dirt off his arms and shoulders, helped by Porky who patted the dust from his breeches at the back. While they held their comments and any further queries Nikko faced Jason and said: “I’m not sure. The last thing I remember is the Keepers and a terrible screaming. I guess I fainted. How did I get here? Didn’t they bring me here?”

“The creatures brought you,” replied Jason. “But they just carried you in and lay you on the ground. Who are, what did you call them, the Keepers?”

“Keepers. The creatures are called Keepers.”

“Keepers. How do you know they’re called that?”

“They told me. Or at least one of them did. Fusan . He’s the leader I think and he said they are in charge down here. Keepers of the Deep as he put it.”

None of them said anything until finally it was Danielle who broke the silence as very calmly she said: “You say those creatures spoke to you Nikko ? Actually talked?”

“Sure,” Nikko answered and looked around at the group. Josh and Porky were no longer smiling and Simon’s concerned expression had returned. “He did. He told me his name was Fusan and that they looked after the maze. He said they didn’t like the Drongs and that they also cared for the specimens in that museum cave.”

Jason glanced at Danielle and Nikko could see the disbelief in his eyes. Fusan was right he thought. The eyes are the most expressive part of the body.

“He also told me the Keepers are very old,” he said. “At least he is. From his description I would say he is at least a hundred years old his English is perfect.”

“Nikko,” said Simon. “They’re creatures. Animals of some sort. I’ve never seen anything like them before, or heard of anything similar, but they’re animals. They can’t speak. Something must have happened. You must have got a pretty bad knock on the head. And had a dream. A pretty fantastic one I must say.”

“Listen,” said Nikko. “Listen carefully. They can talk. They are Keepers and they know about you Leaf Children. They think I am one too. And they know about the Drongs. And I guess you could say Fusan is very wise. What he says is very interesting.”

“Did any of the others talk to you?” It was Jason who asked the question.

“No. Just Fusan. The rest of the Keepers seemed shy and afraid. He was obviously in charge and did all the talking. They just watched and I think it was them who screamed just before I passed out I suppose. Fusan said you were all being cared for and then said they would bring me to you.”

“We have been finding things to eat,” Josh said. Porky added: “Not normal food. It’s all different colours and seems to appear mysteriously in corners where there was nothing before. Too much actually.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Jason curtly. “We don’t know if it’s proper food. Porky will eat anything.”

“You ate it too Jason and even said it made you feel better. That’s what you said.”

“Look.” Nikko was still facing Jason. “Fusan said I should not worry about you when I asked after you all. he said you were being cared for. Maybe he meant the food Porky mentioned. Nothing has happened to you has it? You feel better after eating it don’t you? Just ask yourself: How did you get here? If it wasn’t the Keepers who brought you here? Who did? And where are they now?”

“I do not know,” Jason retorted. “But you can’t tell me stupid hairy creatures can talk and be hundreds of years old and magically make food appear out of thin air. I thought the brat was the only one who believed fantasies.”

“Wait.” Nikko remembered something else Fusan had told him. “He also said the Drongs had three prisoners. A girl and two boys. One of the boys had been held captive for a long time. He said we should try to save them as soon as we can.”

“Three?” said Danielle. “Maybe he meant Gabrysia and Fallon. But who could the third one be?”

“I don’t know,” said Nikko, “but I believe him.”

“This is all rubbish,” said Jason and started to walk away. He stopped and turned back to look at Danielle. “If you ant to believe this fairy take go ahead. As far as I’m concerned that’s all it is. No offence Nikko but I think you got a whack on the head and imagined the whole thing. It’s just not possible. Any of it.”

Nikko could understand Jason’s difficulty in believing what he said. It was a fantastic story. He would find it hard to credit himself if he changed places with Jason. But he knew it was true.

He watched Jason walk to the other side of the cavern and slump down with his back against the rock wall. Very slowly Nikko walked to the centre of the chamber and swivelled around, carefully examining every face. Then he craned his neck back and studied the ceiling. Finally he looked at the others standing some paces away. Drawing in a deep breath he called out loudly: “Fusan!” Then again: “Fusan!”

Nothing happened and Nikko could see the others look to the roof of the cave and then back at him with doubtful expressions.

“Fusan!” he called again louder. “Please! Fusan !”

Still there was no reply. Nothing changed. If anything the cavern seemed even quieter. More isolated. Remote.

“Where’s your ancient hairy creature Nikko?” called Jason. “He’s not answering you. That’s because he can’t. You imagined everything Nikko. We should be trying to work out how we are going to get out of here. Not how to contact some imaginary creature.”

“Oh I am real young man.” Fusan suddenly appeared against the wall of the cave behind Danielle, Porky, Josh and Simon. No-one saw him come. He was just there.

Jason sprang to his feet and the others wheeled around to stare at the little Keeper.

“As you can for yourself I do exist,” Fusan added. “And if your ears are in order you will hear that I can also speak. I am pleased Nikko to know that you consider my speech of a reasonable standard. I have studied it for some considerable time. One always likes to learn one’s endeavours are rewarded.”

The Leaf Children stood speechless, staring at the creature who spoke in the high tone and stared unblinking at Nikko in the middle of the cavern.

“Your English is perfect,” said Nikko and walked over to his side. “Not reasonable. Perfect.”

“I thank you,” Fusan said and nodded slightly.

“Fusan,” Nikko said, “thank you for coming. I would like to introduce my friends to you. This is Danielle. And Porky, Josh and Simon. And that is Jason over there.”

“How do you do. Young Nikko was very concerned about you. But I assured him you were well and being looked after. I am pleased to say you do appear to be in good health.”

It was almost as though there were only two people in the room. While Fusan and Nikko had been talking the Leaf Children stood staring at the strange little creature with eyes as round as saucers and jaws slack.

“Come now Leaf Children,” Fusan said. “Surely it is not so amazing that I speak your language. Do you truly believe you are the only beings that have that ability? Why should not others be capable of speech also?”

Still there was no response.

“Perhaps your friends have been struck dumb Nikko.” Fusan’s grey eyebrows lifted themselves laboriously and Nikko observed the first expression he had seen on a Keeper. He said: “I think they are still trying to get over the fact that you even exist Fusan. Remember I had many doubts and questions too. For us you are pretty amazing you know.”

“There is nothing amazing. You are. You speak. You reason. You feel. I too speak, reason and feel. I too am.”

“Yes, I know. But you are so.....so different. Remember?”

“Yes. I am so different. Perhaps you all think I am some sort of magician. One that doesn’t really have flesh and blood. I might be just some mystical mirage. An image without substance. I have skills that you may well regard as magic but creating talking visions is not one of them.”

“Where the heck did you come from?” Jason, like the rest, had been bewildered by the sight of the small creature, more so since it had spoken directly to him as if merely continuing a normal conversation. But the stunning realisation had passed and Jason was again his arrogant self. “How did you get here? We have found no passages.”

Fusan faced him. “You did not believe Nikko when he told you about us. You doubt our medicinal food that your friend obviously relishes and which has incidentally appeared to do you some good. Now you say there are no passageways. Look again young friend. Are you sure?”

Jason and the others looked about them at the bare, cold walls of the cavern but could see no openings.

“I don’t see anything,” stated Jason.

“That is perhaps the problem. You don’t see. You must not only seek with your eyes but also your mind and your heart. Only then do you really see. And you will be truly amazed.” Fusan’s unblinking gaze burned into Jason’s eyes so that he had to look away pretending once more to search for changes to the cave’s stone surfaces.

“Fusan,” said Nikko. “You said you had skills that would surprise us. What sort of skills do you mean?”

The old Keeper did not reply immediately. When he did it was to all of the children, not Nikko alone, his eyes passing from one face to the next but not settling on any one.

“As I told you before Nikko,” he began, “we have been Keepers of the Deep for a very long time. And as you explained to your friends I am old, very old by your standards. With the passing of such a time I have developed skills that are necessary to survive and perform our many duties. I do not intend to demonstrate if that is your next request. Allow me simply to say that with the aid of these skills we plan to remain as Keepers for some time yet.”

“Sir.” Poriky had found his voice and even his smile which had returned. “What are you going to do with us? I mean, well, what are you going to do with us?”

“Do not fear,” Fusan answered. “We have no intention of harming you. You have absolutely no reason to be afraid of us or what we may, or may not, do.”

“Will you let us go?” It was Jason again. “Are you going to show us how to get out of here?”

“You are not prisoners, young friend. You are free to go where you will at any time. Even the clutches of those Drongs who are this moment search high and low for you. If that is your wish. Though that is something I would strongly advise against.”

“Of course not,” said Jason. “We just want to get away from here and rescue our friends who are being held by that idiot Kerry and his henchmen.” He paused and went on: “Nikko said you told him the Drongs had three prisoners, a girl and two boys. Is that true?”

Fusan’s yellow eyes remained steady and there were no raised eyebrows. “Keepers never tell an untruth. There are no circumstances under which a falsehood can be told. None. There are indeed three Leaf Children in the control of the Drongs in this maze. As I also informed Nikko one of them has been held for some time and you should help him before it is too late.”

“Do you know who he is?” Josh enquired.

“If you mean do I know his name the answer has to be no. but know him? In a manner of speaking I do. A little. I have had time to observe him and to watch how he has coped with the hardships he had thrust upon him. He has strength and goodness in him.”

The Leaf Children exchanged looks and Simon cleared his throat before speaking. “Am I right in saying there are quite a few of you, ahh, Keepers down here?”

“You might say that,” replied Fusan. “There is a family of us.”

“Exactly how many are there in your family?” asked Simon.

“Our numbers have decreased over time but still there are exactly sixty-three of us.”

“Sixty-three!” called out Jason. “Where are they all?”

Fusan said nothing and kept his attention on Simon apparently ignoring the question.

“And how many Drongs are there?” Simon too held his stare.

Fusan replied that the number of Drongs had remained constant at forty-two. Then he added: “And your next question young Simon? What is it to be?”

But it was Jason who stepped forward and Nikko saw that he had his thumbs stuck in his breeches and his whole bearing was one of arrogance. It brought back memories not too dimmed of his very first meeting with the Leaf Child, a meeting that had been a prelude to a life which was to become entangled and different from what should have been. Yet he had no time to dwell on that now and the thought went as quickly as it had arisen.

“What we all want to know,” said Jason. “is if there are so many of you and so few Drons, and if you don’t like them, why don’t you force them out?”

“That would not be possible,” Fusan answered in an even voice.

“Why not? You have the numbers and you seem to be pretty smart. You even say you know some magic or something. Why wouldn’t it possible?”

“It is not possible,” repeated Fusan.

For Nikko it was a case of *déjà vu*. A recent scene was being re-enacted before him. Only this time he was in the audience and not one of the principal characters.

“We don’t understand,” said Simon. “Have you tried to make them leave? Have you actually had a battle?”

“Keepers care for the maze,” said Fusan. Then he continued: “Those Drons make it difficult for us at times to perform our duties but still we carry out our tasks and we shall go on doing so.”

Jason cocked his head to one side. “You haven’t answered the question. Have you ever tried to kick Kerry and his band out of the place?”

Fusan turned purposefully to Nikko. “Nikko,” he said. “I am pleased to see your friends are well and I am also pleased to observe you are happy being back with them. However if you will excuse me I must leave you all for a short time. You will be alright and you need not be alarmed. I shall return soon.” He walked towards the wall of the cave where he had first appeared.

“Wait,” called Jason. “Stay where you are. We haven’t finished...”

Fusan wheeled about and in the same movement he shot both his little arms in front of his body, pointing sharply at Jason. “No!” he said and his voice was low and hoarse, in total contrast to the pleasant high pitched tone he had used before. “We have finished. Enough has been said. I shall return soon.”

He glared at Jason who was transfixed to the spot. Some seconds passed and then the old Keeper turned and walked the few steps to the stone wall which seemed to fall away before him revealing an opening that led along an unlit tunnel with a speck of light in the distance. As Fusan entered the darkness the cave wall closed back into place and once again all was silent.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They had chosen the tunnel for no reason other than it led in the opposite direction to the one Kerry and the Drongs had apparently taken. That the soldier had fled into it and then hastily retreated did not concern them. It had not appealed to him simply because once he was inside it he had realised all of a sudden he was alone and under the circumstances he faced that was not how he wanted to be. At the very least he wanted to be with his co-conspirators so that if caught he would not suffer by himself. The thought of the punishment he would be subjected to would make even the hardest of Drongs shrink away and seek out fellow misery.

As Gabrysia and Fallon and Venki, followed by Jordon with his quick short little steps, entered the tunnel they came across the two Drong soldiers who had been overpowered earlier. They sat leaning against the wall of the tunnel, hands and feet bound with strips of rag, and with handkerchiefs tied across their mouths to prevent their crying out for help. When they saw the Leaf Children approach they straightened their shoulders and drew their knees into their chests, their expressions wide and cautious.

Venki had gone up to the nearer of the two and putting his hand on his shoulder grinned and asked: "So how does it feel to be tied up, eh?" Then he stepped back a pace and his grin vanished. "Well, get used to it. With a bit of luck your comrades won't be back for some time. And you can try to imagine what it was like for me for such a long time."

Then without looking at the others he had set off down the passageway at an eager pace that momentarily left them lagging behind.

That had been a good thirty minutes ago and since then the foursome had walked a long way through the twisting and turning tunnel that one minute curved in a wide arc and the next stretched before them in a dead straight direction with no end in sight. More than once they had thought of retracing their steps and trying another of the passages that led off the main chamber. But each time one of them had convinced the others it would be better to continue a while longer. There was also the possibility that Kerry had returned to the cavern and found the bound soldiers and was now on his way in hot pursuit. So on they went along the tunnel that seemed to lead nowhere.

There had not been much conversation and while Fallon had tried to get Venki to talk about his past and his captivity he had not been able to learn a great deal. Only that he had been in charge of the Leaf Children in the forest before Gabrysia had taken his place. He would not elaborate on how long he had been there or where he had come from. He mentioned Jason by description rather than by name and told of previous encounters with the Drongs who were then led by the same Kerry. However, for some reason Fallon could not understand Venki was no longer talkative and appeared to have retreated into himself. He continued to lead the way, which did not seem to bother Gabrysia, but his manner had become very serious. Finally Fallon put it down to his urgent wish to be away from the underground world which held only bad memories for him.

This was something he could readily sympathise with. He himself could not wait to be rid of the place and back in the forest with the family of Leaf Children and the singing trees and laughter and clear bright sunshine beaming from the blue sky with an occasional fluffy cloud scudding overhead.

Fallon gave an audible sigh and Gabrysia asked: "Are you alright Fallon? You sound tired. Should we rest for a while?"

He shook his head and replied: "We have to keep going. We're committed now. We have to follow this tunnel and see where it takes us. We can't go back." He quickened his step and caught up to Venki again while Gabryisia remained further back with Jordon who plodded on obediently and without complaint despite the difficulty he was now experiencing in keeping up with the others. His head was low and he was breathing heavily. Perspiration glistened on his forehead.

Gabryisia rested her arm around Jordon's neck and bent to speak encouragement in his ear but just as she did there was a cry from ahead of them. When she looked up she saw Fallon disappearing into a hole in the floor of then tunnel.

"Help!" he shouted as his head vanished from sight.

Gabryisia and Jordon rushed ahead. When they reached the hole they saw Fallon's hands clinging desperately to the lip of the opening. His face looked back at them and in a pleading voice he whispered: "Be careful. Don't get too close to the edge."

As she peered over the side Gabryisia could see nothing. There was no light and all she could make out were Fallon's upturned face and shoulders. Beyond his waist all was black.

"Where's Venki?" she enquired. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know. He went in beside me but wasn't able to grab the side."

From below in the dark Venki's voice called up: "I'm alright. It's not far down. You can let go Fallon. I can see you're only a few feet out of reach. Let go. There's something down here."

"I don't think I have any choice," Fallon answered. "I can't hold on. I'm losing my grip." and with that his fingers let go and he disappeared from sight.

"Fallon! Fallon! Fallon!" Gabryisia called down.

"I'm ok," came the reply. Then: "Wait there. Wait a wile."

"What's down there? What can you see?" Jordon was standing close to Gabryisia's side and she had to hold him back from leaning over the hold precariously.

Almost a minute passed before Venki called up: "Gabryisia. Can you and Jordon come down? Can you do it?"

"Don't jump," called Fallon. "Can you lower yourself and Jordon down? Check the edges. See if they are firm enough."

"They are. It looks like there is a stone border around the sides. It's like it's a trap of some sort. I'm sure of it."

"Right. Well try to lower Jordon first. We can see out even if you can't see in. if you can lower him in we can catch him. It's only about three meters down. Try it."

Gabryisia did not have to coax Jordon to the hole. He was only too willing to climb overt the edge with Gabryisia holding onto his forearms as he lay on his stomach and dropped his legs behind him. Before she could offer any advice he was dangling into the hole, his little hands holding the stone rim. Then he dropped.

"We've got him," called Venki. "Almost missed but we've got him. Now you."

Gabryisia by instinct bent her legs at the knees as her feet hit the ground, cushioning her landing so she did not hurt herself. She staggered slightly but was quickly up with the help of a hand under her armpit from Fallon.

"Where are we?" she asked. "Why did you get us down here? How are we going to get back out? I can't see a thing but it must be at least three or four meters to the top."

Gabryisia looked up where a square of light shone, much larger from below than from beside it.

“Look,” said Fallon. “Look over there,” and he pointed to his right and almost directly behind where Gabryisia stood. It was still very dark in the hole but Gabryisia was becoming accustomed to the gloom and when she turned she could see a shape about ten meters away. As she looked harder she slowly realised what it was. Venki and Jordon were standing beside a rock carving.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Come and see,” said Fallon and together they walked over to where their companions stood. When they were together Gabryisia exclaimed: “My god. It’s Torpah.”

Before them the image rose out of the earth showing the upper part of a bird, not any bird, but exactly like Torpah from the forest. The shape, the piercing eyes even in the dingy darkness, the bearing of the bird; all were unmistakable. The lower portion was buried in the hard surface of the room’s floor, but there was no doubt it was the likeness of Torpah.

“It’s fantastic,” said Fallon. “I don’t know what it can mean but that is Torpah. Do you agree?”

“Yes,” was all Gabryisia could say and she continued to stare at the carving. It rose easily two meters and if the rest of the body was below the ground they stood on the entire sculpture would measure at least five meters in height.

“What’s it doing here?” Jordon asked. “Why would anyone build a statue of Torpah? And right down here anyway?”

“He’s right,” said Venki. Of course Torpah was no ordinary bird and the children knew there was a great deal more to him than the mere affection and regard they held for him. But they had never imagined anyone would carve a sculpture in his honour, and certainly the location of the image was mystifying to say the least.

“Well whatever the reason there has to be one,” offered Fallon. “He’s here after all. We’re all agreed that it’s Torpah. I guess what we have to find out now, or try to find out, is what he is doing down here. It can’t be a mistake so there has to be a purpose.”

By now the four children could see quite well having been in the darkness some minutes and they looked at one another each searching for an answer.

“Maybe it’s a sign,” said Gabryisia.

“Oh what? And by whom?” asked Venki.

“I don’t know,” replied Gabryisia. “I just think I could be a sign of some sort. Why else would it be here?”

“If it is a sign then there has to be a message. But there doesn’t appear to be anything.”

“There are not even any other tunnels,” said Jordon. “Only this hole and the statue.”

“I hope we can find something,” Gabryisia said again. “Because we can’t get out the same way we came in.”

“There must be another way then,” said Fallon. “No-one goes to the trouble of making something like this and throws it in a pit and forgets about it. And that’s the other question we haven’t looked at yet. Who made it?”

The others did not respond.

Fallon went on: “We didn’t and I don’t think the Drongs would, or could. Who does that leave?”

Again no-one answered.

Finally Venki spoke. "I think we should find a way out of here as quickly as we can. We can worry about the *who* when we are not trapped in a dark hole with nowhere to go."

It did not take the children long to discover there were no obvious escape routes from the pit. But that did not deter them as they knew that in the subterranean world seldom did anything easily betray its secret. And everything seemed to have hidden secrets. So after a visual examination of their close surroundings they set about a physical search. What they were looking for with their hands were concealed buttons, plungers, cracks that might hide levers.

After they had been searching for a time, without success, Venki stood beside the statue of Torpah scratching his head. There had to be something. Otherwise it did not make sense. He leaned against a protruding upper portion of a wing and sniffed exasperatedly. Dust was clogging his nostrils causing him some annoyance and he looked around at the unrevealing walls. Torpah's eyes showed specks of light. Venki looked away but then turned back and closely studied one of the eyes again. It should not have reflected any light at all if it was stone. Particularly down in the hole. They must be glass, thought Venki, and stretched to see more clearly. It was too far away to tell so he pulled himself up on the wing, clamping his feet against the bird's underbelly to help. Carefully he reached up to feel an eye. It was smooth like glass.

"What are you doing?" asked Fallon who had stopped his searching to watch.

Venki did not reply. Instead he pushed the eye with his thumb.

"What is it?" Gabryisia joined in. "What have you found Venki?"

"I don't know," he said and swung himself further around in front of Torpah. Again he reached u-p and pressed the other eye.

Still nothing happened.

Then the sculpture began to separate half a meter from the ground, slowly and silently swinging open to reveal yet another rope ladder descending into a massive expanse of light far below. So bright it was that when the children peered down they had to squint.

"I don't believe this," said Venki. "I just don't believe it."

"It's not the first time we have come across this sort of surprise," said Gabryisia. "We've seen other things in other parts of this place, but I have to admit each time they are more surprising."

As the children continued to look they could see the ladder made from thick rope with solid wooden stepping panels hung heavily and was so long it dissolved in the bright light many meters below. Even from what they could see it was evident the ladder must have been at least a hundred meters long, perhaps more. The light from below brightened the hole they were in and the children looked at each other without saying a word.

A minute passed and Gabryisia said: "We have to. There's no other way."

"I know," agreed Fallon. "But it's so deep. Fall from that and you're dead for sure." Then he added: "You're right though. We have to do it. Venki?"

Venki was still staring into the shining opening. He drew his eyes away reluctantly and said: "Yes. Yes, we must."

"I'll go first," said Fallon. "Maybe you next Venki and then Jordon. Gabryisia, you come last." He looked at Jordon. "Jordon, you must be very careful. Do not hurry and take each rung very slowly. Whatever you do, don't look down. Just go as slowly as you can until your feet hit the bottom. OK?"

"Alright," said the youngster but there as clearly a worried note in his voice.

Tentatively Fallon climbed into the opening and eased himself onto the ladder. Rigid, it did not sway at all and he gripped the top rung, tightly wrapping his fingers around the wood. With a last look up he began his gradual descent.

Venki was next, followed by Jordon who did exactly as he had been told and then Gabrysia. They did not talk. Nor did they look down. Slowly, and very cautiously, they lowered themselves ten meters, twenty, fifty, a hundred. The bright light actually waned as they got lower and it became warmer but none of the children noticed as they concentrated totally on the wooden rungs of the ladder.

Fallon stepped down but his foot did not land on a narrow cross piece. He had stepped onto hard earth and was down. For the first time in nearly a quarter of an hour he looked around. He blinked and did not move. A minute later Venki almost stepped on him. Then Jordon and finally Gabrysia. Together they stood and gaped at what they saw.

Before them was a world of green and blue and a range of colours that was dazzling. They were standing on the brink of a landscape that stretched to a far horizon and which showed grass, trees, flowers and a silently flowing river that snaked its way between towering banks on either side.

“My god,” Fallon exclaimed.

From where they were a gentle slope entered the valley and a small grey animal bounded across in front of them and disappeared into a row of thicket near a large tree whose leaves rustled in a slight breeze.

“My god,” repeated Fallon. “My dear god.”

The scene could have been lifted from a picture book, given life and dropped into place so that it looked constant yet fresh and new. The grass was an unspoiled green and thick. It spread across the hills and valleys like a giant quilt. The trees stood straight and strong with their leaves rustling in their millions or drooping heavy with moisture laden veins. Bright yellow blooms clustered around their base, low to the ground, while in the open violet, red and blue flowers turned their faces upward and opened themselves to their plentiful world.

At the foot of high banks rimmed with reeds the river strolled leisurely from the foot of the hill where the children stood to the horizon where blue met green. It was wide and dark except at the bends where ripples chased one another to add a glitter of silver to the surface, and where the breeze dipped lower to flick light sprays into the air where they held a moment and then were extinguished. A plain brown bird burst from the branches of a tree quite near with an urgent *weep, weep* followed soon after by a *hoi, hoi, hoi* further away in the direction the bird flew.

The entire panorama was one of peace, life and beauty. The contrast with the underground world the children had emerged from was almost unimaginable. Whereas the maze of tunnels and dungeons was lifeless and depressing the view before them was alive and bountiful.

A third time Fallon invoked the Maker: “God in heaven. It’s magnificent.”

Time passed as the children absorbed the vitality of the world before them. After some minutes they began gesturing, pointing things out to one another, their faces beaming and arcing from one side to the other as something new and exciting was spotted, identified and commented on. But they did not venture into the valley as still they were wary. Their experiences had shown that behind every pillar, around every bend and with each new development, something awaited them. Not always pleasant but always unexpected. So

while they laughed, and in the case of young Jordon jumped in the air with glee as a horse sauntered from behind a clump of bushes, they remained in the mouth of the yawning cave looking out on the valley. When they had quieted Fallon asked what they had all been wondering: "So, what do we do now?"

It was a question that had been repeated many times in the past days and no matter who had posed it the answer was inevitably one of consensus. So it was this time, and after a brief discussion it was decided they should explore the land down to the edge of the river at its nearest point. If all went well they would then consider whether to go further.

The walk to the river bank went without incident though it took longer than they expected. It seemed that no matter how long they walked the river got no nearer. Perhaps it was because they stopped often to gather flowers, pick up stones which bore coloured glass and substances that shone like gold and silver, or to once again marvel at the range of wildlife.

Two hours after they set out they arrived at the river, and once again their first impression had been incorrect. The water was calm at the edge as they looked down on it from atop the bank, but in the middle it raced along surprisingly fast and the eddies they had seen from a distance were in fact quite busy white water lapping around rocks and whirling about as it tumbled on. The children searched the rim of the high embankment until they found a path that wound its way down the side to a sandy tract at the bottom. Once down the children had to raise their voices to be heard over the loud murmuring of the flowing river.

"Look at the fish," shouted Jordon. "Over there. It's a big one. And there. Here, here, too." The river teemed with them and shoals swam up and down the edge, lazily seeking food and flashing their scaly sides through the surface.

"I'm hungry," said Jordon, reminding the group that they had not eaten for a long time. They had been preoccupied with captivity and escape for so long they had not even thought of food. But now that they were free and had stopped running they realised just how hungry they were.

Within minutes they had caught sufficient numbers of the fish to silence the grumbling of their stomachs, and they were neatly spread out on the sand, no longer flipping their tails and jerking their heads with fixed but somehow frightened looks in their eyes. Actually they had been easy to catch as they cruised sluggishly along almost completely unconcerned as the children waded into the water. It was only when hands began to close around their bulging bodies that they sensed danger but by then it was too late. Some in fact were hoisted out of the water but tossed back with only the larger, obviously older, ones being kept and thrown ashore.

Four now lay still in the sun while the children remained in the river with the shallow water gently caressing their knees. It was cool and refreshing and they stood for a moment longer drinking in the tranquillity, breathing in new life and for the first time in days relaxing. Then they walked to the sand and collected some dry drift wood and fallen branches and began building a pyramid shaped pile out of the twigs. Once it was alight larger sticks would be added and the fish would be skewered and held over the flames. But first the fire had to be started and the children concentrated their efforts on rubbing two sticks together as rapidly as they could.

However they soon came to the realisation that this was not a simple thing to do. The wood seemed different to that in the forest somehow. Each tried his hand at the rubbing but all they manufactured was much sweat and two smooth sticks.

Fallon was the last to try, his second attempt, but felt he was wasting his time and sat back on his haunches, his arms hanging limp in front of him. He tossed the sticks aside, picked up a grey stone and juggled it in the air a few times before throwing it away frustrated. As it ricocheted off a large rock a spark flew. He stared ahead for a few seconds and then heaved himself and retrieved the discarded stone. Returning to the heavier rock he bent and brought his hand sharply across it at an angle. Another spark cracked between the two surfaces.

Less than five minutes later the heap of twigs was burning and the children were standing around with satisfied expressions.

“I thought we would have to resort to eating them raw,” said Gabrysia.

“Ughhh,” commented Jordon and screwed up his face. “No way. I’d rather starve.”

“Well we don’t have to now.” Fallon gazed at the growing flames. “When that gets going a bit more we can put those thicker branches on and start cooking.”

Still later as the four fish hung over the fire Fallon joked: “At least our two fire sticks weren’t wasted altogether. We didn’t start a fire with them but they ended up smooth and shiny and make perfect skewers.”

It was a feast they would remember long after the fish had been reduced to brittle skeletons. The fire died down to embers that flared and crackled while the children sprawled on the sand and soaked up the warm rays of the sun. Muscles loosened their knots and limp limbs seemed to sink into the clean soft sand as their bodies took on the weight of satisfaction. The four Leaf Children drifted into their separate dreams of worlds totally different from the one they now occupied. Deeply they slept.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The group of ponies grazed in the open, leisurely nipping the grass and grinding it to mulch with their strong teeth as they plodded methodically towards the huge tree at the edge of the bank above the river.

The three animals twitched and flicked their tails, reminding the small birds on their backs they knew they were there but were prepared to tolerate their tickling dances as they sought insects among the coarse hairs. More birds hopped through the grass at the side eagerly snatching insects scattered by the heavy hoofs digging their hard nails into the earth. The grass was thick and often the birds could be seen flapping into the air just above the top of the leaves and stalks, hovering a moment and then dropping out of sight again, only to reappear shortly after and repeat their aerial acrobats.

The ponies were quite small and a light brown in colour, each in fine form with full belly and straight back. Their paths were such that from time to time they met in pairs, and on a few occasions one would bristle quickly, raising its head high and playfully kick up its hind heels before bucking a few paces away to continue its concentrated feeding.

Elsewhere in the fields other animals fed or cavorted. A small family of rabbits stayed close together, sniffing the air repeatedly and twitching their whiskers in between bouts of nibbling at succulent ground cover. A large eagle glided overhead, floating on warm air currents, wide wings braced straight out from its sides with long feathers fluttering at the tips. The eagle was in its hunting formation but had eaten not long before so the rabbits below were safe for now.

In the distance the calling sounds of birds broke the silence, but while the rabbits froze momentarily the ponies continued their slow progress towards the tree that towered over the high bank beside the river. Its trunk was rough and gnarled with age. The canopy of leaves cast a permanent shadow in the wide perimeter that held the lush grass at bay and ensured a clearing littered with leaves. The river had worn away the cliff over the years so that the tree now stood at the very edge with thick roots trailing down the bank to the sand where they again burrowed into the earth.

Two of the roots formed the basis of a sturdy ladder which had lengths of vine fastened as stepping rungs. It was joined at the top level with the floor of the valley by another ladder made entirely of vine which reached up into the tree and a wooden platform across three massive branches. At one end of this platform was a shelter constructed of smaller branches, dry grass and mud. It was a tree house, home for the four Leaf Children for the last two weeks. They had set about building it the day after their arrival in the valley and completed it the day after that.

The first night had been spent on the sandy shore. When they had woken after their sated sleep it was late afternoon and with the dying sun the temperature was starting to drop. Rather than risk the open of the valley the children had rekindled the fire and elected to huddle around its warmth through the darkness. By morning there was no doubt in their minds that if they were to spend any time at all in the place, and that was looking increasingly likely, a more solid shelter was essential.

The tree had been chosen for a number of reasons. It was near to the river and its generous supply of food. They would be off the ground which was still uncertain. Also they had quickly recognised the descending roots of the tree could be wisely used. Finally the dense foliage of the tree protected them from the elements to a certain extent. But not

entirely. So they had fashioned their tree house on the platform made from sticks and tied with vine across the tree branches. It was almost two days before it was ready. Dry grass was tamped between the cross sticks and then more was spread on top so that a soft warm bedding covered the floor. The mud mixed with the grass made wind proof walls and did the same for the roof.

Their home measured about six meters long and four meters wide and was a single room, each corner of which was occupied for sleeping. In the middle rocks and stones had been laid to form a base for a small fire to be used for cooking fish over. The children drank only cold water from the river as they had no container to heat it in, and a hole in the roof allowed the smoke to empty out of the room. By the middle of their first week in the valley the children had settled in and had begun to explore the land further afield.

They discovered the animals were unafraid of them and showed curiosity rather than fear but still kept their distance. Birds continued to fly in and out of the huge tree and the smaller, cheekier varieties would sometimes land on the platform cocking their heads sideways to try to see what the new arrivals were doing. It was not long before this became a regular occurrence and the children encouraged it by leaving tiny bits of fish for the birds to feed on.

Fish was almost their sole diet. There were berries to be found and some trees bore tangy yellow fruit but there was no other meat to be had. The children decided not to try to kill any small animal and even if they had it was doubtful they would have been able to as they had no weapons to speak of. So each morning Jordon and Venki had gone down to the river and within an hour had been able to return to the tree house with six good sized fish. They were scaled by rubbing rough stones over their bodies and then lightly cooked before being wrapped in moist leaves and hung from the ceiling. At midday three of the fish would be fully cooked and the rest would become the final evening meal. There was no special nutritional reason for doing the food this way. It was simply more convenient to catch them first thing in the morning than later in the afternoon. And for some reason the flesh was meatier with a slightly smoky taste if they were cooked twice. Each day only six fish were taken from the river for this was all they required. By adding a few berries each time and sharing one or two of the larger fruit the children had more than enough food to satisfy any hunger pangs.

This had been daily routine for the past two weeks and the four children had then ventured out to explore their new world. Each day they returned and sat comfortably in their tree house as the sun slowly dissolved over the horizon and discussed the day's findings. The valley was very large and no matter in which direction they headed the scene around them was one of beauty, harmony and freshness. Not once did they see violence, cruelty or destruction. The tall grass waved mesmerically. The trees shimmered and stood proud. The whole valley was bathed in a soothing warmth that seemed to wash over even the creatures that walked the land or flew in the skies. It was idyllic. Perfect. The nature of the imagination. The children were free to go where they pleased without any hindrance, and they too caused no disturbance to the land or its inhabitants. For the past weeks they had simply enjoyed the valley to its fullest.

As the ponies now approached the shaded clearing around the tree they veered around it, keeping in the light, until they arrived at the edge of the bank above the river. There was a careful lifting of heads before casually turning about and beginning to feed again, heading back into the open.

In the tree above them the Leaf Children sat cross legged on the platform outside the shelter. They had been watching the approaching animals as they ate their first fruit for breakfast after Jordon and Venki had completed their morning catch and prepared the fish for the meals later in the day.

“Where to today then?” asked Fallon swallowing the last of his berries. “Any suggestions?”

“I don’t know,” Gabryisia answered. “We’ve been in every direction, some more than once as you know.”

“Short of staying out overnight I don’t think there’s any more we can cover,” she added. “Personally, I don’t like the idea of sleeping under the stars. Even though it’s very peaceful everywhere we’ve been and we have had no reason to fear anything, I think it would be unwise. You just never know.”

“I agree,” said Fallon again. “If anything did happen we would no way of defending ourselves.”

“Perhaps that’s what we should be doing then.” Venki was watching the ponies as they continued feeding, their regular feathered passengers perched on their backs.

“We’re not going to have to live here forever are we?” asked Jordon. “We’re going to go home to the forest aren’t we?”

Gabryisia smiled at the youngster. “Of course we are. We just haven’t found a way out of here yet, that’s all. And until we do we have to make sure we can defend ourselves.”

“Look,” said Fallon. “We can’t go back the way we came in. we know that now. And so far we haven’t been able to see how we can get back to the forest from this valley.”

“We’ve been out a fair way,” interrupted Jordon.

“I know that. But obviously not far enough. Obviously we have to go further to see exactly where we are in relation to the forest.”

“But which way? And how far? No matter how far we walk the valley just seems to go on and on. There seems to be no end to it.”

“I don’t think there is an end to it,” stated Venki. He had been sitting quietly, picking at his fruit without appearing to pay much attention. In fact ever since they had been in the picturesque valley he had gone through each day, not unhappily, but almost by rote. He still had not recovered his talkative high spirits which disappeared in the tunnels and though he joined in the forays and carried out his tasks, he had kept pretty much to himself.

“What do you mean Venki?” Gabryisia asked. “There has to be an end to it. Somewhere.” Venki lifted his head and looked straight at Gabryisia. “Where?” he said. “You mean out there? Over there? Or that way?” and he pointed in the three directions they had already explored. The only way they had not gone was across the river, but even from where they were sitting in the tree they could see the plains stretched unbroken to the horizon. There was no forest there.

The most puzzling thing the children had found was not where they were so much as where they had come from. On their second day in the valley they had returned to the cave entrance. The ladder lay in a heap on the floor of the cave and the ceiling overhead was so dark it was not possible to determine really what was above them. Then when they had gone outside and explored the land around the cave they found only a plain. Having come from a maze of tunnels and having climbed down, not up, more than once, the last time down a very long ladder, they expected to find themselves at the foot of

extremely high cliffs or mountains. There was a hill of sorts but behind and around it were only fields that extended as far as the eye could see. There were mounds and trees and dales but certainly no forest, no Dead Place. In short what they discovered was impossible. It defied all rational reason.

Venki now drove his point further. "Well? Where do you suggest we look?"

When there was no immediate response he went on: "Right. There is no way. Is there? We've looked everywhere and found nothing. Even around the cave. Only more plains. And that scares me half to death. What we have seen is simply not possible. Considering now we got here and where we came from there must be a mountain over there and the desert and the forest behind it. But none of them are there."

He glared at the others and then finished: "We are in another world."

"What do you mean *another world* Venki?" Fallon was a little short tempered. Mornings were never his best time but he had been starting the day even more glum lately. And it had a lot to do with Venki's sullenness.

"I mean another world," Venki replied. "Not the one we know as ours, but another one."

"Oh that's stupid," blurted Fallon. "What do you think we did? Walk from, our world all the way to a distant galaxy that also has air and fish and horses and looks perfectly natural? Come on, be sensible."

Venki glared at Fallon for a few seconds then dropped his eyes and began toying with his berries again. He offered no further comment.

But Gabryisia rose and walked the few paces to where he sat. She dropped down beside him and asked quietly: "Go on Venki. I'm listening. Tell me what you really think. Where do you think we are?"

He did not answer, but imperceptively shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Please Venki," Gabryisia said. "Come on, explain it to me. I don't understand what happened to us. I do know that we can't use normal common sense to find the answer. So there must be some other explanation, please tell me what you think."

The boy looked from his fruit to Gabryisia, back to the berries and finally back to Gabryisia. "I mean it," he said. "I really think we are in another world."

"Where? How?"

"I don't know where exactly. And I think the *how* is too incredible but there is no other way."

"Then how?"

Venki paused and after a quick glance in Fallon's direction he said softly: "I think the ladder from Torpah took us into another world. Another dimension."

Gabryisia started: "Another dimension? What do you mean?"

"If we could climb back up the ladder, which we can't I know, we could be back in the tunnels. You see, I believe the ladder took us through a hole in time, or space. We're here alright. And the forest and all the other places are here too. But on a different level. In another dimension."

"Oh really," broke in Fallon. "That's rubbish. You don't honestly believe that. It's impossible. You don't even know what another dimension is. So how can you say we are in one? What's wrong with you?"

Venki retorted: "Well, where are we then Fallon? Can you tell us? Can you explain things?"

"I don't know where we are. But we are not on another planet or in some mysterious dimension where everything is here but we just can't see it. That's too much."

“Where then? Where’s the cave we came out from?”

“Up there.”

“And we climbed down into it right? So where’s the mountain and all the tunnels and the forest and the desert? Where? Can you show me?”

“Well, they must be there...”

“But they’re not. We know that.”

“I know, but...”

“We’ve been to the top of the hill and there’s nothing there. It’s simply a hill with a cave in the side of it.”

“Don’t keep saying that,” Fallon said. “I know that. I can see too you know.”

Venki shrugged and once more concentrated on moving the berries around in one hand. He pushed them into a pile in his palm and then one by one he picked them up and dropped them over the side of the platform, to the ground below. When they were all gone he slapped his hands together and wiped them as if they were damp. Springing to his feet he gave his hands a final wipe on the back of his breeches and said: “If we’re going to be here a while I’m going to prepare to defend myself.” With that he swung himself down the ladder and started off towards a clump of small trees about a hundred meters away.

“What was he talking about Gabryisia?” asked Jordon. He had stood quietly to one side while Venki and Fallon had crossed words, but now he sought explanations. “What’s a dimension? Why can’t we find our way back to the forest?”

Gabryisia put a comforting hand on his shoulder and said: “We’re not quite sure where we are Jordon, we seem to have lost our bearings somewhere along the way and Venki thinks we might have to stay here for some time before we’re found or we can find our own way out.”

“How long?” asked the youngster.

“If you believe him,” said Fallon, “it could be forever.”

“Fallon please,” said Gabryisia. “Don’t make it worse than it might be.” She turned to Jordon again. “It could be a few days or weeks but there’s no need to worry because we will find a way. In the meantime, I think we should prepare ourselves. Why don’t we go and see what we can do.”

“But we will go home won’t we?” said Jordon. “We will see the others again won’t we?”

“Of course,” answered Gabryisia. “Now come on. let’s go and see what we can do. Coming Fallon?”

The three of them climbed down out of the tree and without thinking set off after Venki who had reached the small trees and was standing with his hands on his hips studying them. As they approached he reached out and pulled a slender sapling towards him. Forcing it down to the ground he held it with one hand while he stamped on it with his foot about a third of a meter from the ground. It splintered and when jerked hard it came free in his hand. Holding it up he examined it then put it to one side and scanned the trees again. He grabbed a second one and repeated the action, breaking it near the ground and lay it next to the other one. A third soon followed. When he was satisfied he picked them up and started back towards the river.

“What did he do that for?” asked Jordon. “What does he want them for?”

“I thing I know,” said Fallon. “Come on, get a few each.”

Sometime later, with five more small tree trunks, they joined Venki on the river bank where he sat on the sand with his legs stuck straight out. He had one of the saplings between his feet and with his hand he was stripping all the leaves off it. The other two already lay beside him. When he finished he lay it next to the others and got up and walked along the beach, head down, looking left and right. About thirty meters away he bent down and picked up a flat stone about the size of his hand. When he returned the other children were busily stripping their saplings.

Venki squatted on the sand and with one of the sticks in his left hand he thrust one end into the sand and lay the other end on his left shoulder. Then he began rubbing the stone down the wood away from him. The rock was flat and had one edge sharper than the other. Next he turned it around and again using the sharper edge of the rock he began honing it towards him. Gradually the sapling started to become pointed at one end.

“It’s going to be a spear isn’t it?” said Jordon loudly. “You’re making a spear aren’t you?”

Venki grunted without looking up and kept rubbing the stone along the wood. Then other children had finished stripping their sticks and Fallon and Gabrysia went looking for suitable stones to work the wood into pointed spears.

Until midday they worked on the young trees. Eight lay beside each other on the sand, all smooth and sharp. The splintered ends of the shafts had also been evened by chopping with a stone and then rubbing long and hard against a big flat rock in the side of the river bank.

“Do you think they’ll work?” asked Gabrysia.

“Not yet,” answered Fallon. “We have to dry them and make them hard. Right Venki?”

Again Venki grunted, but then he added: “We can do it down here. No need to go up into the tree. Bring some wood and we’ll do it straight away.”

While Fallon collected a pile of dry wood that always seemed to be washed up by the river Gabrysia and Jordon watched closely as Venki held the sticks under water. He kept them submerged by standing on them and watched Fallon build the pyramid of twigs and get the fire started with the flints they kept handy. When the fire had been under way some time he picked up the sticks and carried them over to the fire. He sat and held one over the flames, high so it was only the heat that reached the wood and not the raw flame. The others did likewise watching and copying Venki as he slowly twirled the stick in his fingers. Gradually the wood darkened and Venki removed it and went and soaked it again in the river. Once more he returned and started the process over the fire. The children did this five or six times until they were satisfied. When they had finished they examined each spear. They looked hard and strong.

“Leave them out in the sun for a few days,” said Venki. “That’s the best we can with them now.” He got up and looked around the group. “Shall we eat before we move on to the next job?”

“Oh please,” said Jordon. “I’m starving.”

Fallon clapped the youngster on the back and pushed him towards the ladder. “So what’s new,” he said and they all moved off leaving the hand made spears lying on the sand in the sun.

In the days that followed the Leaf Children made and collected an arsenal that would have outfitted a group three times their size. However, the work served a dual purpose. It kept them occupied as well as took their minds off the proposition put by Venki, and it

taught them skills they had never had to master in their friendly forest but which would stand them in good stead in unfamiliar situations. The rudimentary wood spears were only the first of many weapons and implements that would grow in workmanship and expectation as the hours of labour passed.

At the outset though the spears quickly proved a failure. On the first occasion they were tested the children realised they were a dismal disappointment. Over distance they floated lightly on the air and landed flat or tail end first. When cast only a few meters into the ground the point simply broke. It did not take long for the children to see their morning of toil had been for nothing. The continuous submersion of the spears under water and then the careful twilling over the fire had done nothing to toughen the shafts. Ultimately the spears or what remained of them were kept in the tree house as a means of frightening off curious climbing animals or large birds that landed on the branches and eyed the hanging fish.

After the failed test practice in the field Fallon had approached Venki and demanded to know what made him think the combination of water and fire would make the young saplings more resilient. Venki had just shrugged and said something about “it it worked for steel I thought it might work for wood too.” Having witnessed his sweat go up in smoke, so to speak, Fallon wondered if the principle would really apply to metal. And he vowed to think more carefully before following Venki’s example too quickly in the future.

Their second attempt at weapon making was also a failure the first time around. To be precise it was their first taste of defeat because it happened while the spears were being dried out in the sun before their testing. The weapon was a bow and arrow. Once again a sapling had been wrenched from the clump of small trees and hacked into length of about a meter. Branches from a larger tree were broken off and sharpened with the stone. Then notches were rubbed at both ends of the bow. Finally some vine was cut and tied to the sapling. It looked like a bow and the branches, complete with nicks in the blunt ends for the bowstring to fit into, looked like arrows. But it didn’t work. None of the children could stretch the vine. It was too taught and at the same time the bow refused to bend. A thinner more flexible bow was made, one which could be bent by Fallon and Venki grabbing both ends in their hands and pressing in. But when an arrow was fitted and the vine stretched it snapped.

“Damn,” cursed Fallon. “Either we can’t bend the bow or when we can the vine breaks. We’re useless.”

Not to be beaten a third bow was fashioned. The bow was even thinner and the vine slightly thicker. This time the bow bent and the vine held. But the arrow floated through the air and landed only twenty paces away. And the bow held its curved shape with the vine dangling untidily.

“To heck with this,” said Venki. “I’ve had enough. I’m going for a swim. You can keep trying if you like but I need to cool off.”

The children were more successful with the next weapon they made. It was a sling and as Fallon said: “If we can’t make a sling that works we might as well give up on everything.” Once again they went to the vines which grew in the trees and cut various lengths. They had no leather for the pouch which the stone would rest in, but they did have material. Strips were torn from tunics, doubled over for strength, and then holes were made in the ends through which the vines would pass. Again narrow strips of

material were ripped from clothing and used to bind the ends of the vine doubled back after being threaded through the pouch. Then a rounded stone was found.

“Go on Fallon,” said Jordon. “Try it out. See if you can hit that tree over there.”

The tree was a large one with a bulbous trunk about forty meters away with its foliage spreading out like a giant umbrella. The trunk itself was devoid of branches, was smooth and shiny and was to be the target.

Fallon placed the stone in the pouch and held it steady as if weighing it. He swung it back and forth testing the balance. Gradually the swing arc widened until Fallon swung it around in a clockwise motion. When he released one end of the vine the stone flew fast and hard – and straight past the tree, missing it by a good six meters.

“Great,” said Venki. “Thank heavens it’s a stationary tree and not a charging, zigzagging enemy bent on slaughtering us. Mind you, if it was you may well have laid him flat in mid zig or mid zag.”

Fallon was about to protest it was his very first attempt with a sling when Gabryisia spoke up: “You show us Venki. Demonstrate how it should be done please. Then we can all practice.”

Venki held back a moment but he had been trapped by his own criticism. Now he had to have a go, gingerly he took the proffered sling and Fallon even handed him a nice round pebble of the right size. “Yes, here Venki,” he said. “Show us how.”

Of course, Venki’s shot would also have laid out an oncoming foe. But like Fallon’s he would have had to be weaving his way in attack and he would have had to have the added attribute of being about five meters tall as the stone flew high in the air and crashed into the leaves at the extremity of the tree’s canopy. A squawking bird flapped out of the tree not far from where the stone hit and Jordon cried: “Fantastic. I think you hit it. Great shot.”

Fallon and Gabryisia burst out laughing and it was not long before all four children were roaring and slapping each other on the back.

“Snipers had better look out,” said Fallon. “Dead eye Venki is at large.”

Venki stopped laughing and in mock seriousness said: “That’s not all. Anyone sneaking up on the flank is in for a hard time also. Fallon’s got eyes in the side of his head and can hit anything on the edges.”

“In that case,” said Gabryisia wiping tears from her eyes, “we’d better hope we are never attacked from the front at ground level by people or normal height. If we are, we’re done for.”

Despite these initial disappointments the Leaf Children persevered and slowly mastered the means of making basic, if not elaborate, weapons. They had at least one sling each and enough clubs to batter an entire civilisation to a pulp before they would have to make new ones. Bows and arrows never worked but shortish stout spears were ideal for digging up yams and dislodging stones that were suitable as sling shot. Sharpened flat stones became worthy knives though because they killed no animal they were mainly used for slicing off lengths of vine and sharpening stabbing spears that would also never be used for the purpose they were designed. So while the arsenal of the Leaf Children looked impressive at first glance a longer more critical examination revealed it to be plentiful but generally ineffectual. Their comic self-criticism was absolutely correct. If they were attacked, even by the Dronics, they could hardly rely on their slings and sticks though

they could be some help. Any more sophisticated foe would have little to be concerned about.

The children spent day after day exploring the land around their tree house and became familiar with the animals and birds that shared their world. And pleasant it was. The peace and tranquillity continued without anything more disruptive than a frisky bickering of the ponies or a screech of a hunting bird as it swept down on some small rodent which was careless for a last fateful second. At first it was an idyllic time for the four, but slowly it became unusually oppressive. The uneventful quiet was too persistent, too perfect, too unnatural.

The children had been drawn closer together and the irritating quirks of the first few days had been overcome and the four were not firm friends who accepted each other's differences and helped when a listening partner was needed. There was no leader as they lived and worked as a team, exchanging opinions, asking views and questioning personal proposals that one or more felt were unsuitable at a particular time.

Venki had regained his exuberance after the dismal demonstration with the sling. Fallon's suppressed antagonism had dissipated altogether and the two boys were now almost dependent on each other's company.

Gabrysia had relinquished her title as head of the family for all intents and purposes, though if one was to look and study her closely she retained a slight air of, not superiority, but something almost akin to an observer who was not actually experiencing the events of the days as they passed, but was on the outside watching on and not interfering in a way that would change the natural course of things.

Young Jordon seemed to have matured considerably. He was no longer the child who had to be constantly guarded. As with the emergence of a baby to a toddler he had learned to walk, as it were, to reason and to challenge. Still he needed to be curbed but he was not one of the group who played his own role, one he did with more maturity and common sense with each passing day.

So it was that the four Leaf Children entered their fourth week in the beautiful countryside where there seemed no change, but little that was stimulating and challenging.

"I don't agree," said Venki as they sat on the grass floor of their hut eating their morning breakfast. On the platform outside two small green birds picked at fish crumbs in rapid head pecking movements while a larger brown bird perched motionless on a nearby branch watching them with piercing yellow eyes. He had already had his daily pickings and would soon fly off not returning until the same time the next day.

"Why not?" asked Fallon. "It makes sense to me. We can't just sit around and do the same things day after day after day."

"Oh, I agree with the idea of using them," Venki replied and tossed another ball of white meat to the large bird which caught it expertly without appearing to move at all. "I just don't agree with the method. I don't think it would work, that's all."

"They're already pretty tame," joined in Jordon. "I almost touched the light brown one yesterday. And then she just walked away, didn't buck or anything like that, I reckon it would work. What about you Gabrysia? What do you think?"

"I think it's worth a try," she said. "Even if it fails it's worth a try. Why don't you think it will work though Venki?"

Venki rolled another piece of fish into a ball between his fingers and threw it in the direction of the large bird. But he flapped his wings and flew out of the tree, scattering the smaller birds as well. He rubbed his hands together, wiping the, and said: "Look. This is just my opinion. We'll certainly give it a try but this is just what I think." He cleared his throat and continued: "Tell me if I've got it wrong. You want to lure one of the ponies under the tree and then drop a vine around its neck. Then we climb down and tame it. Once that's done we can use it to catch the others, tame them and use them to rise much further afield. Maybe find a way out of here."

"Right," said Fallon.

"And you reckon we can do that?"

"Yes. Why not? We have the vine. It's strong enough to hold the pony. I've tested it down by the river."

"OK. And we can tame it?"

"Sure, once we have it tied. As Jordon says, they're fairly docile even now."

There was a silence. Then Fallon said: "So what's the problem then?"

Venki looked at the others. "How do you plan to lure it under the tree? This is the one place the ponies will not venture."

"He's right," Gabryisia said. "They won't. the tree's off limits to them. They don't come under the branches even when it is very hot outside."

"They simply shy away from it," added Venki. "They know we're here. That's why they only use the shade of those other trees. They're smart you know those four."

Fallon thought for a moment. "Alright," he said. "We'll do it from one of the other trees then. This one, that one, it doesn't make any difference."

Venki remained unconvinced but instead of pointing out his doubts he said: "OK. We'll try it. Gabryisia's right when she says we have to have a go. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"When?" asked Fallon, quickly looking around the group clearly anxious to try out his plan.

"Why wait," Gabryisia answered. "Let's do it today. Probably around noon is the best time. When the sun's highest. That's when they head for the cool for a few hours."

"We'd better be in place well before then," Venki added. "And maybe some of us should distract them while the others are getting ready."

Between their discussion and midmorning the children selected a long piece of strong vine, testing its strength and making a large loop at one end. Then Jordon pretended to be a grazing pony and strolled under the tree-house. As it was Fallon's plan he sat perched above holding the loop end of the vine in both hands and with the other end wrapped and tied securely around a branch. He dropped the loop around Jordon who immediately bolted with the vine tucked under his arms. He was yanked off his feet and crashed to the ground on his back.

"Ughh," he grunted and then slowly got to his feet. The vine strung out behind him was still fastened to the branch in the tree.

"It works," he said. "It really works."

"On you," Fallon called. "Let's just hope the pony is as dumb as you but is not all muscle. This vine has to hold him."

All the children took turns at being the pony. They rushed with all their might against the vine but each time they were tugged off their feet and the vine held firm. Long before the sun reached its zenith Fallon said: "Let's do it."

As the planned hour of action approached the excitement in the group heightened so that by the time Fallon set off for the distant tree all were on edge, silently anxious. For two hours Fallon perched among the branches checking and rechecking the vine tied securely to the thick branch beside him, his bottom hardening against the rough wood and his knee joints aching more and more as the minutes passed.

Elsewhere the other children again debated the chances of success and watched the tree and its surrounds even though they could not see Fallon hidden behind the dense screen of leaves. As they wiped sweat from their foreheads and away from the corners of their eyes they also studied the ponies grazing as usual in the open field. But gradually they began doing other things and eventually stopped concentrating on the area of the meadow which would soon, hopefully, be the arena of combat between stubborn horse sense and reasoned human sense.

The sun rose higher in the unblemished sky until it seemed to rest suspended in a single position pouring down its heat rays. Slowly, one by one, the ponies moved closer to the shade cast by the tree where Fallon waited. The children ceased their activities and watched and waited.

One of the ponies clopped its way into the shade, its back sloughing from side to side as its hoofs stabbed into the earth. Then a second followed. The third bristled and flicked its tail and almost jogged over to the other two, nuzzling against the high rump of one of them. Finally the last stepped in under the branches. Out of the hot sunshine the ponies snorted briefly and then stood still, clearly enjoying the cool of the shade. Gabrysia, Venki and Jordon remained just as motionless with fixed gaze on the far tree.

A minute lapsed. Two. Three. And just as Gabrysia whispered "What is..." There was a commotion under the tree and the four ponies bolted into the sunlight. But one had the vine around its neck and before it neared full speed it jerked to a halt and did a comical half turn before shaking its head followed by more nodding, kicking pirouettes. But the vine held and no matter what the pony did to sake it off the noose remained tight and the vine stretched out behind did not snap.

Fallon was seen to drop out of the tree and do a little dance around the trunk sending a faint "yahoo" back to his friends.

"Well," said Venki, "it looks like stage one has been successful. All going well our new life here is about to change quite a bit."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The circumstances of Nikko, Jason, Porky, Josh, Danielle and Simon had not changed for some time though the clock had yet to register a month. They were still in the dungeon as Jason called it, unable to find a way out and bickering among themselves.

Since Fusan had disappeared into the seemingly impenetrable rock face they had seen no one else and had heard nothing but their own voices. No sooner had the elderly Keeper left them than Jason had rounded on Nikko. "What the heck are you ip to Nikko? What is this?"

"Wait a minute," Nikko began.

"No. you wait a minute," interrupted Jason. "you got us into this mess. I said it before and I'll say it again. Before you came along everything was fine. Now look where we are. Gabrysia and the others gone. We're stuck in this dungeon somewhere in the bowels of the earth. And you're playing pally sidekick to some weird hairy toy who's supposed to possess magic but won't lift a finger to help us or get rid of the Drongs. Sounds a bit off to me." He looked to the others, coldness in his eyes, demanding support.

"Jason you know I had no part in this trouble," said Nikko. "It happened that's all. As for....."

"Happened! Just happened. No way. I don't believe that. Why now? Why almost as soon as you came on the scene out of nowhere?"

"Look, I don't know why. But instead of accusing me you should be trying to understand Fusan and be thinking of what we can do to help Gabrysia and the rest."

"Understand the creature? You expect me to accept it that you two have become firm buddies all of a sudden and just say 'OK, oh master Poosan. Tell me what to do and shall do it' .?"

"His name is Fusan. And...."

"Fusan. Poosan Cuckoosan. Who cares? He's a creature from another planet. A coward at that it seems to me. I'm not going to rely on him to get me out of here. He's probably a damn Drong. And you're on his side."

"Alright Jason," said Porky and physically stepped between the two of them. "We're all upset about things. but let's not go too far. Nikko is not a Drong and you know it. And if he was on their side he'd have led us into a trap long before this. Much easier too. I've got no idea what the creature is. But I don't think we should do or say anything more to upset him. He got pretty made back there and I for one would not like to really get on his bad side."

Jason stood his ground and glared at Nikko.

Porky continued: "I don't feel in a very happy mood but I say if we have to play along with this hairy toy as you put it then we have to."

Simon was studying the ground at his feet. When he looked up he saw his three friends standing in a line with Nikko and Jason facing off, and with Porky in the middle looking from one to the other, his hands outstretched pleading.

"I don't see that we have a choice," he offered, breaking the temporary silence that had settled. "We can't get out and we don't know where we are even let alone where to go if we could escape. We've got to go along with the creature, for now anyway."

Josh and Danielle merely nodded in agreement. They had not spoken as they observed the strained exchanges. Jason's outburst had shocked and disappointed them and they had actually stepped out of the way, their backs pressed against the stone wall.

There followed a long pause when no-one spoke. Josh and Danielle remained where they were but slumped to the ground and crossed their legs in a typical yoga lotus pose. Nikko turned away and walked to a corner of the cave where he sat alone. Porky led Jason to an opposite corner and stood very close, a hand resting on his shoulder as he spoke earnestly in an inaudible whisper. For his part Jason stared at the ground, mute.

Nikko was saddened. The episode had upset him and rekindled the animosity that Jason had displayed when they had first met. When was it? A few days ago? A week? It seemed like an age and in many ways it was. So much had happened; the experiences in the forest, the dead Place and the subterranean world where evil and mystery lurked. It was like a fog that hung in the air, ominously swirling in slow clouds which soaked into the body and the soul bringing about chemical changes which altered a person's very being.

The primitive urge to attack or fight when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds rose to the surface and expressed itself in a frightened way. It had occurred more than once since the trials had begun. And they were trials in the very real sense of the word. Also Nikko quickly realised that it was only a few days since the posse of would-be rescuers had set out. In that short time a great deal had happened. Jason was correct when he said that. Thinking about it Nikko could not point to anything positive. One disaster appeared to follow another and from where they were at the moment there seemed little likelihood of a reversal of luck. The longer it went on the more certain Nikko was that the situation would deteriorate further.

Looking around the cave at the leaf Children Nikko told himself something had to be done to right the situation, and it had to be done very soon. He had the definite and sinking feeling that their lives depended on their next move.

When the high-pitched screaming came he was caught by surprise but quickly reacted by clapping his hands to his ears and tightly shutting his eyes. He did not look at the others as he instinctively knew the effect it would have on them. He heard Porky's distant voice first as he asked the obvious question: "What on earth is that?" Then it was Josh: "Where is..." But he was immediately cut short by Jason: "Look out. It's those things. Don't let it..." But he too was struck speechless as the screaming rose sharply and it was mere seconds before all the children blacked out and collapsed limply to the floor.

They did not see the hoards of little Keepers run into the cave from the opening in the wall, swarm around the unconscious bodies and quickly but gently gather them up and disappear back onto the opening. Fusan was not there.

But he was sitting on the flat rock studying them as they opened their eyes some time later. They were in the large cave where Nikko had been earlier and as then dozens of the hairy creatures huddled around the walls and peered from openings and around craggy stone corners. Slowly the children sat up rubbing their foreheads and blinking in the soft pink light.

"Hello Fusan," said Nikko and stood up.

"Hello Nikko," the old Keeper replied. Then he looked at the others who still were seated. "Do not worry," he told them. "The dizziness will rapidly disappear. Indeed if it has not done already please tell me."

He need not have explained though because by the time he had concluded his sentence the Leaf Children were gazing about them, any feelings of mental confusion replaced by wonder and some concern at what they saw.

“Don’t worry,” repeated Nikko. “They won’t hurt you. They’re friendly, shy really I think.” His remarks were directed at his colleagues and about the Keepers who still kept their distance.

“I don’t believe this,” stated Jason. “I just don’t believe it.”

“Well you’d better start,” said Simon. “If you doubted Nikko before you can’t now. So far everything he said has been true. It’s time you apologised. Then we can find out what happens next.”

Jason looked at Nikko but Nikko turned away and said to Fusan: “Fusan, what are we to do now? You must have brought us back here for a reason.”

“I have my friend,” the old Keeper said and dropped from the rock to the ground. “I have brought you here to try to help you.”

“How? How can you help us?”

“I think there are things I can show you and perhaps teach you that may assist in your escape, in your attempt to find and help your other friends and in your efforts to return to your forest home.”

“Can you help us beat the Drongs?” asked Jason.

“What you do with the knowledge I can share with you is your concern,” replied the Keeper, still with his unblinking gaze on Nikko. “But you will do it alone.”

“We understand,” nodded Nikko.

“I don’t,” said Jason. “I still can’t understand why you don’t get rid of the Drongs.”

Fusan shifted his attention to Jason who was now standing and who had stepped forward to Nikko’s side. “Young man,” he said, “as I stated before that is not possible. Please accept that. We will not be pressed further. If you persist you will only waste time and this will not be good for the girl and the others who are still in danger.”

Danielle now came forward and asked: “Do you know where they are? Can you take us there please?”

“Later my dear,” he answered. “First, you must be prepared. Then when the time is right you will join them, or they will join you.”

“We agree,” Simon said and joined Nikko, Jason and Danielle. Josh and Porky completed the single rank and Simon said again: “We all agree. What do we have to do?”

Fusan remained where he was and examined the six children facing him as if they were volunteering for a military mission. He stared into their eyes one at a time seeing past the pupils and their questioning expressions. The children would be embarking on a journey and they would need to be at their best if there were to succeed. He would need patience and they would have to apply trust and determination. He was confident of his own abilities of course, but only time would tell if the children could manage their side of the task.

Shortly he spoke and one more his voice lowered. It was still higher than the children were used to but by comparison with the high pitched lilt he had used before the tone was now almost coarse.

“Allow me first,” he said, “to confirm what Nikko has already told you and to elaborate somewhat. Then I will speak anew of things present and in the future. You should please set as it will take a little time to relate all that think is necessary.”

The children did as they were told. The other Keepers gave a faint sigh and also seemed to relax where they were. Fusan himself returned to the flat rock, casually climbed up onto it and with his legs crossed beneath him began to speak.

“We are Keepers of the Deep,” he began. We are guardians of this underground world and all that is here. We are to ensure it is undisturbed and remains a tangible memory, a reminder for the future, of all things in the past. This is an obligation we have been entrusted with and one we have dedicated our lives to fulfilling. For many of our years, many more of yours, we carried out our duties with pleasure and satisfaction but recently we have experienced disappointment. The Drons as you know them have intruded and caused disruption bringing with them impure and discordant thoughts and practices.”

Fusan stopped and then continued: “however this is the present and before I tread here I shall go back. Back to a time and a place that is lovingly familiar to me and my family. I speak of a place in another time where all thinking beings are as we are. Its name is Yshon.”

A soulful soft murmur rose at his back but Fusan continued: “Yshon is our home. It is our beloved heritage, our history, our love, our very reason for being. We began in Yshon and Yshon will always be in us. Though we are here and will ever be so our souls are back in Yshon. For we are Yshon and Yshon is in us. To imagine otherwise is to imagine the unimaginable. We have in us more than mere memories of a place where all was good and all were happy. In our hearts we are there still. The deep and tranquil knowledge that we remain a part of the land that teems with joyous life is in us always. For Yshon is a land that is physically not so different from yours.

“It has hills and plains, rivers, animals, birds and reptiles and a sky that is the canvas for the master’s brushes, sometimes displaying the splendour of brightness and at other times the bleakness of torment. The blue of the heaven is the hue and the clarity of a child’s eye, and the gold of the sun is the gleam of the cat’s caught in the sudden beam of light that stabs the black of night.

“At night’s noon the stars, countless sparkling jewels, communicate in soundless pulsations against unmarred velvet. Our nights are not quite the same as yours as the only light before the stars emerge is given by our moon and her child, a glorious orb that moves gracefully across the heaven. Always by her side is a smaller yet equally silver satellite. It is not uncommon for us to spend the entire hours of darkness following the path of the moons from horizon to horizon and then to luxuriate in the beauty of the starlit heaven until the rays of the morning sun gradually spread higher and higher. Rather than facing the ensuing day with exhaustion the experience is uplifting and enervating. We are but specks in the great universe and it is the night which reminds of this.

“While this is a time for solitude and reflection the daylight brings forth life in abundance. The sound of flowing streams mingled with the calls of birds and animals heralds each new day. There are no noisy contraptions to pollute the sounds of nature in Yshon. Only nature itself breaks the silence. There are birds of every size, colour and shape, and animals that hop, walk and run on two or four legs much the same as you are used to. Nevertheless I dare say there are some that would surprise you with their forms. Even one or two with their apparent ferociousness though it would be wise to remember that not all is always as it seems.

“The land inhabited by these creatures would indeed be easily recognisable to each of you, for it is a mirror image of your own. As I have already remarked Yshon has rivers, fields and flora aplenty. The grass grows green and thick and covers great meadows. Trees are tall and straight and some have massive clusters of leaves that extend over large areas providing welcome shade.

“My description of the land and its life has of necessity been brief and I fear fails to do it justice. But under the circumstances I believe it to be sufficient.” Fusan stopped and for a moment he looked as if he was going to drift into a distant reverie. He soon recovered however and continued.

“In Yshon I was a Keeper also. All of us here were Keepers. But we did not live in caves like this one. Our homes were in the trees. In one corner of the land there is a huge forest and it is there that we Yshons have made our homes since the beginning of time. There are many of us and we live in peace with all creatures and in harmony with the land.

“One day I and the others were chosen to leave Yshon because of our Keeper knowledge and come to this place to maintain the collections and when necessary to add to them. We are the latest in a succession of Yshons charged with this task. It is our duty and our privilege. But we have encountered disruptions. They are troublesome but we will overcome them.”

The old Keeper again stopped talking and there was a deep silence. He sat on the rock unmoving and stared at the Leaf Children before him. They looked back and said nothing. At last Fusan said: “One day a group of children penetrated our domain. They roamed wantonly and noisily, their actions and words displaying great disrespect for our work. While this saddened us we did not confront them. That is not the Yshon way. We avoided them and retreated deeper into the darkness of the caves but continued to maintain and care for the collections.

“Once however by complete chance I was seen by one of the children, it was a foolish mistake on my own part and I am afraid many may have suffered as a result. And now you are here. Perhaps I have erred again in taking the course I have. Perhaps I am risking too much.”

The speedy transition from the beauty of the unknown Yshon to the all too evident present seemed to prod the leaf Children from a trance. They fidgeted and looked at one another and then back at Fusan who sat impassively on the rock.

Nikko coughed lightly and rather self consciously said: “We are sorry Fusan. We did not know you were here and we had no intention of causing you any trouble.”

“You do not make trouble my friend,” replied Fusan. “there is no need for you to apologise. It is I who made us known to you.” He added: “Please do not misunderstand what I say. It is not you and your friends who displease us. It is those others. They who have hate and anger in their hearts.”

“I understand,” Nikko said. “What can we do to help? How can you help us to help you?”

“There are ways,” Fusan replied. “I feel we can impart knowledge to you that will aid you in your endeavours. And of course in so doing we will be aided also.”

“Sir,” said Porky. “Can I ask you a question please?” Like the rest of the children he had not moved during the Keeper’s discourse and he showed none of the joviality that marked him as prankster in the forest family. “Where exactly is Yshon? And what sort of collections do you have down here? We’ve seen a sort of museum but is that it? How do you get them?”

Fusan's grey eyebrows rose imperceptively and he said: "This is something that I have often pondered. Here a person says he wishes to ask a question. He then proceeds to list a number. On the other hand, a person asked a number of questions frequently gives only a single reply. Please do not be offended. I do not mean to be rude. You have posed four queries so I will answer all four, though with your permission not in the order you put them."

Porky blushed.

"First," said Fusan, "your questions about the collections. As I have already said our aim is to preserve the present for the future. Our belief is that the past must never be lost. Of course time takes its essential toll and evolution replaces the old with the new. Memory retains that which is gone but memories too fade, and often history and its integral elements disappear entirely. The collections are...." He paused, searching for the word. "They are pieces of a giant jigsaw that when assembled recreate the past. They are a vivid picture of what was, and therefore are not forgotten. We believe the past should not be dismissed as dead and gone. It must be kept alive so that we can always remember and learn. So the collections are constantly being added to.

"You have seen but a small part of them. There are very many chambers where they are cared for. After all, the jigsaw of history is vast with not a few individual pieces. Even we are kept very busy tending them. As for how we collect the pieces, allow me to stress we do not rob the present. It is only when the present has finished with them that we bring them to the Deep. We are not thieves. In time you may be able to see more of them but I doubt it will be many. You do not wish to linger and in any case, as I said, there are many chambers. We shall wait and see."

His voice trailed off somewhere once more as though he was thinking of something else. Then he brightened and said to Porky: "Finally, you wanted to know where Yshon is. That is easy, yet difficult to explain so you can understand. You see, Yshon is here. Here, around you."

The children looked around at the stark walls of the cave. Their heads swivelled in doubtful curves and then again their eyes settled on the old Keeper.

"What do you mean here?" asked Jason. "You told us this Yshon of yours had trees and flowers and animals. We're underground and this cave is nothing but dull brown and dead. What are you trying to tell us?"

Danielle quietly joined in. "Maybe you mean the cave is not underground. Have we been taken outside somewhere? Aren't we under the Dead Place any more?"

Again the eyebrows rose slightly –that is definitely meant to be an expression, a smile, thought Nikko – and Fusan replied carefully: "We are here. As I said the answer is simple. The explanation is not. And if you will allow I shall not try to explain it to you in detail at this time. Yshon is certainly where we are but not in these caves. Nor do I mean it is far away and that we must travel some distance to reach it. On the contrary, in terms of distance it is a short walk. But rather than confuse you further I hope to be able to take you there so you can see it for yourselves. And then you will understand my hesitation in trying to unravel the complexities by simple words. For now I would like to show you how we might be able to help you solve the very real problems confronting you."

"I think that would be best," said Nikko. "We are very confused as it is. Like the rest I don't understand what you're saying about Yshon. So perhaps you should leave the

explanation for now and concentrate on what you can do to help us rescue Gabrysia and the others and get back to the forest.”

The old Keeper looked around the group of children and in his deep voice said: “So be it. We shall begin.”

He turned to the other Keepers and stood perfectly straight and still. The high pitched wait that lasted for two to three minutes was not unpleasant for the children and they observed that the other creatures also did not move. Clearly communication was taking place. Fusan was probably explaining what was going to happen and giving instructions. Then he again faced the children and in his hand he held a silver ball. It emitted no light and rested in his tiny fingers. Slowly he rolled it around in his palm, gently powering it with his thumb and little finger, and as he did so the ball became brighter and brighter. When it was the brightness of a normal lamp bulb he stopped manipulating it and raised his arm in front of him to shoulder height.

The children stared at it and then at Fusan who was looking at them intently. His face appeared above the ball and its light highlighted his grey eyebrows and was mirrored in his pupils. Again his delicate fingers turned the ball and it grew brighter, the stone walls around them plainly showing their markings and cracks as the ball lit up the cave.

Suddenly Fusan lobbed the ball in the air above his head. The children shielded their eyes and turned their faces away expecting the blinding flash they had seen in the forest when the Drongs had captured Gabrysia. They squeezed their lids tightly together and screwed up their cheeks in anticipation. For half a minute they remained with their backs to the Keepers.

When they, one by one, cautiously peeped through spaced fingers they were not met by engulfing white light. The interior of the cave remained as it was, with one exception. The silver ball hung suspended in the air over their heads. It rotated very slowly but held its position.

“How does it do that?” asked Simon and waved his hands criss cross through the air beneath the ball, as a magician might to prove there are no wires attached to an apparently levitated object. “How do you get it to stay up there?”

Fusan did not reply. He stepped forward and held out his hand. The ball dropped into his upturned palm, the light dead.

He held it out to Simon saying: “Try it young man. Make the globe float. Ask it to obey you.”

Simon was reluctant to touch the ball and glanced sideways at Jason and Danielle for encouragement. Jason shrugged and Danielle nodded. As he turned back to Fusan the Keeper placed the silver ball in his hand and repeated: “Go ahead. Ask it. Do not fear.”

Simon could feel the ball in his hand, light and cool. Though that was not strictly correct. Rather than feel it he sensed it was resting on his flesh. He could see it and knew it was in his hand but it as more a feeling than the actual feel of the object. It was almost without any weight at all.

A quick glance at Fusan and then back to the ball and he tossed it in the air. The ball flew high, reached its zenith and fell back to the floor.

Fusan retrieved it and Porky asked: “What happened? It didn’t even light up.”

The old Keeper extended his arm to Porky, offering him the globe. “Try it. Ask it to do what you want.”

Porky took the ball. "It's as light as a feather," he said. "Not heavy at all." He dropped it from his left hand into his right hand and then hefted it aloft.

Again the ball rose, stopped and fell back. Porky caught it and looked questioningly at Fusan. "How come? What are we doing wrong?"

"Give it to your friend," he said and then to Jason: "You try. Throw the globe in the air and ask it to stay there."

"No," said Jason. "Give it to the others first. I'll go last. Josh, your turn."

But Josh was unsuccessful too. And so was Danielle, though both tried to be smooth and gentle in pitching the ball over their heads."

Nikko now had the ball in his hand and Fusan said softly to him: "Ask it my friend. Ask it to stay floating."

Nikko stared at the globe and then at the old Keeper who again said: "Ask it Nikko."

Nikko's fingers closed around the ball and he threw it high, watching it rise. At the top of its climb the globe stopped and momentarily held its position, it was poised for a few seconds but then fell back and was caught by Porky."

"It stopped," he cried. "It did. You stopped it for a bit there Nikko. How did you do it?"

Nikko said nothing but handed the ball to Jason. He kept his eyes on Fusan who eyebrows rose and he then turned to Jason. "Ask it to stay up young man. It can be done."

Jason was the last. He fingered the ball in his hand, feeling the cool smooth surface. He hurled it high, much higher than the others and then stood stock still with his eyes closed. As he opened them shortly he saw Porky catch the globe and grinning broadly ask: "How did you do it Jason? You had it up there for ten seconds at least. It was fantastic. What did you do?"

Jason looked at Fusan and without shifting his eyes he answered: "I did what I was told."

"So did we," blurted Simon. "But you got it to stay up there. And so did Nikko for a short time. You must have done something different."

"They did," said Fusan. "They both did what I advised you all to do."

"I don't understand," Danielle said. "We all did the same. We threw it in the air just like you did."

"And you did it most considerately," said Fusan. "But that is all you did. You threw it up and expected it to stay up."

"So?" asked Josh.

"I asked it to stay up," said Jason simply, looking at his friend. "I actually asked the ball to stay in the air. That's what he kept telling us to do. He didn't say make it float. He kept saying ask it, ask it to float."

"What?" Simon took the silver ball out of Porky's hand and turned it round and round between his own palms. He looked at Jason and Nikko who nodded. He looked at the globe again and then at Fusan.

"You mean," he said, "if I ask it to stay up it will?"

The old Keeper's voice was low. "Try it. Your friends did. They say that is the reason the globe floats."

Simon waited for a moment and then hurled the ball over his head. He watched it sail high and as he did he said over and over to himself: "Stay up. Float, float, float."

The silver ball peaked in its flight and stopped. It hovered. One second. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Simon started to laugh and the ball dropped as if an invisible hand holding it had suddenly released its grip.

Porky again caught it and as he did Simon said to Fusan: “Why? Why, or how, does the ball stay up there? Just because we wish it to? What sort of ball is it?”

“It is not only in the ball,” replied Fusan. “Though it is a special globe I agree. In asking it to float you were in fact wishing to defy gravity. Even though you know such a thing is not possible, yet you wished it. You should ask yourself other deeper questions my friend. I cannot guide you any further. It is for you to find the answer.”

While they talked Porky and Danielle had each tried throwing the silver ball into the air and wishing it remain aloft. Porky managed to keep it up about six seconds before he broke into a giggle. Danielle was better and concentrated long enough to hold it steady for just over ten seconds.”

Josh was also more successful in his second attempt, though for only a few seconds.

“Are you trying to tell us we can all learn magic?” he asked. “Are you going to teach us more?”

Fusan was slow to answer. It only confused the Leaf Children more when he did. “Magic is nothing. Anyone with fingers of dexterity can a will be deceive, coupled with much practice, can learn the art of the magician. Satisfying it might be, but it does not fulfil. I am not a teacher of magic. This is not my purpose.”

“Then what are you teaching us if not magic?” Jason asked. “Are you now saying this magic is no use to us?”

Fusan again was slow to answer. Instead he politely took the globe from Josh and fingered it so it shone its silver light in a large arc. “The globe gives the light,” he said. “But it is the light which shows the way in the darkness.”

The children stood silently and each considered what they had seen and heard. Nikko wasn't sure what conclusion to draw from the lesson – there was no doubt it had been a lesson – but he had learned enough from the Keeper in his brief experience to know that such riddles should not be ignored. The obvious was not necessarily obvious and the wisdom was often hidden by the casual remark. Fusan had an excellent command of the language and Nikko was sometimes puzzled by answers to his questions. But when he thought about them there was always depth and meaning to them. So he was not going to merely accept the plain statement about the globe.

His first thought was that in showing them how they could keep the silver ball in the air Fusan was teaching them to use it as a means of distracting an opponent, a Drong for instance, while they took advantage of the loss of concentration and launched an attack. It could work. Or perhaps the lesson was simply the first step to mastering the globe. After all, they had only managed to keep it in the air for a few seconds at a time. Hardly sufficient to organise any large scale capture of Drons. The second lesson might be the more important. That was, how to make the globe glow. Then they would be able to use it to light dark passageways and conduct a thorough search for Gabrysia and Fallon and whoever was with them. Not forgetting little Jordon of course. That made more sense. Fusan had said it was the light, not the ball, that was significant.

But even that did not rest easy with Nikko. It was too simple. Too obvious and clear. Out of character for the Keeper. What could the concealed meaning be behind his remark? If it wasn't the ball and it wasn't the light what was it? What was the message he was trying to convey?

Nikko looked at Fusan who was staring back at him, his eyes unblinking, penetrating. For a moment they were the only two people in the cave and what passed between them was

a communion of trust and faith. After such a short time, and despite the absolute differences, Nikko had no doubts he could rely on Fusan. As long as he trusted Fusan and if Fusan had faith in him there would be no breaching of the link. It made him feel good and calm. And the realisation struck him.

That's it, he said. Trust and faith. That is what he is telling us. If we have faith in ourselves and trust our actions we can succeed. They are the light. The globe was just the instrument. He smiled and noticed the old Keeper's eyebrows rise, and he knew he was right. He looked at the other children who were shuffling their feet impatiently waiting for something to happen. They had not understood what had been said and he about to explain his own thoughts when Fusan spoke. "If you are to confront eh so-called Drons you will need more than light. There are many of them and few of you."

The children lifted their faces to him and he went on: "you will, therefore, need to be more capable, more skilful. We can, I believe, help you to overcome the odds."

"Yes," said Nikko quickly. "That would be very helpful." Aside to Jason he added: "We can talk later about the globe."

Jason wanted to pursue the matter further now as he could not fathom what the Keeper was telling them. He did not want to move on to something new still in confusion. He was used to concentrating on one thing at a time. Concentration and practice was his motto. Apply enough of both and chances were you could become an expert at practically anything. Add a touch of forcefulness and the chances increased. That's what he wanted to do with the silver ball because he could already see a number of ways it could be used. Learn to make it flash like it did in the forest and it would be most useful indeed. However, the word of caution from Nikko and the promise to learn something more that could counter the Dron's huge superiority in numbers convinced him to bide his time. If the creature was able to teach them some more he was willing to listen. For now.

But it was Porky who spoke. Addressing Fusan he asked: "What can we do to make the fight with the Drons even? What can you show us if you won't do anything yourself about them?"

A slight whine rose from the other Keepers but Fusan cut it off sharply with a stern look. He then said directly to Porky: "I know the stars are in the sky. I also know they are planets, many of them dead and no longer where they appear to be. But I have never put foot on one. You know a tree breathes and drinks moisture. Have you ever seen its heart beat or witnessed the water enter its blood stream? Yet the stars did exist as planets millennia ago and the tree does live. Because we choose not to fight does not mean we do not know how to protect ourselves."

Porky was about to say something more when Fusan continued: "You are still unsure."

Without turning around he emitted a short high-pitched screech. For a moment nothing happened. Then from behind a craggy rock outcropping stepped a Keeper about half as tall as Fusan. It sort of waddled on its splayed feet, its hairy arms dangling by its side and its tiny finely crafted hands open. It approached slowly and when it came to Fusan's side stopped and gave out a sound like the purr of a contended cat.

"I think my friend you are a warrior among your own family in the forest," said Fusan. "I can see you are strong and I believe you to be brave. We are not warriors so you should have no difficulty in overpowering any member of my family. Particularly one so small. Please show us how you would do it," and he moved aside to the rock where he had been sitting before.

Holding out a hand Porky protested. "I can't do that, I know you Keepers don't fight. It's unfair."

"Then it should be easy for you," said Fusan. "Let us see how it is done, please."

Porky looked around at his friends but they too had cleared the way around him and the small Keeper who had not moved. Left with no choice Porky shrugged and said: "OK. But seeing this is not for real and is only a demonstration I won't use much force."

He then launched himself at the Keeper who stood only five meters from him, his arms outstretched and his upper body propelling forward. Just as his hands were to close on the Keeper the creature pivoted sideways and seemed to gently nudge Porky's hip with his shoulder. It sent him reeling off balance and he fell headlong into the ground at the base of the wall. The Keeper stood motionless, facing him, and purring quietly. Porky struggled to his feet and murmured something about "seemed to trip" but his face was bright red.

Evenly Fusan said to him: "Ah yes. The ground is a little uneven. Please, show us again."

Porky dusted himself down and took up his position once more, having cleared away some pebbles that lay between him and the little Keeper. A second time he rushed forward and this time he wrapped an arm around the creature's neck. He turned to face Fusan and began: "See. Now I have...." He got no further.

The Keeper appeared to duck his head and twist clockwise, slightly unbalancing Porky who instinctively reached to regain his hold. As he did so the Keeper deftly deflected his arm and Porky staggered past, groping empty air. He didn't fall, but as he held his footing and spun around he saw the Keeper standing quietly, purring, with its arms limp by its side.

Porky was breathing heavily and his face was redder still. Without a word he hurled himself at the Keeper. The little creature put up an arm and brushed aside Porky's thrusting arm. As Porky careened by the Keeper bent its knees and lifting one heel high with its back to Porky it snapped out its leg and stabbed it into Porky's buttocks. The kick was more forceful than it looked and Porky was sent flying. He crashed into Josh and Simon who fortunately held him up and prevented him banging into the stone wall behind. The Keeper stood impassively in the open, purring audibly.

Fusan stepped to its side and said to Porky: "I am sorry my friend. But you have learned three things here. Do not be misled by an opponent's appearance. Do not commit yourself unless you are sure you can achieve your objective. And do not only rely on your own strength. Turn your opponent's power against him."

He paused and then continued: "You are strong and brave. I am deeply sorry if you have been embarrassed. But the hardest lessons are often the most rewarding." He repeated his short speech and the little Keeper shuffled back to its place in the crevice in the cave wall.

Porky had regained his composure and in a cold, steady voice he said: "Once more. One more time."

"I think that is unnecessary," replied Fusan. "You will all be able to practice shortly but first I should explain my remarks about preparation, commitment and strength."

Porky wanted to protest but Jason stopped him. "Leave it," he said. "He's probably their champion and has been practising for a hundred years."

Fusan dropped his eyes briefly and said: "You are right of course. We have had a very long time to study. But Nishka is not our champion, we have no champion. She is no more accomplished than any Keeper."

"She?" blurted Porky. "You mean that was a girl? Oh no," and his cheeks turned brilliant crimson.

Luckily Porky did not have to suffer too long for Fusan went straight on to explain at some length the principles of Keeper defence, he reminded the Leaf Children their first priority was not to underestimate their foes. No matter the size or demeanour of an opponent they should always engage on the basis that he was a trained and highly skilled fighter. That way, said Fusan, there was no question of their being caught unprepared. The Keepers who themselves did not believe in fighting nevertheless appeared to recognise and accept that for the Leaf Children it was inevitable they would at times have to make the first move. So, they should always make that move on their terms. In other words, he explained: "Get your distance, make it your timing not his, and act swiftly."

"Don't initiate a move unless you have the advantage and are certain, or as certain as you can be, that you will succeed," he told them. "Watch his eyes, his breathing, his hands, his feet. But watch all these things without taking your eyes off his. They will convey important messages. For the rest use peripheral vision. Be aware of his movements but watch his eyes,"

Finally, he told them, if an opponent attacked they should not merely try to block a kick or punch or shove with brute force. "Use his power," he stated. "Deflect his attack. It will unbalance him because his momentum will carry him forward. But be quick before he has time to recover. And remember a large attacker can be beaten by a smaller defender. With technique, size and strength can be overcome."

He studied the children for a time and then said: "We will now practice what I have told you." At a hand sign from Fusan six Keepers, including the small female called Nishka, stepped forward and stood in silent single file.

"Please," Fusan said. "If each of you pair up with one of my family we can learn from one another. We can put into practice what I have preached, so to speak."

Porky almost ran to the middle of the cave and stood opposite Nishka. The others paired off willy nilly. What followed was three hours of attack and defence practice. The children lunged at the Keepers who easily deflected the blows and counter attacked. Then the Keepers would strike back while the children tried to do what they had been told. They made many mistakes and Fusan moved among them advising and demonstrating time and time again.

After the training period the children were exhausted. Their feet hurt, most had sore arms and without exception they had been utterly beaten by hairy creatures half their size who as a matter of principle refrained throughout their lives from entering into combat. They were demoralised to say the least. But they said nothing. Instead, when Fusan called a halt, they collapsed where they were and lay flat on their backs, their sweat dripping onto the earth floor.

"You will rest," said Fusan and waved his Keepers away. "Food will be brought and after that we will try the globe again. Then you will sleep. Tomorrow we will talk more and again practice. You have much to learn and not much time to do it in."

Later, after they had rested and eaten light helpings of the strange food, the children took turns with the silver ball. Fusan remained with them but the other Keepers left the cave.

By the time they had each learned to keep it in the air for around thirty seconds it was time to finish for the day.

Fusan recovered the ball from Danielle and spoke to them in his slow, husky voice: "You have done well my friends. However, again I must tell you that there is much more to learn so tomorrow we will practice again. We have only a short time before you can leave here and seek out your friends, you will be ready I feel. But for now I must leave you. Until tomorrow my friends," and he walked to a corner of the cave where he vanished into an opening which closed behind him.

More food was brought by four Keepers and the children ate it eagerly. Then they sat together and quietly discussed the day's events. There was no arguing and by the time they had finished it was clear that they all looked forward to the next morning.

"It's been incredible," said Josh. "So fantastic I am not sure it is not all a dream."

"It's real alright," said Porky. "And we're really learning a few handy lessons. They're good. Very good."

Even Jason agreed. "If we can get the hang of that ball and also learn to fight as well as they do we can lick the Drongs easily. He's an odd one that Fusan. But he's got smart ideas."

Nikko got to his feet and stretched. He was worn out and he knew sleep was not far away. "We have to learn quickly," he said. "There is not much time that we can play with. We have to find Gabryisia and Fallon. We have no idea what they're doing. They could already be in serious danger."

Later when the others were asleep Nikko lay awake thinking of his home and his mother and father. They seemed so far away, a part of his life that had been ripped from him, and he wondered if he would ever see them again. A tear crept from the corner of one eye and Nikko tolled onto his side so that the salty droplet swelled and fell heavily onto the dirt. Sleep finally came after Nikko had no more tears to shed. He had sobbed all he could.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They had searched every passageway they knew. They went up and down the same tunnels two or three times but the result was always the same. The Leafies had simply disappeared. Vanished.

They had rechecked the lookout tree and the hollow boulders in the Dead Place but the security locks were still in place so they could not have got out that way. Inescapably they came to the conclusion that the leaf Children were hiding somewhere in the network. But where? They had searched everywhere except the dark unknown passages and there was no way they could have gone in there. So they had to be hiding in one of the places they had already looked.

Kerry was frustrated and angry. For the last two days he had pressed his soldiers harder than ever before and with his temper fraying more almost by the hour the atmosphere in the camp was tense. Resentment had set in and if he was not careful rebellion would take over, he knew it was risky but he could not help himself. He had been outsmarted and his fellow Drongs knew it. Worse, he had been unable to regain control of the situation. That was more than his pride could bear.

He sat brooding on his rock chair in the Drong base. The soldiers were out searching the tunnels yet again and the other Drongs grouped around the walls of the huge cavern listlessly doing minor chores that they had done only the day before and which didn't really require their attention again so soon. They did them just the same because at least Kerry knew it was better than leaving them to their own devices and more importantly to dwell on their own thoughts.

Suddenly he called out loudly: "Get those three in here again. I want to talk to them."

One group near to an opening in the corner stopped what they were doing and walked slowly to the passage.

"Quickly," bawled Kerry. "Move it."

When they returned they were escorting the three guards who had conspired in the escape of Gabrysia and Fallon. Their hands were bound in front and they were dirtier and grimier than even the most unkempt of the other Drongs. They were marched in front of Kerry and left standing alone, their heads bent avoiding his fierce glare.

"Look at me," he commanded. Reluctantly they did as they were told. Their eyes were red around the rims and they were clearly afraid.

Since they had been caught, literally having run around a corner in one of the tunnels straight into the arms of the party led by Kerry, they had been kept tied up in the cave where Venki had spent his imprisonment. They had been questioned severely a number of times, and while at first they maintained they had been unwittingly overpowered, they in the end had to admit their complicity in the Leafies' escape. Kerry had screamed at them and swore they would pay for their disloyalty.

"Well, traitors," said Kerry. Now he stood up and walked two paces closer to the soldiers so they could actually feel the spittle from his mouth as he sneeringly asked: "Are you able to come with anything useful yet?"

The three did not reply. They dropped their head lower.

"Look at me I said," yelled Kerry and shoved one of them in the chest. "I asked you a question. Answer me."

The ringleader cleared his throat and stammered: "No. we've told you everything."

“You’ve told me nothing traitor,” said Kerry. “All you’ve told me is how you betrayed us to those Leafies. You admitted your guilt that’s all. I want to know where they went.”

“We don’t know. We didn’t see them,” said the soldier.

“Oh yes, that’s right. You ran away first. You’re not only traitors you’re cowards too.”

“They threatened us.”

“Threatened to hand you over you mean. You didn’t even try to help the two comrades you turned on. You left them tied up. You ran away like scared rabbits. Thinking only of yourselves.”

Kerry turned his back on them and walked to his chair. Then he wheeled around and shouted again: “Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” the soldier called back. “I don’t know. Maybe they got out and have gone back to their forest. I didn’t see them.”

Kerry stood glaring at the trio. After a time he sat down and said quietly: “Well, we’ll just have to see won’t we?” He paused. Then: “That’s what we’ll do. We’ll go to the Leafies’ camp and see for ourselves.”

He sat thinking and then called to the other Drongs who had watched the scene. “Take them back to their cell. Go and bring the searchers in. and get ready. We’re going to the forest.”

An hour later Kerry and a group of twenty Drongs set out from their base he had had to decide how many should accompany him and how many should remain behind to continue the search of the network and guard the base against possible attack. Of his total force of forty-two, including himself, he had already lost four. The three traitors and one who had been captured by the Leafies. That left thirty-eight. Kerry reckoned he would need the larger force, but he still needed to leave behind a sound contingent. The number to go to the forest he decided at twenty-one. Seventeen would stay behind. It was the best balance he could strike. So with a stern warning to the rear guard he moved off.

They went down the winding tunnels into the museum, up the stone steps to the cave above. From there they climbed up through the tree, along more passageways and finally up the rope ladders to the hollow boulders. Activating the mechanism they watched one of the boulders glide sideways and the brilliant rays of the sun stream through the opening. With a final caution for silence and care Kerry led his band out of the subterranean gloom into the dazzling glare of the Dead Place.

Once outside, and with the boulder back in place, the Drongs stood in a bunch surveying the desolate landscape. It was nearing noon so the sun was directly overhead and the sudden power of the heat bore down on their shoulders. Reflexes hunched tunics high around necks and watering eyes adjusted to the sharp contrast. The Dead Place stretched far in all directions, but to the left was the dark outline of the jungle. In between, the heat haze shimmered off rocks and hills.

Kerry breathed deeply and stood looking at the jungle. Then he quickly glanced in the other directions before addressing his comrades. “So far so good. Now here’s what we’re going to do.”

His plan was simple, to a point. They would cross the desert as fast as they could, rest briefly on the edge of the jungle, and then make their way straight to the forest, stopping for nothing unless they had to. That would probably take the rest of the day, he figured, so they would stay hidden in the trees until morning.

“At dawn we will attack,” he said. “They won’t be expecting us so it shouldn’t be difficult. The fools will most likely still be asleep.”

He looked around his band. They seemed pleased to be out in the open again and he realised that he still needed to exert influence over them.

“Anyone who disobeys an order is in trouble,” he said firmly. “There will be no second chances. He’ll be tied to a tree and left. Permanently.” He paused. “Understand?”

There was a mumbled acceptance and Kerry after a hard look at each said: “Right. Let’s go.”

As they trudged through the steamy wet jungle the Drongs did not talk. If they had they would certainly not have complained for each of them, despite their tunics becoming saturated and their bodies glistening with sweat, relished the change from the drab dry underground world they had been confined to. Most of them over the last few days had come to regard the maze as a prison of sorts and now they were in a sense free. Even if it was not for long they were intent on making the most of being outside. Kerry was no different in his thoughts. He slashed at bushes and brushed aside the large sodden leaves in his path, uncaring of the noise it made. His vigour was also born of freedom and while he would have never admitted it, the caves and tunnels were not his first choice of where to live. If he was able to choose he would be in the forest, or at least the jungle, daily exploring the country. He would like to hunt and even though animals and birds were seldom seen, he knew they were there, just timidly hiding and living their own untroubled existence.

He well remembered the time when he had lived in the forest,. The memory was vivid despite it being a long time ago. Then he had been part of the Leaf family. All the Drongs had. It was before Gabrysia, even before the dark Venki. In fact he had once been their leader,. He had had the necklace with the stone. He had held the position for an all-too-brief time. His leadership had been questioned and he had been voted out.

He smashed a leaf out of his way at the thought of how stupid the Leafies had been. He had brought strength to the family and even then had based his rule on fear. However, he and the coterie of tough supporters he had gathered around him had been replaced by a committee who believed in what he regarded as softness. The meek had indeed inherited the forest. He had been told he could stay. But he would have had to accept the weakness of the family and change his ways. He was not prepared to do that so had left with his gang.

At first they had roamed in other parts of the forest, then they moved deep into the jungle, and finally they had decided to explore the barren Dead Place. By chance they had stumbled on the entrance to the caves and had lived there ever since. They had many times tried to retake the forest camp but had been beaten back on each occasion. “Not this time though,” Kerry said to himself. “This time we’ll take it and I’ll keep it.”

An hour before darkness fell the Drongs left the jungle and entered the forest. It was still quite dense but the going was much easier now that they were out of the thick grass and heavy foliage.

Kerry signalled a halt and motioned everyone to silence. They squatted near a thicket of trees and Kerry said: “We’ll camp just inside the jungle for the night. Then at dawn we’ll move off. The camp is about a half hour from here. We’ll take it before they’re up and about.”

They moved back into the undergrowth and cleared a patch so they could bed down. There would be no fire allowed and they knew the night would be long and cold so they stayed in one group close together. It was some time before they slept but not one word was spoken. Their thoughts were concentrated on what the morrow would bring.

Unaware of the threat on their doorstep the Leaf Children in the trees not far away were also getting ready for the night. Since Nikko and Jason and the others had left life had gone on much the same as it always did. But nothing had been heard and the children were becoming worried. They discussed it nightly, but David, the boy Nikko had given the necklace to, had recommended they wait a bit longer before they decided on any plan of action. At a meeting this night it was agreed that if no news was received by the end of the following day a second search party would set out the next morning,. Having reached that decision the Leaf Children retired to their tree chambers to sleep.

The moon crept across the heaven, bathing the land below in a muted silver glow, and the stars gleamed undimmed by clouds. Many sounds filtered through the forest and the jungle but neither the Leaf Children nor the Drongs heard them.

But as the stars retreated and the moon waned the sounds of the jungle were interrupted by a course: "Get up. Come on. Up," as Kerry kicked awake his soldiers. In minutes the sleep had been roughly rubbed from their eyes, equipment had been checked and the Drongs were ready.

"Move out," commanded Kerry and they left the jungle and began threading their way among the tall trees of the forest.

The sun was still to brim the horizon when they arrived on the outskirts of the Leaf Children's camp. It was quiet. There was no movement and there were no lookouts. Trouble had not been expected.

They would enter the five trees which they knew housed the main meeting and sleeping chambers. The leaders would be there. Once they were taken the rest of the Leaf family would have to accept defeat and the camp would be theirs. Four to each tree would be more than enough given the element of surprise was on their side.

The only difficulty, or rather the main one because Kerry was certainly not complacent, was that the target trees stood in the very centre of the camp. This naturally meant the Drongs had to pass the other trees, without a sound, open the doors, climb the ropes and get into the rooms, completely unnoticed. If there were any guards, just one would do it, or if a single Leaf child rose early and ventured outside, the alarm would be sounded and the trapdoors and windows would be locked. If that happened, the Drong attack would be ended before it started. Unless they controlled the trees they controlled nothing. This was what Kerry impressed on his soldiers as they scanned the camp. The first rays of the morning sun struck the tree tops and gradually began to creep towards the ground.

"Now," said Kerry and the Drongs sprinted in five teams to the cluster of trees, there were no lookouts,. No Leaf child rose early. When they reached the bases of the trees the soldiers stopped. At a sign from Kerry the teams entered the tree trunks simultaneously. They did not scamper up the rope ladders too quickly, concerned not only about the speed but also for silence. When they reached the trapdoors to the chambers they listened closely and hearing no sounds inside cautiously pushed them up a few inches and peered inside.

Kerry had chosen the biggest of the trees and as he now looked into the chamber he saw he had been right. It was the headquarters and inside, against the far wall, were the

shelves lined with toys. Through a small gap between the trapdoor and the floor he could only see parts of the two other walls and they too had toys stacked high against them. Gradually he lifted the trapdoor higher.

He whispered to a soldier on the ladder behind him to stay where he was and only follow when called. He intended to capture the headquarters alone if he could. He poked his head through the opening and saw on the floor behind him six children asleep. They were lying on straw matting beds and covered by light squares of green material. They did not stir as he raised the trapdoor higher and climbed through. Crouching, he silently closed the opening in the floor and watched the sleeping children, he counted four boys and two girls.

Kerry carefully approached them and examined each. He did not recognise any of the faces, but he did see that one of the boys was wearing the necklace with the red stone. An awkward smirk crossed his face as he pulled from his breeches a stubby baton with a rope threaded in a loop through one end which also had finger grooves cut into it. He gripped it firmly and bent down beside the boy.

The boy rolled over onto his back, nudging Kerry's knee as he did so, and sleepily opened his eyes. He reacted quickly as soon as he saw the Drong, but he was too slow. Kerry leapt onto his stomach and pinned his neck to the floor with the baton, momentarily cutting off his air.

The boy choked as Kerry hissed: "Quiet! Don't say a word of I'll press harder." The boy's fingers tightened around Kerry's wrists but he knew he was powerless to throw him off.

"Now," said Kerry. "Wake the others. Carefully. Don't shout or try anything smart. Just get them up."

The boy coughed a rasping: "Wake up, Wake up all of you." And the other five children one by one opened their eyes. They jumped to their feet but Kerry said very slowly: "Don't make a sound any of you or your friend here is in trouble. Get over here where I can see all of you."

When they were standing in front of him he ordered: "Right. Now tie each other up. Hands and legs." Indicating one of the girls he barked: "You. Come over here and tie his legs and hands. Quickly, and tie them tightly. No tricks. Understand?"

The girl did as she was told. Like the others she used ropes and strips of material that were piled in a box in the corner. Then she bound the feet and hands of the last of the other four children, the boy on the floor had his hands stretched out over his head but the others all had their hands tied behind their backs.

"Get over there with the rest," Kerry told the girl. "All of you sit against that wall." Then he eased himself off the boy and told him to roll onto his stomach. When he did he retied his hands behind his back and then bound the girl in the same manner.

"Well," he said breathing heavily. "You're not much you lot. One against six and you still lost." He moved back to the trapdoor and lifted it. "OK," he called down. "Come up. The place is ours."

A few minutes later Kerry led the boy with the necklace out through one of the windows into a platform across two branches high above the ground. At the top of his voice he shouted: "Alarm! Alarm! Wake up! Hey! Hey! Hey!"

Windows in the other trees cracked open and Leaf Children poured out onto the platforms.

He noticed that with the four other target trees only Drong soldiers emerged. He smiled and again shouted: "You are beaten Leafies. I, Kerry, have captured your camp. Leave your weapons where they are and get down onto the ground. Do as I say or your friend here is in real trouble. And so are the others we have," and he pushed the boy to the edge of the platform, he tugged the necklace from the boy's neck and holding it aloft added: "I'm in charge. The trees are mine."

The Leaf Children were herded into a single group in the middle of the camp directly below the tree where Kerry remained with the bound boy. His other captives, along with all but one from each of the other occupied trees, were released and ordered out with the mass of children.

Kerry stood on the platform and lectured the Leaf Children for ten minutes on what he termed their *misbehaviour* and *bad judgement* in opposing him and his fellow Drons. They were *errors* which he assured them they were going to regret.

"Starting now," he said, "you are going to learn some respect." He and the other Drons were to be called *sir* and their orders were to be carried out without question. Any deviation would result in severe punishment, not only for the child who was disobedient, but for all of them. If one stepped out of line they all suffered.

Fear, thought Kerry. Fear is the way to exert control. If you make a person afraid of you he will do whatever you tell him. And the greatest fear is to be punished for something you did not do. It makes a person watch his neighbour very closely. At its ultimate it actually breeds reluctant but useful sympathisers. It had worked before and it would work now, he thought.

Kerry was excited at his victory and the prospects for the future. To heck with Gabryisia and the others who had escaped in the tunnels. They did not matter any more. When they returned to the forest, as they must sooner or later, there would be nothing they could do. The trees were his. There was no way he was going to be kicked out again. From now on everything would be the way he wanted it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The wind streamed through Gabrysia's hair, straightening the curls and stringing it out behind so that it fluttered and whipped like a shredded flag in a gale. Little cracks clawed their way along her temples as she squinted tightly against the wind, and the corners of her mouth turned up sharply in a grin that flashed tiny white teeth and etched fine cheek bones. Her tunic clung to her body.

Her knees pressed against the pony's rippling sides and she held the vine rein close to her chest, her buttocks floating a few inches from the animal's back as she leaned over its shoulders.

Gabrysia was a long way from the lead but the exhilaration of riding the pony at speed made up for the loss she was undoubtedly going to suffer, Fallon was way out in front with Venki hot on his tail. If consolation was needed Gabrysia looked over her shoulder and saw Jordon a long way back, trotting painfully, even from a distance his little body bumping up and down in opposite motion to his mount.

Gabrysia laughed and sat back, pulling the rein in, gradually slowing the pony to a canter and finally to a smooth walk. Happily she sat, running fingers through her hair until Jordon came alongside.

"Whooa! Whooa!" he said and gladly the pony eased to a walk.

"How are you doing?" asked Gabrysia. "You look pretty good Jordon. Though it would probably be more comfortable if you didn't trot all the time."

"I know," replied the youngster. "My bum is really sore. I can't seem to get the timing right. I go up and he goes down. That's not so bad. But then I go down as he comes up and that's the part I don't like."

"Don't worry," said Gabrysia smiling. "It'll come. We're all a bit sore. In a day or so you'll be alright."

Jordon rubbed his behind. "I hope so. I think I'm getting calluses."

They laughed together and looked into the distance where Fallon and Venki had stopped. The boys were confidently astride their ponies which had their heads down grazing in the thick grass.

"They're pretty good aren't they Gabrysia?" said Jordon, "Really good actually. Fallon won I think but Venki is Justas good."

"Yes," she said. "They're both excellent." She gazed at the two boys not that far away now. They were chatting happily and seemed perfectly at ease on the ponies. She looked at Jordon. Even at a walk he was awkward looking and perhaps because of his size he slid back and forth across the animal's back with every step it took. Again she smiled. "Don't worry Jordon," she encouraged. "We've only been at it a couple of days. We'll be just as good soon." Then she said: "Come on. Who's going to be third then?"

Jordon waved his hand up and down and bounced his little body in unison, but his pony took no notice and continued to walk at its own leisurely pace. It was not his day and despite every effort to hold back her own pony, Gabrysia could not avoid reaching the boys first.

"Where have you two been?" asked Venki. "Did you stop for a nap or something?"

Gabrysia shook her head and frowned at Venki. "Don't concern yourself about us," she said. "Jordon and I just wanted to talk that's all. To be honest I wanted to ask him how he learned to trot so well." She winked and went on: "We can't all be racing jockeys like

you. But I thought at least I might be able to learn how to trot. And Jordon is certainly the best at that.”

Fallon looked at the young boy with his head down patting his pony’s neck. “Right,” he said. “Yes. Really, we were just talking about that. We were wondering if later on you could show us how it’s done Jordon. Weren’t we Venki?”

“Oh yes,” he replied. “Trotting’s one of the hardest things to do. I just can’t seem to get the hang of it.”

“Will you Jordon?” asked Gabrysia. “Will you show us? Later? Tomorrow?”

Jordon kept on patting the pony’s neck. Without raising his face he said: “Maybe. Maybe I will.”

“Great,” said Fallon. “Tomorrow maybe then.”

“In the meantime,” said Venki, “where to?”

Since they caught the ponies three days ago their lives had changed radically as Fallon had predicted when he proposed his plan. Their world had been enlarged many fold and they were no longer confined to the tree-house and the river or at best half a day’s walk in any direction. With the help of the ponies they could now venture out ten times as far. Not to mention the fun the animals provided. However, the good often has the bad as a partner for a time and the first two days after capturing the ponies was that time.

The other three ponies were caught in the same manner as the first, using those caught as decoys each time. That was the relatively easy part.

Jordon had said they were friendly, almost tame. Which was true. When they were free. On the other hand when they had a foreign rein around their necks they were not so relaxed. Add a strange being to their backs and the animals became downright cantankerous, they bucked and twisted sending Fallon and Venki in all directions. The two bigger boys had offered to do the breaking in so that Jordon and Gabrysia would not get hurt. They were the ones who ended the first day bloodied and bruised, and so worn out they went to bed without eating and grumpy to say the least. For their part the ponies stood victorious under the tree, tied up to be sure, but equally surely the winners of the first round.

Gabrysia and Jordon were wise enough not to ask questions or offer advice and sat quietly outside the tree-house watching the two boys limp around picking fault with everything they came across. Eventually though Fallon and Venki fell asleep, snoring heavily. Gabrysia and Jordon cupped their hands over their mouths to smother their laughter.

The second day began where the first had left off with Fallon and Venki talking turns at flying through the air and landing in crumpled heaps in the grass or in bushes. All morning it went on. Fallon would climb into the tree, wait patiently for a pony to be goaded beneath him and then slide on to its back. Sometimes he stayed on a minute or two. Sometimes it was seconds only. The end was always the same. Or Venki would resignedly take his turn. And fare no better. By lunch time the boys had had enough. Their knees were skinned, along with their elbows, their hands ached and they had grass stuck in their hair.

Plucking a straw from his ear Venki said impatiently: “I’ve had it. I’m fed up. I’m sore. I’m hot and I’m thirsty. You can keep your ponies Fallon. They were your idea anyway. You can go on getting bucked into the dirt if you want to but I’m finished with them.”

“Me too,” mumbled Fallon. “I nearly broke my left arm the last time. I think they’re getting stronger all the time.”

“We’re getting weaker,” retorted Venki. “Which is not surprising. We’re the ones getting thumped into the ground.”

“Anyway,” he added “No more. I’m going for a swim. Coming?” Fallon grunted and they started for the river. As they headed off Gabryisia approached one of the ponies with her hand extended in front of her, talking softly to it. The two boys turned to watch.

Gabryisia went up to the pony which stood its ground and gently patted and stroked his neck and nose, running her hand up and down the middle of its head between the eyes. She did this for a while before moving to the side, her hand never leaving the animal’s body. For about fifteen minutes she patted and stroked the pony. Once or twice it turned its head as if to nip her back, but it was only a gesture and the shivers which rippled its shoulders stopped altogether.

Gabryisia called to the two boys softly: “Help me up.” Venki protested immediately, warning her she would get hurt. “Help me up, please,” she repeated. “Slowly.”

The pony seemed to shiver wildly. Its eyes were wide and it nodded its head up and down. But it did not buck. Seated on its back Gabryisia ran her hands over its neck and spoke softly into its ear, for a long time she just sat on the pony and patted it and talked to it. Then she slid down to the ground again and scratched the pony under the neck, watching Fallon and Venki who were now standing by two other ponies stroking and talking to them. Even Jordon followed her example.

By mid afternoon Gabryisia, Fallon and Venki were walking their ponies around the meadow with reins around their necks. By dusk the ponies had accepted their unusual passengers and the three children cantered about quite freely. Jordon was not so advanced but at least he was sitting on the smallest pony and walking it around in circles with a long lead tied to a stake hammered into the ground. That night the children sat on the platform outside the tree-house and talked cheerfully until late.

And now here they were on the third day riding the ponies as easily as if they had been together for ages.

“Why don’t we ride over to that range,” said Fallon. “It looks like a nice place to spend our first night under the stars.”

“Why not,” said Gabryisia. “It’s as good as any place to start. But no more racing please. We’ve got all afternoon so let’s enjoy it together.”

They pointed their ponies towards the range of hills Fallon had suggested and walked at a steady gait talking all the while. Only once they stopped to eat some fish and drink some water they had brought with them. Also to rest their bottoms and stretch their legs. Their supplies were wrapped in dried plaited grass and worn like rucksacks on their backs. These, too, had become heavy and itched in the hot sun.

They rested for about an hour under a tree before starting out again. By mid afternoon they could see there was still a long way to go before they reached the range. It was also obviously a lot higher than they had imagined. There was some doubt they would reach it before dark but they decided to go as far as they could before camping for the night. In the morning they would take a look over the other side before riding back to the tree-house. If there was anything of interest there they would come back another time, more prepared for a longer stay out in the open.

As the sun dipped below the horizon the children rode into a cluster of trees at the foot of the range. "I think this is as far as we go," said Venki. "We can camp here. Fallon and I will get the fire going. Gabrysia, you and Jordon can tie up the ponies and clear a place under one of the trees. That one over there looks fine to me."

The others agreed and the camp was prepared. After the meal the four children sat around the fire and watched the moon with its tiny accompanying planet wend its silvery way across the sky. The night seemed clearer, crisper somehow away from the tree-house where they had spent every night in the beautiful countryside. They fell asleep easily and were undisturbed as the moons completed their heavenly journey to be replaced by the millions of brilliant flickering stars.

As they also faded with the dawn the children stirred and yawned, they rose refreshed and ready to face the new day. Sated with a hearty breakfast the children examined their position, standing at its base they could now make out in the brightness of day that the range extended in both directions like a wall or a barrier as far as they could see. Jordon even remarked that it looked like the embankment of a dam.

"Some dam," replied Fallon. "It would have to be the size of an inland sea. Maybe that's what it is. It could be you know."

"Well, some on then," Venki said. "Let's go and see what's on the other side. Sea or no sea I want to see."

"Wisecracker," said Fallon and the children gathered their belongings together. They elected not to ride the ponies straight away. Instead they would pull them behind on their leads while they walked the night's stiffness out of their limbs.

The range had a steady gradient but it was exhausting nevertheless to climb. The ponies had to be tugged along because they wanted to stop and graze at regular intervals. The animals appeared not to be thirsty and this was perhaps because there had been heavy dew during the night and they had taken in a fair amount of moisture during their early feeding.

When they breasted the hill the children stopped and the ponies again dropped their heads in the long grass. "Look at that," said Venki. "Will you just look at that."

Far below stretched a huge valley. The range that dropped into it was clear of trees as was the one which rose far away on the other side. The river had apparently found its way around the end of the range and flowed through it in a dead straight course. Either side was fringed with what appeared to be dense jungle which extended to the foot of both ranges. Across the jungle must have measured at least five kilometres

From where they stood it was clear the plain they had enjoyed since their arrival had been no more than a plateau which fell away down a slope perhaps half a kilometre deep before rising to another gleaming plateau on the other side. To their left a beaten path wound its way from the rim to the nearest edge of the jungle in a long snaking repetitive S. There it either came to an abrupt end or continued unseen into the thick growth. It was impossible to tell.

The children were speechless as they surveyed the scene before them. For some weeks now they had come to believe that somehow the land they shared merely continued unabated until it reached an ocean eventually. But as they stood on the crest of yet another fascinating discovery the children realised all over again the enormous complexity and uncertainty of their situation. The valley below clearly showed that they had absolutely no idea of where they could be, and what was also becoming more and

more probable was that no-one else knew where they were. They were alone in a beautiful, but strange, wilderness. Dots on a never-ending landscape.

However, while this may have been so another striking conclusion could be drawn. The path that led down the long slope was made by something, or someone. It was doubtful that it had been made by animals as its circuitous route was too logical. If animals had been responsible it would have been more haphazard. But if it had not been worn away by animals, who then? The possibilities were exciting.

It was Gabryisia who voiced these thoughts first and they were instantly accepted by the other three. That being so, the question that had to be posed was: What to do?

“No question,” said Venki. “We have to go down. And I say we go now.”

There was water in the valley so thirst should not be a problem. Judging by past experience the river should also provide plenty of fish. So the matter of food should be solved as well. As for staying away from their base longer than planned, the children quickly agreed that was not a genuine consideration given the first two positive indications. The only doubtful matter seemed to be safety. Would they be in danger from whoever had made the path?

“Even if we are,” said Fallon. “I think we have to explore. The path means there is hope and we cannot afford to ignore it. I second Venki. We should go now. There is no reason to wait.”

Gabryisia looked at Jordon who smiled at her. She smiled back and turned to Venki. “OK. That makes it four. We go, but let’s be careful. People will certainly not be the only creatures down there.”

The walk to the bottom of the range, pulling their ponies behind them, took little more than two hours. While the slope was around half a kilometre in height, their path was not as the crow might fly. There were no fewer than seven twists and turns so by the time they arrived at the jungle’s edge they had walked well over twice that distance. They were breathless and sticky, covered in sweat, and their knees ached from the constant jolting of their body weight during the descent.

The path did indeed proceed into the jungle. Not only that but the dense growth had been cleared on both sides leaving no obstruction to users unless they were more than two meters tall where the branches of the trees would have barred their way. It meant that with the overlapping foliage above the way ahead was dank and dark. It was not inviting at all.

After they had rested a while they prepared to enter the jungle. There was no point in taking the ponies, they decided, as they did not intend going far. Just far enough to see if there was a clearing reasonably close by. If so they would then bring the ponies in. If not, they would return to the open and consider their next move, which would most likely be the next day anyway.

Venki led. He was followed by Gabryisia, then Jordon with Fallon bringing up the rear. Precariously they picked their way along the path. Very little light penetrated the overhead growth but there was sufficient to see where they were going, if not far in front of them. The path seemed to continue in a straight line without a single turn. When they had gone about three hundred meters and found nothing and were about to turn back Venki suddenly exclaimed: “Wait. I can see something up ahead.”

He moved on another thirty paces or so and said; “It looks like it is clearing a bit. There may be an opening about a hundred meters in front of us.”

The children went on and as Venki had surmised the jungle opened up and they could see in the distance that much more light was getting through from above. They moved more quickly and the closer they got the more obvious it became that there was a large clearing with fewer trees and considerably more light.

Suddenly there was a *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* and the children were lifted off their feet and flung onto their backs. They cried out in surprise and alarm as thick rope nets swept them into the air, Fallon and Jordon tumbling into each other having been caught in the same mesh. All three nets were hauled high into the trees, crashing through masses of leaves and springy branches. When they had gone as high as they were going to, the nets bobbed up and down a few times and came to a rest.

The children struggled upright and looked about them. Through the rope mesh they could see they were suspended high above a blanket of leaves. Only a meter away from them, almost within reach, was the edge of a platform that spread over a vast area and supported innumerable wooden houses. Ladders and steps led to more platforms and houses higher up and from there still more ladders and steps climbed to even higher levels. Before their startled eyes was a tree-house network of immense size.

There were enough structures to house hundreds of people yet there did not appear to be a soul about. An eerie silence confronted the children. There were not even the sounds that could be expected in a jungle, and the whole place had an ominous feel about it.

“Is everyone alright?” called Venki. “Fallon? Gabryisia? Jordon? Are you ok?”

“We’re ok,” answered Fallon. “I’ve got Jordon with me.” Gabryisia also confirmed she was shaken but safe.

“What are we going to do?” Jordon cried. “What’s going to happen to us?”

“We’ve got to get out of here, that’s what,” said Fallon. “I can’t see anyone. Can anyone see anybody?”

“I can’t. The place looks deserted.” Venki was reaching through the mesh trying to grab hold of the platform. But while he was level with it he was too far away to touch it. He realised he was probably wasting his time anyway because even if he could pull himself over to the platform it would be no use. He wouldn’t be able to free himself. The ropes were thick and the children’s weight pulled the tops together preventing them climbing out. They were trapped like bugs in a bag.

“I think we’re stuck,” he said with finality. “Really stuck. I don’t like it, but we have to wait for whoever lives here to come back.” He turned to look at the others known reaching uselessly through the ropes as well. “At least we can assume they are civilised. They’re not animals. They live in houses.”

It did little to comfort the children. They had been snared like animals and were hanging perhaps a hundred meters in the air with absolutely nothing they could do about it, and also nothing to do but wait until their captors returned from wherever they went. The possibilities that crossed their minds were all as unappealing as one another. Apes, unknown creatures, pygmies, and head hunters. Drongs maybe, though that was unlikely. There were not that many Drongs and if some did live in the jungle why didn’t Kerry and his gang also? It had to be someone else. A lot of them.

Again Venki told himself that whoever it was certainly was not backward. The dwellings, from what he could make out, were very sturdy. The rope ladders and wooden steps which linked the houses and platforms had been laid out cleverly so there was minimum obstruction but maximum access. In fact, the overall impression was that the colony of

tree-houses was designed with sophistication. A primitive concept, using primitive materials, but in a most imaginative way. Its present cleanliness and emptiness only added to this impression.

“Damned clever,” said Venki aloud. But he did not have time to muse further as he, along with the others in their nets, suddenly were jerked and swayed over to the platform. They hung for a moment and then dropped into the plants. At the same time the knots at the top so that the netting were released and it fell heavily around the children in the three bulky heaps. Instantly, they jumped to their feet and took up fighting stances. But they could see no-one. And still there was not a sound.

“What the heck is going on?” said Fallon.

“I don’t know,” Venki replied. “But we aren’t alone any longer. Someone is up there somewhere.”

Gabrysia put a hand on Fallon’s shoulder steadying him. Then she did the same with Venki. “Wait a minute,” she said. “Let’s not be hasty with anything we do.” She continued: “Obviously we’re being watched. But we have not been attacked. Instead we have been freed. That means something.”

“It means we can defend ourselves,” said Venki.

“It means that whoever is out there chose not to harm us while we were defenceless, but to let us go,” she said.

Venki looked about him anxiously, his muscles tense. “Well, where are they then?”

“I don’t know that,” Gabrysia said. “But they must be able to see us. And I don’t think they want to hurt us otherwise they would have done it already.”

Gabrysia turned back to the houses and held her arms out in front with the palms of her hands facing up, showing their were empty. She walked forward a few paces and called out: “Hello. Whoever you are we do not mean you any harm. Please, we are friends. We need your help.”

There was no response and she moved forward another six steps. Fallon went after her. “Gabrysia, be careful. Come back.”

She shrugged off his warning and said: “No. I’m certain of it. Fallon please. We must show them we are not their enemies.” Again she held out her hands. “We do not want trouble. We need your help,” she called.

Jordon ran to her side and called loudly: “Please. Help us. We want to go home that’s all.”

The door of the largest dwelling directly in front of them opened slightly. Venki quickly joined the others. “Watch it,” he warned.

“Please,” Gabrysia repeated quietly. “We mean you no harm. Can you help us?”

The door swung wide and out stepped Jason, his hands on his hips and his legs apart. “That depends,” he grinned. “Only if you promise not to go running off again. We’ve had the devil of a job finding you.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The children were sitting on the floor in the house, in a large circle, with their legs crossed under them.

The reunion had been one of stunned joy, with no-one saying anything for a time and then everyone trying to talk at once. There were hugs all around and much laughter and back-slapping. Venki was introduced and if he and Jason were a bit distant at first, they soon warmed to one another and it was Venki who began to recount events, with the others joining in.

Porky and Josh interrupted constantly with questions while Simon sat quietly. Danielle and Gabrysia exchanged smiles frequently. Nikko listened attentively.

“How long did you say you’ve been on that plateau?” Simon asked.

“I’m not sure exactly. But it must be about five, six weeks,” replied Fallon. “But listen, how did you get here, and who owns this fantastic place?”

“Fallon,” interrupted Simon again before anyone could answer his question. “You must have been dreaming. It couldn’t have been that long.”

“Well, as I said I can’t be certain, but it must be about that.” He looked at Venki and Gabrysia with raised eyebrows.

“That’s right,” said Venki. “It was just over four I think when we got the ponies. It’s around five weeks all up.”

Simon’s face was a blank as he turned to Jason. Then to Gabrysia he said: “What do you say Gabrysia? How long?”

With a puzzled look she answered: “They’re right. It has been that long. But why do you seem surprised? You know too.”

“That’s just it,” he said and cleared his throat. Again he glanced at Jason, then went on clearly: “you see we do know. You were taken in the forest only one week ago Gabrysia. We lost you Fallon six days ago. The day after that Jordon was captured. You can’t have been missing for as long as you say. It’s impossible.”

“Don’t be stupid Simon,” laughed Fallon. “You’ve never been one to tell stories, so don’t try to start now. Come on Jason, or Nikko, tell us how you found us,”

They said nothing. Jason continued to look at Fallon and Gabrysia with a stern expression on his face.

“Well?” repeated Fallon. “What’s wrong? Why don’t you tell us?”

“It’s true,” said Nikko. “You can’t have been here as long as you say. It’s been only days.”

“Listen,” said Fallon, no longer laughing. “This is plain silly. We know how long we’ve been here, there is no way we would be that wrong, and we’re not trying to be smart. It has been a long time, too long, and we just want to go home now. You tell us your story and let’s get out of here. OK?”

“It’s not that easy Fallon,” said Simon again. “We’ve got to clear this up before we can decide what to do. And for another thing, we just can’t leave. Not yet.”

“Why not?” asked Venki. “You found us so you must know the way out.” His face grew serious, and he went on: “What is it? Are you saying you’re lost? You can’t find the way out either?”

“Not exactly,” said Jason. He turned to Nikko. “Perhaps you should try to explain things Nikko.”

Nikko was already unsure how he was going to explain events to the others. The way the conversation had gone so far made it that much more difficult. Everyone was obviously very confused. He was afraid that what he had to say would only confuse them more. Timing was also important and it was unfortunate that Simon had forced the issue so early. He had hoped they could lead into it more gently. But now he had no choice.

“Before I tell you what I’m going to,” he said, “I would like to ask you a favour. Please, if you can, don’t interrupt. Let me tell you the whole story first because it is important I think that you hear it all at once rather than in broken snatches. It is fantastic and I’m pretty sure you are going to think we are crazy. But we’re not. Everything I’m going to say to you is absolutely true. So, again, please bear with me.”

“It can’t be any weirder than what happened to us,” said Venki.

“I’ll let you be the judge of that once you’ve heard our story,” said Nikko. “I guess I should go all the way back to the forest when you were captured by the Drongs Gabrysia.” He stopped briefly and then began to speak.

When he had finished a good while later he was dry. He had spoken at considerable length and as he had requested he had not been interrupted. Now the children sat in silence.

It was Fallon who spoke for the other three. “That’s a good story Nikko, and I think it beats ours. If it’s true. But are you certain it’s not you who have been dreaming? That you have not imagined the whole thing? Creatures and magic? It’s all pretty fabulous you have to admit.”

“I did warn you that you might think we were crazy,” answered Nikko. “But no. We were not dreaming. It all happened just as I have said. And really, it has taken no longer than a week. Not five. So something is wrong somewhere.”

For the next few minutes they argued over the time difference, each group adamant as to its veracity. Throughout the exchanges Venki withdrew into himself and seemed disinterested. During a break he said simply: “You’re both right. It has been one week. And it has been five weeks.”

Fallon turned to his friend. “That is totally illogical and ridiculous.”

Venki went on: “I think it is possible. I think you are mixing up what I said. A person can’t be in two places at the same time I agree. But perhaps two people can be in the same place in two times.”

“Of course they can be in the same place at two different times,” said Fallon. “That is logical. But what does that have to do with us? We’re talking about the same time, notm last week compared with this week. It all happened at the same time.”

“I didn’t say *at* a different time,” said Venki. “I said *in* a different time.”

“What’s the difference?”

Venki appeared reluctant to speak further. But he did continue. “I think we entered another time zone when we came out of the tunnel I think you all did too. There is no other explanation. That’s where we are now.”

“Oh that’s absurd,” said Fallon. “With respect Venki that’s science fiction like before. Look. Why don’t we just forget this for the time being and concentrate on getting home.” He turned to Simon. “You said we couldn’t leave yet. Why not?”

“For one thing we don’t know where we are,” answered Simon. “And for another you have to meet Fusan and the other Keepers first.”

“You mean those creatures you met up with? Or think you did?”

“We did alright. This is their home. It’s called Yshon.”

Fallon stood up and went to the door of the house, he stepped outside and looked around the colony of dwellings in the trees. When he came back inside he said: “I grant you this is a pretty incredible place. Whoever built it knew what he was doing, but if what you say is true, where are these creatures? Why aren’t they here now?”

“They are,” answered Jason. “They’re waiting for us in the other houses.”

Nikko added: “Fusan wanted us to see you first and to explain things. He felt it would be better that way. So did we. Prepare you sort of.”

There was a pause. Then: “OK,” said Venki. “You’ve told us. We’re prepared. Let’s see them then.”

“If you turn around young man you will.” Fusan was standing in the doorway. As Venki spun about, as did Fallon, Gabrysia and Jordon, Fusan said: “And also allow me to say how pleased I am to see you are well and safe with your friends. I am sure you must be most relieved to be free and no longer in confinement. I am indeed pleased for you. For all of you.”

They said nothing in reply, but sat startled with the jaws open, so Fusan added: “Welcome to Yshon.”

When they still said nothing Fusan raised his grey eyebrows noticeably and said in his pleasant high-pitched voice: “Do all your friends have this problem with speech young Nikko? It seems that when you introduce them to me they always lose their tongues.”

Nikko laughed. “It does certainly look that way Fusan,” he said. “Mind you, I believe Fallon has never been one for many words, but he has always had at least one.”

“Fantastic,” blurted Fallon as if he had been punched on the back.

“See,” said Nikko. “At least one.”

Jason laughed. Stepping forward he said: “Fusan, I’d like you to meet our friends Fallon, Gabrysia, Jordon and Venki. This is Fusan. He is our imaginary Keeper. And we have already told you, this is his home. This is Yshon.”

“I am honoured,” said Fusan. “Ad I do most sincerely welcome you.”

“Ah, yes, thanks,” stammered Fallon. Then: “I mean, how do you do. Thank you.”

“Hello,” added Gabrysia, followed by a “how do you do” from Venki.

Jordon smiled at the old Keeper. “Hi,” he said.

“And hi to you too Jordon,” replied Fusan.

There was another silence. Fusan looked around the group. “Well now,” he said. “I have to admit this is a significant improvement on the last time we were together Nikko. You are all as one again. And I daresay the six of you were surprised to find Venki here and to hear his tale. It is a remarkable story and if he will permit me I will commend him. You endured much and have survived it well. I applaud you.”

Venki was clearly embarrassed. It would not be possible to say he blushed, though he probably did. But his dark skin concealed it and the only signs were a quick turning away and a shuffle of the feet as he mumbled: “Not really, I mean, I just, er, did the only thing I could do. Ah, anyone would have... Anyway, er, thank you, ah, Fusan.”

There followed a long discussion during which the children probed Fusan about the Keepers and about Yshon, much of it covering areas which the old Keeper had already passed on to Nikko and the others when they were still in the tunnels. However, he did not seem to mind and readily answered all their questions.

Fallon's and Venki's scepticism turned to sheer amazement and they were unable to get enough of Fusan and the information he imparted. The fact that the Keepers existed was incredible enough, but that they were in such numbers and so intelligent was little sort of unbelievable. Even as Fusan stood before them Fallon and Venki frequently punctuated their remarks with: "I still don't believe this." And when all the children were invited out on to the platform again they were met with such a sight that Gabryisia too echoed the boy's comment.

"My god," she exclaimed. "I don't believe it."

Hundreds of Keepers, with their sleek black hair, grey highlights and bare patches, had gathered on the higher levels and were looking down on them.

"My friends," Fusan said simply. "This is my family." He raised his arms above his head and a soft hum began. It started on the lower levels and rose one by one. By the time it reached the highest platform the sound was a high pitched whine. The children were about to cover their ears when Fusan dropped his arms and the noise abruptly stopped. The contrast was such that if a leaf had fluttered to the ground its rocking downward flight would have been like a waterfall. But no leaf must have separated from a twig because the silence was total.

Fusan interrupted their thoughts. "This is where we live. It is our home."

"Yshon is nice Fusan," said Nikko politely. "Not quite what I had pictured from what you told us."

"You have seen but a fraction of Yshon, Niko," Fusan answered. "You have seen only our homes. Your tree in the forest, where you live, is one of many thousands. So this is one small part of a far greater whole."

"You can say that again," said Fallon. "From what we've seen there is no end to this place."

"It has an end my young friend," Fusan said. "But unfortunately it is something you shall not see."

"Why not?" interjected Jordon. "Is it secret or something?"

"No Jordon. But time will not permit. I think you are anxious to return to the Deep."

"Not the tunnels as such," said Fallon. "But we do have to get back to the forest, so we do have to go through them I suppose. Unless there is another way."

"I fear not," answered the Keeper. "The Deep is the way you must go."

"Yes," said Venki. "And that's the real problem. We can't."

"Why not?" asked Simon.

"Because they're not there."

"What do you mean they're not there? Of course they're there."

"I mean what I said. The tunnels, or at least the tunnel we came out of, is not there."

"It was there," added Gabryisia, "but when we went back later on, we couldn't find it. The tunnel I mean. The cave was there. But the tunnel and the mountain had disappeared."

Simon faced Gabryisia squarely. "Let me understand you properly Gabryisia. You came out of a cave onto the plain. Then when you returned there afterwards the cave was still there while the tunnel and the mountain had vanished."

"Yes. They were gone."

"You must have gone to the wrong cave, that's all."

"It was the same one," said Venki. "There are no others. We looked for weeks. It was the right cave, but that's all."

Jason interrupted. "We've been over this weeks business before. That's not possible. And whole mountains and tunnel networks don't walk off by themselves either. So you must have got lost. That's all. Just as Simon says. You got the wrong cave."

"Listen Jason," said Fallon sharply. "For the last time, we have been on that plateau, in the tree by the river, for at least five weeks. We are not lying. We did not dream it all up and we are not batty. Now that's it. And also, the mountain and the tunnels are gone. As sure as we are standing here, in a jungle surrounded by hundreds of hairy creatures, that mountain disappeared. If you think that is crazy what do you think all this is? It's just as crazy you know."

"You're right of course," said Nikko in an attempt to cool the situation down. "The whole thing is a little crazy. We all; have to admit that. But Fusan can confirm we have been gone from the forest for only a week, not five as you say."

Nikko looked to the old Keeper for support. "You are absolutely correct Nikko. You have been in the tunnels for days and not weeks." As he paused, Nikko turned back to Fallon and was about to speak when Fusan continued: "But Fallon, Venki, Gabrysia and Jordon had indeed been in Yshon for five weeks."

Fallon laughed. "You're as bad as Venki. He's the one with a touch of the sun. reckons we are in another time zone or something. Here and there. Now, but then too."

Fusan's eyebrows rose quickly. "Then Venki is wiser than the rest of you. For that is precisely the case. Yshon is here, now. The Deep is here also, but then. The way to both is the cave. The cave is the door."

"I knew it," Venki cried. He beamed at the Keeper. He looked around the group of children, at the houses and the hundreds of other Keepers motionless on the platforms above. When he looked back at Fusan he said: "No. I didn't know it. I hoped it was true. But does that mean we are now in the future?"

"In a manner," replied Fusan. "But not the future as you mean it. It is not your future. At a time yet to come your home will not be replaced by Yshon. It will exist with it, not be displaced by it. Yshon is another dimension of now outside. Time there passes differently, that is why you are both right. One week is five weeks. Give is one. But when you again pass into the Deep you will leave the weeks behind you."

"But how are we going to get back into the tunnels?" repeated Fallon. "They're gone."

"Not gone Fallon," said Fusan. "You just did not see them. They are there, through the gate. You will be taken and shown, do not worry."

Gabrysia had said little. She had listened and tried to understand what was being said, but was confused by the thought of different dimensions and time frames. Her concern, now that the Leaf Children were all together again, was to get back to the forest and a normal life. She spoke softly: "Will you be coming with us Fusan? Will you let us show you our home? We would be honoured if you would come."

Fusan shook his head. "I am afraid not my dear, Yshon is our world. The Deep and its treasures we shall continue to protect, but we shall go no further. When we leave you at the cave it will be goodbye. It must be that way."

"You mean we will not see you again?" asked Jordon. "Ever?"

Fusan touched the youngster gently on the elbow. "I believe we will see one another in our minds for a long time to time. The memory is a mirror, all you have to do is glance in that mirror and we shall be there. It is better Jordon than a crystal ball even."

"Speaking of crystal balls," said Fallon, "there is something I want to ask you."

“Yes?”

“How come that Drong Kerry has one of your balls? One that he used in the first place to capture Gabryisia. And which led to all our problems.”

A hush fell over the group. The children looked at one another and then at Fusan. Nikko had asked himself the same question as soon as he had seen the silver ball in the tunnel. However he had forgotten about it. At the time he had wondered if Fusan had given it to Kerry, if they had known each other. But Fusan had explained many times that the Keepers had done everything possible to avoid contact with the Drons. To the point of retreating deeper into the maze rather than have a confrontation. Now these thoughts returned and he fixed his eyes on the old Keeper's.

Fusan showed no emotion in his face. Not that that was unusual. What surprised Nikko particularly was the Keeper's voice when he spoke. It was a hoarse whisper, a far cry from the high pitch and quite different also to the low harsh tone he seemed to choose when he wanted to be serious. Instead of facing Fallon, Fusan addressed his answer to Nikko. “One cannot go through life without making mistakes. Some are worse than others. Few, and hopefully it is only a few, can do real harm to others. Directly or indirectly. This is not an excuse. I erred seriously. That error has caused harm.”

Nikko could not help but notice the way Fusan spoke. His eloquence had gone, in its place were short, crisp sentences. He is apologising, thought Nikko, and it is hard for him. The words were almost choked out of the Keeper's throat and Nikko was unsure whether it was because of anger, embarrassment or sorrow.

Fusan said: “Much suffering has resulted. There will be more to come. It is my doing.”

“Why?” asked Fallon. “Why did you give it to him then? You must have known he was rotten.”

“I did not give the ball to the boy,” said Fusan. Fallon was about to ask another question but Fusan put up his hand and went on: “The boy surprised me. I hastened off but left the ball behind. He found it. It should never have happened.”

He stopped. Nikko was sure now that Fusan was angry, angry at himself. He was also sorry for the injury his mistake had caused. But he senses there was more to the story. Gabryisia more than sensed it. She also knew that no matter how hurtful, it had to come out. Softly she urged: “Fusan, we believe you did not give the ball to Kerry, we also can see you regret what happened. But unfortunately I think there is more you have not told us. You see, Kerry mentioned you by name, Keepers, when he had us in his dungeon. You must have seen him again. You must have spoken to him.”

“I had no choice,” said Fusan. “He had the ball.”

“Tell us,” said Nikko. “Please Fusan. We have to know.”

There was a slight hesitation, and then the old Keeper spoke in a low monotone that conveyed as much in emotion as it did information.

“He had the ball. I had to retrieve it. After I ran away the boy stayed in the tunnel playing with it. I knew I had to get it back. He might also tell his friends about us. We would be unable to look after the collections. So I returned and faced him. I just asked for the return of the ball. But he was cunning,. He was not as shocked as you that I could speak. He laughed and called me funny. Before he would give me the globe, he said, I would have to tell him what I was and what I was doing in the Deep. I did not want to but he said he would keep the ball and tell his friends. So I had to. I did not tell him everything,

but it was too much. Then I again asked for the ball. He said no. I had to tell him what it was.” He paused. “I had to.”

“But he kept it anyway,” said Fallon.

“He said he would keep it as insurance. I knew then he was totally untrustworthy. I knew also I had no choice but to leave with my family and go further into the Deep.”

“And he used the ball to get hold of us.” Ended Fallon. “And he could use it again.”

“No,” said Fusan.

“How can you be so sure? It worked once before.”

“It can only be used once. He has no others.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

“Have you seen him again?”

“Yes. But he has not seen me.”

The children looked at one another but remained silent. Then Nikko faced the old Keeper and spoke: “Thank you Fusan. We had to know, that is now all past. We are safe together. What we must do is look ahead. Plan our next move.”

It had been a trying time for everyone. What had started out as happiness had ended in sadness, doubts or even distrust perhaps. Yet it had been unavoidable. The timing and the manner in which the unsavoury matter had been broached could have been better, but that was behind them now. It had been raised. It had been pursued and Fusan had answered their questions. Information had been gained, but it was difficult to immediately gauge any damage that may have been caused as a result.

Nikko had felt some pity for Fusan as he replied to his critics. He had grown very fond of the old Keeper in a short time and was saddened at his loss of composure and obvious embarrassment and discomfort. At the same time he realised that some of the children had been disappointed at what had happened. This was entirely understandable though. Their misfortune over the last week or so had been the direct result of Fusan’s mistake. It was natural for them to be angry.

Fallon was clearly upset and his expression left little doubt as to his feelings on the matter. Jason and Simon, too, were not pleased. For the others it was hard to tell from their outward appearances what they thought. Nevertheless, if Nikko had to guess he would say there was not much sympathy in the group for the Keepers generally. Fusan had been the cause of the suffering they had all experienced with the sole exception of Venki. He was impassive.

Nikko could not have known it but Venki was unconcerned about the silver ball and the Drongs. His mind was firmly fixed on Fusan’s explanation of the fact that there were different dimensions a person could enter. The thought fascinated him. A window had been opened for him. It was a window that a person could climb through and enter another world where time was not the same. Time travel in effect. He was not sure whether it was a journey back or a glimpse into the future. Fusan had said that because it went faster it took its inhabitants into the future. That only meant that five weeks in Yshon was equal to one week outside.

Venki remembered Nikko recounting Fusan’s claim that he had been alive when even the Dead Place had been vibrant with life. In forest time that made the Keep ancient. But in Yson time he was at least five times as old. It was too incredible. The Keepers had had

eons to learn so their knowledge had to be awesome. Venki was bewildered but hungry to learn some of their knowledge.

“We don’t have to go back just yet,” he said. “We should take advantage of our situation to learn something while we can. It won’t hurt.”

“We can’t,” Fallon said. “We have to get back to the forest as soon as we can. Whom knows what’s going on back there.”

“Fallon’s right,” Gabrysia agreed. “We can’t afford to delay. We have to go back through the tunnels don’t forget. That’ll take some time. And we don’t know what to expect there either.”

“Even a day is too long,” said Fallon. “We can stay the night but in the morning we will have to go.”

“That’s just it,” said Venki, gesturing with his hand. “It’s not a day. It’s only a few hours. We can stay here for five days and it’s only one day back there. If we stay on for just two days it’s hardly anything.”

When no-one said anything, Venki continued: “Look. If we stay two days and then leave we’ll get back into the tunnels tomorrow morning. In the morning our time. It will give us the whole day to get through and home. If we leave before then it’ll be night there and we’ll have to either stay in the tunnels, camp in the Dead Place, or walk during the night. None of those are any good. It is to our advantage to stay here longer. And we could use the extra time. Can’t you see that?”

Gabrysia turned to Fallon. “What he says makes sense,” she said. “I don’t understand all this talk of time and dimensions, but the way Venki puts it sounds logical.”

Fallon said nothing. He was deep in thought. Then he spoke. “Two things. First, Fusan is Venki right? If we stay here two more days will it be only tomorrow morning back in the forest?”

“Yes,” Fusan replied. “Right,” said Fallon. “Then I agree. But before we go any further we have to clear something up.” He stopped and surveyed the group of children.

“What’s that?” asked Josh.

“We have to decide who is leader,” said Fallon. “I’m not. As it stands we have three. Venki used to be. Gabrysia was until she was captured. And up to now Nikko has been in charge. We have to decide.”

“I’ve had my time,” Venki smiled. “Besides I am not sure I will be coming back to the forest.”

“What do you mean you’re not coming back?” asked Gabrysia. “Of course you are.”

Venki turned to Fusan. “That depends,” he said. “Fusan would you allow me to join you? I mean, would you and your family permit me to stay here? To live in Yshon?”

“You can’t,” said Jason. “You’re one of us. You belong in the forest.”

Venki continued looking at the Keeper. Ignoring Jason and the others he said: “In want to learn Fusan. I want to know, to understand. There is so much.”

“Venki, you can’t,” repeated Jason.

“Can I Fusan? May I stay?”

Fusan stared at Venki for a long while, then replied: “If you stay you can never return. You will be part of Yshon. Forever.”

“I know that.”

Again Fusan looked deeply into the boy’s eyes. “You are welcome to stay with us Venki.”

“Thank you,” he said and turned to the others. “I shall not be coming, so count me out.” Nothing any of the children could say would change his mind. He had made his choice. That choice was Yshon.

When the discussion of leadership was returned to the decision was quickly reached. Nikko did not want the role and nor did he think he should have it. He said as much. Gabryisia was returned to leadership and Nikko had the feeling that would have been the outcome even if he had not decided to back out. He was not disappointed. It was the way it should be. Things were getting back to normal and he was pleased. He was sad in a way though that Venki would be remaining behind when they left.

Clearly the boy had a yearning to learn and Nikko respected that. He doubted he could have made the same decision himself. He would leave. But as they were staying a little longer he told himself he should make the most of it.

“Before I hand over the reins, or my reign, I have a final order to give,” he said. The others laughed.

“What’s that?” asked Porky.

“Over the next two days let’s learn as much as we can,” he said seriously. “Let’s not waste the opportunity. Please Fusan. Please teach us and show us all you can.”

Learn and observe they did. Over the following two days the children saw fabulous things, heard wondrous talks and listened to the teachings of Fusan that covered a history of seeking that could not truly be imagined. In their totality the sights and insights overflowed. Some could not be comprehended, some were understood in part only, but much was considered, digested and absorbed.

During the days they walked and climbed the upper reaches of the jungle where myriad birds and animals flourished. They had suddenly returned to life in a blaze of colour, chatter and movement as if a secret sign had been given. The children also roamed the jungle floor to the river which did not rush on its way to a distant end, but meandered along providing calm security for water creatures of all sizes. The trees parted above the river and the sun beamed down turning the surface to glistening gold and the leaves on the fringe of the jungle to hot silver.

Hours were also spent on the plain on the opposite side of the jungle valley to where Gabryisia, Venki, Fallon and Jordon had spent their first weeks in Yshon. The contrast was stunning. Despite the warmth, the landscape was one of ice and snow covered hills. There were deep blue lakes dotted to the horizon and the sensation was that an invisible shield separated the winter of one side of the valley from the summer of the other. These twin seasons remained unchanged year in year out, they were told.

Back on the platforms in the trees Fusan took the leaf Children into seven of the houses, two of them huge. Inside were scores of objects of wonder: piles of hundreds of silver globes, more blocks with protruding limbs that were merely said to be art, gold rings that when placed around the neck of a person rendered him incapable of motion as demonstrated by a somewhat reluctant Porky, stringed instruments that produced sounds so sharp and piercing they almost sent the unfamiliar listeners to sleep at the first few notes, a chest of jewellery that Fusan mysteriously referred to only as Keeper Holengs, a magnificent crystal mirror that when looked into allowed the viewer to see that section of Yshon bordered by the frame in any direction it was faced, glass, wood, gold and silver toys depicting animals, people and structures, and some made from materials whose names meant nothing to the children. And many, many more items.

By the end of each day the children were exhausted with the novelty and number of things they had seen. But they did not sleep until late as Fusan, who was the only Keeper to accompany them on their trips, again singlehandedly kept them wide eyed and alert with explanations of Keeper history, learning and philosophy. Words and concepts which were repeated throughout were truth, honesty, goodness, love, peace, respect. These principles were the boulders on which the roots of the finest and strongest trees were anchored.

They were the messages that sounded in the children's ears during the nights in Yshon. They sounded again in their mornings as they awoke, and as they did on their last.

"Up there is the cave," said Fusan. "You will find it as you left it."

The ten children and Fusan were standing under the tree where Gabrysia and the others had lived. The morning sun had risen only two hours before, but the party had left the jungle long before dawn.

"Go now," he added. "Go quickly."

Venki extended his hand. "Good luck," he said. "Be careful. And be happy all of you."

Nikko opened his mouth to speak but Fusan held up a hand. "No," he said. "Go. Go with haste."

Nikko looked steadily at the old Keeper. Then he turned and walked in the direction of the cave at the top of the rise. The others followed in silence. When they reached the cave's entrance they looked back towards the tree and the river, but they could not see Fusan or Venki.

Behind them the rope ladder hung from above in a bright beam of light. "Well then," said Fallon. "Here we are again. The first steps on the way home."

"Yes," said Gabrysia. "Home. Let's go," and the children, in turn, gripped the rungs and began the long climb.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Since the forest camp had fallen to the Drongs life for the Leaf Children had been miserable. They had been subjected to taunts and abuses, some of them had been mistreated physically, and they had all been ordered about by Kerry and his gang of thugs as though they were slaves.

Kerry stayed up in the central tree with each of the other four trees they had taken being held by one of his soldiers. The rest of the Drongs paraded around below issuing instructions, pushing and shoving the children for no reason and generally making life unpleasant.

One of the first orders Kerry gave was to have all the toys in the main chamber taken out. They were removed by two of his soldiers and thrown from the platform to the ground. There they were placed in a large single pile and a Drong was posted near them as a guard.

“Anyone who touched them will be severely punished,” Kerry warned. “And every time one of you Leafies causes any trouble, any trouble at all, a toy will be thrown into the river down there.”

He was apparently a man of his word when it came to carrying out such threats. On the first day six toys had been lost. And five boys and one girl had been punished. The boys were whipped around the legs with vine and then tied to trees. Each time a Drong passed the tree he punched the boy in the stomach. The girl was not whipped but she too was fastened to a tree. As she was passed by a soldier her hair was tugged hard. The other children could not help noticing how often the Drong soldiers walked by those trees, and the pleasure they got from the punches and the hair pulling.

All the while Kerry sat in his tree looking down from the platform. Often he smiled or laughed out loud as one of the Leaf Children was pushed to the ground or grunted from a blow. On one occasion he had actually pointed to a boy and shouted to one of his soldiers to teach him a lesson. The offensive behaviour had been nothing more than a glare in Kerry’s direction.

But if the children were unhappy Kerry and his Drongs were delighted with the way things had turned out. The soldiers who had been sullen and bordering on rebellion had recovered their dreadful happiness and once more had no thoughts of going against their leader.

For his part Kerry was jubilant. He was in total charge of the present situation. At first he had been disappointed not to find the girl Gabryisia and then others in the camp when he took it. But they would return sooner or later and then he would have absolute power. He had had to alter his plans though. Instead of the Drongs staying in the camp with a messenger running back to the tunnels the next morning with the good news, they had all had to stay where they were for the moment. He needed the numbers until he was certain they could not be counter-attacked. So he decided to wait one more day. Two at the most. If Gabryisia and the others had not come by then he would risk the messenger to bring out the rear guard of Drongs.

For now though he would enjoy the fun of getting back at those Leafies who were there for what he considered the insults he had been subjected to when he had had to leave the forest.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The climb up the ladder from the cave below was long and hard. Going down Gabryisia, Fallon and Jordon had had little trouble other than concentrating on their grip as they lowered themselves one rung at a time. This time it was tougher. Heaving themselves up was a tiring process and they stopped a number of times to rest their legs and stretch strained fingers.

For Nikko and the others it was the first time they had been on the ladder. Their entry into Yshon had not involved any climbing at all. Another day had been spent in the tunnels practicing self defence and learning to control the silver ball so that they could all manage to keep it in the air for a minute or more. At the end of this Fusan had given each a globe and advised them to go to sleep early after a meal as they had much to do and see the next day. The food had been the same as before but had a slightly sweet taste and they found themselves asleep in seconds. The next thing they knew they were in the tree colony in Yshon.

When they asked Fusan for an explanation as to how they got there, the Keeper had simply said: "While you slept soundly my family transported you." He had offered no further information but had begun telling them about Yshon and finally alerting them that Gabryisia and the others were on their way. Now that he saw the long ladder Nikko was doubtful they had been carried down it by the little Keepers. They must have come some other way. But they would never know now.

Nevertheless for the children the route home had had to start with the climb up the ladder even if they had not come down it. They had started out eager and fresh but by the time they reached the top they were sweaty and their hands, shoulders and legs were sore.

They crawled into the cave and slumped against the wall breathing deeply. Before he sat down Nikko reached up and pressed the eye in the statue of Torpah. The ladder fell away and the statue swung silently closed. As it did so the cave was plunged into darkness. Almost immediately the trapdoor above them opened and another short ladder unravelled, also letting in light.

"It would have been nice to have that the last time," commented Fallon. "Jumping down was a bit risky. We could have turned an ankle or broken a leg even."

No-one moved towards the ladder for some minutes until they had got their breath back and massaged their limbs so that the blood flowed and untied the knots which had caused the tension. Then they climbed out of the cave into the tunnel. They searched the walls on either side of the opening where a concealed button was located. When it was depressed the hole in the ground was covered by a plate which slid from one side. The children kicked dirt over it until they were satisfied it would not be noticed by anyone unless they specifically knew it was there. The second exit from Yshon was thus closed off as Fusan had asked.

"Which way?" asked Jason.

"This way I think," Gabryisia replied. "I'm not certain. But I think it's right."

"Well, let's try it anyway," said Jason. "We can always come back if we're wrong."

They set off along the tunnel, *illuminations* lighting the way for them as it wound its way first in an anticlockwise direction and then swinging to the right so that it wound back on itself.

They had walked for ten minutes when the tunnel came to an abrupt end about fifteen meters after turning a final sharp-angled corner.

“Now we know,” said Fallon. “I thought this was the way too, but obviously it’s not.”

“Well,” added Jason, “fortunately we didn’t have to go too far before finding out. We’d better get back.”

But when he got to the corner he stopped suddenly and backed around the bend with an urgent: “Quiet! Get back! Quickly!”

“What is it?” asked Simon. “What’s the matter?”

Jason looked shaken. “There’s another one of those creatures. Coming this way.”

“A Keeper?” asked Fallon, and moved forward.

Jason pushed him back roughly. “Not a Keeper,” he said. “A dog. One of those huge black things we came up against before.”

“Oh god,” exclaimed Danielle. “What are we going to do? We’re trapped this time and we don’t even have any arrows or anything.”

Jason poked his head around the corner then pulled back quickly. “I don’t think it knows we’re here. But it’s still coming. About twenty meters away.”

The children ran to the end of the tunnel and frantically searched the bare rock face for hidden buttons or levers. “There’s nothing,” said Danielle. “It’s a dead end. What are we going to do?”

Just then the dog rounded the corner. When it saw the children it stopped and stared for a few seconds. Its tail switched and it roared, its green tongue flashing against its sleep black body.

“Look out,” cried Jason. “Stay together. Don’t move.”

The animal held its ground, its tail in constant motion and its bright eyes never shifting from the group of children huddled together not far away. Time seemed suspended as nothing happened. Without warning Jordon walked quickly out of the bunch and moved up the tunnel the animal’s tail stopped and it stood staring at the youngster as he approached.

Jason bolted forward but he was grabbed firmly by Nikko who pinned him from behind.

“No,” he hissed. “Wait. Wait Jason.”

Jordon continued walking slowly towards the animal. When he was only five steps away the dog lunged.

“Look out!” screamed Jason and simultaneously Danielle yelled: “Jordon!”

The dog landed in front of Jordon and heaved its huge front paws onto the shoulders of the youngster, crashing him to the ground on his back.

“Jordon!” screamed Danielle again, but the animal was on top of him now, its tail flicking back and forth. Then to the amazement of the children instead of sinking its teeth into Jordon’s throat it dropped his head and began licking his face with wide sweeps of its tongue. Momentarily it stopped, staring at the children, roared, and again began licking Jordon’s cheeks.

“Help,” the young boy called. “Get this thing off me. Help me.”

The other children rushed forward and when they reached the dog it leapt from Jordon onto Jason, knocking him to the ground and subjected him to the same wet rasping tongue lashing.

As Jordon struggled to his feet Jason bumbled: “Get off. Get it off,” and turned his face left and right in an attempt to evade the animal’s sloppy licks.

The other boys warily tried to shove the dog to one side to no avail, until Jordon lightly smacked it on the side of its snout with an open hand and commanded: "Off! Off!" The dog stopped licking Jason and backed away, staring at Jordon.

"Sit!" the youngster ordered. "Sit, I said."

The other children stood dumbfounded as the huge animal sat back on his haunches, its tongue hanging out of its jaws and dripping saliva on the ground between its paws.

"Stay," said Jordon. Then he turned to the others and said quietly but triumphantly: "It's alright. Everything's ok now."

The children stared at him. Danielle asked: "How did you do that? You could have been killed. We could have all been killed."

"Just a hunch I guess," the youngster answered, shrugging. "I remembered something Fusan told me. So I thought I'd give it a try."

"What do you mean?" asked Danielle. "What did Fusan say?"

"When we were in the jungle," replied Jordon. "He told me that sometimes animals that look dangerous are more likely scared and if you are friendly to them they will be friendly back. I reckoned we had nothing to lose so I'd try it."

"Good god," said Jason. "You might have been wrong. What then?"

"Jordon was right," said Nikko. "Fusan said something like that to us in the tunnels too. About fierce-looking creatures not being fierce at all. I remembered it too. That's why I held you back Jason."

He turned to Jordon. "Thankfully you were right this time. But next time, if there is a next time, we had better be more careful. We could be wrong. Fusan did not say all animals."

Jordon nodded. Jason was feverishly wiping his face with the back of his hand. "Damned dog," he said. "Nearly killed me."

"Oh go on Jason," smiled Porky. "He was playing. The only way he could have killed you is if he drowned you with his spit."

Josh added: "Look at him. He hasn't moved since Jordon told him to stay there. What are we going to do with him?" The children were tense but relieved.

"We don't have to do anything with it," said Jason. "Just tell it to go away Jordon. If you really can talk to it tell it to get out of our way so we can get going."

Simon agreed. "Yes," he said. "We've got to keep moving. We've still got a fair way to go yet, even if we don't make any more wrong turns. And don't forget we've got to get past the Drongs also."

"Ok," said Jason. "Jordon, tell it to get out. Or stay. Or something. We have to go."

Jordon walked over to the dog and patted its back. The dog roared and licked the boy again, knocking him off balance.

"Gives me the creeps," said Jason. "Tame or not it would scare the heck out of anyone."

"Why don't we take him with us?" Jordon asked.

"No way," Jason shot back. "I don't want any creature like that breathing down..."

"Hold on," said Fallon. "Why not?"

"Because it's frightening, that's why."

"Maybe that's it. If we take him with us and we run into the Drongs he would scare the living daylights out of them. He could be the weapons we don't have."

Jason didn't say anything and Fallon continued: "What would you do if you saw this thing coming at you? I'd run like mad."

Again Jason remained silent. "It makes sense," said Nikko. "Can you control him Jordon?"

"Sure," said the youngster confidently. "No problem."

"Alright," said Gabrysia. "We'll try it. But if he starts to play up we leave him behind. Alright?"

They all agreed and immediately started back down the tunnel. The dog stayed beside Jordon and kept nudging him in the shoulder and trying to lick him. Finally Jordon stopped and ordered: "Down. Lie down." The dog did as it was told and Jordon climbed onto its back. "Up," he said. "Go."

As the others laughed Simon said: "Man's best friend." Jordon rode the animal like a pony, gripping a roll of fatty tissue on its neck.

With Jordon riding in the middle of the line the children retraced their steps to the point where they had emerged from the cave below. They noted that if they had not known the trapdoor was there they would never have been aware of it. One of Simon's fears though was soon realised. The children walked for more than hour along the main tunnel which ended in a stone wall, then along a shorter off shoot which also came to a dead end, and finally down a long zigzagging passage that seemed familiar but which ended with a solid rock face as well. The passages had looked likely each time but for some reason led nowhere. Nor were there any hidden devices which may have rolled the walls away like magic as before. There was no explanation for it.

They had one last chance. About a hundred meters back from the last impenetrable barrier had been a tunnel it was semi dark and the children had rejected it because they were certain they had not used it before. Now they had no choice but to try it. As they entered the dim passage they were full of foreboding and as it to echo their feelings the dog let out a fearsome roar that brought bumps to the backs of the necks.

It would in a haphazard manner for over two hundred meters and just as the children were on the verge of giving up all hope of it ending they burst into a gigantic cavern. It was the largest they had seen and it was full of Keeper specimens. There were literally hundred of cages of birds, animals, reptiles and creatures they had never imagined. The first such museum had made most of the children catch their breath. This time they were not as struck but they were amazed at the sheer quantity of creatures that surrounded them.

For Gabrysia and Fallon it was their first encounter with what they had been told. And they were stunned. They roamed from one end of the cavern to the other and from side to side examining and touching the collections. For nearly half an hour they stayed there and exchanged incredulous comments.

It was Nikko who interrupted their talking with the repeated warning that they should leave the cavern and continue their search for a way out. Reluctantly the group left the museum behind and went into the only tunnel leading out. It was a wide, brightly lit passage but it gradually narrowed and after a hundred meters or so it ended. Another dead end.

The children were thoroughly mystified as to how they could have got lost. They had missed no tunnels yet each one they had taken so far had been unfamiliar and obviously wrong. However, they agreed there was no other route for them to take so there had to be a concealed device that would move the wall in front of them. Gabrysia found it. A small button recessed in the middle of the wall at head height.

When she pressed it the rock wall shuddered sideways making an opening two meters wide which revealed another cavern. In front of them was a large flat stone on a platform and behind that a band of Drong soldiers. The children had found the Drong base and were directly behind the chair from which Kerry issued his orders.

“Dronics,” shouted Gabrysia and instantly took up a fighting stance. But she was knocked to one side as the huge dog bounded past her with Jordon holding on to its neck and screaming: “Yeah! Yeah!” He rode headlong at the bunch of Dronics who scattered in all directions yelling in terror and dropping anything they were holding.

Jordon and the dog raced across the cavern to the main exit on the opposite side where he wheeled about and, with the dog roaring and pawing the ground, he shouted. “Yaah! Hyaah!”

The other Leaf Children ran in from their side and guarded their entrance in fighting stances. The Dronics ran around in circles not knowing where to flee and hide.

“Yaah!” yelled Jordon over and over again. “Yaah! Yaah! Yaah!”

“Enough,” said Jason. “Stop. Stop all of you. We are Leaf Children and we command you to surrender.” But his call had no effect until the boys grabbed three of the soldiers and threw them to the ground.

“Stop it,” ordered Jason again. “Stop and surrender or we will launch the beast on you.”

The Dronics slowed and gathered in a corner where they huddled moaning and mumbling incoherently.

“You are ours,” shouted Jason. “Throw down your weapons.”

The Dronics cowered in the corner. They had no weapons to throw down. They had dropped them when Jordon and the dog had burst in on them. The Drong base had unexpectedly been captured with a fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kerry was furious.

The Leafies continued to defy him. Despite a number of them being punished and in spite of his continual warnings as to what would happen if he and his soldiers were not obeyed the children committed act after act which he considered disrespectful. They glared at him constantly, some whispered together and snickered when they looked in his direction, others simply refused to do what they were told and one boy, the one who had had the necklace, had even attacked a Drong.

They were all punished of course, only one full day had passed but already fourteen Leafies had been tied to trees. There were boys and girls and it was two to a tree, three in one case. The boy who had assaulted the soldier was singled out for special punishment. He was whipped like the others, but instead of being tied to a tree he was suspended from a branch, his feet barely touching the ground. He was also frequently punched in the stomach or kicked from behind.

Also almost two dozen toys had been sent floating down the stream or sank to the bottom where they were thrown. Yet still the Leafies rebelled. In fact, so many of the children had been tied up the camp was almost out of rope. If there were only one or two more acts of defiance Kerry would have to devise another form of punishment that did not involve tying anyone up.

Although the second day in the camp had started only a few hours before he already was certain it would follow the same pattern as the first. He sat out on the platform and watched the children go about their tasks of collecting water and firewood and generally tidying up. Three groups of two Leafies, under guard, had gone into the forest and collected berries and some of the other wild fruit and vegetables that grew there. All the while they reacted to the soldiers' instructions slowly and too casually.

His breakfast had been ruined. He also sensed his soldiers were becoming agitated over the childrens' behaviour. If things didn't change they might decide there was no point in holding the camp and decide to leave. That was one of the reasons he suddenly called his gang together for a meeting. All but those guarding the trees where the offending Leafies were tied climbed into the central chamber and sat down to formulate plans which Kerry had decided needed to be carried out. One of the major objectives was to keep everyone busy with something and take their minds off what was increasingly taking on the appearance of a hollow victory.

The first point decided was to send a messenger back to the Drong base to give those behind the good news and to bring them into the forest so the Drongs could settle down to a life of permanent control of the trees. He would depart immediately after the meeting concluded.

The second decision involved the children who were to be punished in future. Their suffering would have to be different and as the present form did not appear to be working as well as he expected, Kerry ordered it would have to be more severe. It must not be so harsh that it would incite open rebellion across the board. That would be counter-productive because the Drongs could hardly effectively tie up or totally control the movements of every single Leafie. But at the same time it had to be a deterrent and put an end to the challenges they now experienced.

There was a lot of discussion with a number of options considered but all of them rejected. Ultimately one of the most ruthless soldiers proposed the answer. Ironically it also meant they would be able to free the Leafies they had already punished so they could carry out other work Kerry had in mind, but still be controlled.

The idea was simple and straightforward. Select one of the Leafies and punish him in such a way the rest would have to obey any and all orders they were given. Failure to do so would result in the chosen victim being inflicted with more and more suffering. That was fine as far as it went, said Kerry, but what type of punishment would fit that bill. The soldier had a ready answer.

The river, he said. Where it narrowed to a stream. The children collected their water at that point as there was a log that had fallen across the flowing torrent. A Leafie could be securely lashed to the log and each time one of his friends misbehaved he could be lowered deeper. If it started with the flowing stream lapping the Leafies' armpits it would only take three or four misdemeanours and his head would be under the water and he would drown.

The reaction of the other Drongs, and Kerry, was to recoil at the idea of killing a child. Even if it was a Leafie. But the soldier continued: "I'm not saying we actually do it. We just threaten to. Once they see what's happening and if we just convince them we mean it, they'll buckle. After all, who is going to be the one to force the kid's head under? Four, five orders at most disobeyed and no-one will dare risk it."

Kerry's mood changed. He gripped and slapped the soldier on the back. "I like it," he said. "I love it. Sergeant, we'll do it." The soldier beamed. His idea had earned him an instant promotion. Without hesitation Kerry selected the boy who had had the necklace as the hapless victim. It would be a lesson he would learn and remember for a very long time.

Kerry liked the idea also because it had the added benefit of his being able to free the Leafies he had already tied up. There had clearly been too many of them and he needed them for something else he had in mind. It concerned the precautionary defence of the camp.

"Let's do it," he said and went out on to the platform of his tree and called the Leaf Children together. He slowly, with emphasis for maximum effect, outlined what was going to happen. He instructed the sergeant to carry it out and pointed at the boy suspended from the branch of the tree opposite. "Lucky you," he jeered. "I hope you like water." Quickly he then instructed another Drong to return to the tunnels and bring the rest of the gang to the forest camp.

Facing the Leaf Children below who had not fully grasped the grotesqueness of the Drong punishment plan, Kerry said: "You've forced me into this. Don't forget that. And also remember – disobey my orders and your buddy there goes under. You'll drown him, not me." As he finished the boy David was led away struggling in the direction of the river.

It seemed that once more Kerry and the Drongs were in charge of the situation. The Leaf Children were helpless. In fact, they would be their own warders.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

With the capture of the subterranean Drong base the Leaf Children had created a problem for themselves. It was something they had not really thought through as they had set out on their journey home. Then they had merely concentrated on getting out of the tunnels, across the desolation of the Dead Place and back to their forest. If there had to be a battle then they would fight. But beyond a hoped-for victory, or better still if they could avoid a confrontation altogether, detailed action in the aftermath had not been discussed.

Now they were forced to address the subject. The confrontation had been short lived and surprisingly easy. Indeed, surprise had been one of the deciding factors. The surprise of their arrival on the scene and the shock at the cavorting black creature with Jordon mounted on its back screaming at the top of his lungs. The base was theirs. And so were twenty Drong soldiers. The question was, what to do with them?

The three who had been shackled in Venki's former dungeon for being traitors posed no difficulties. As soon as they were released they pledged their support to the Leaf Children. They had no choice. But the other seventeen were not so simple. Beaten they were. Terrified of the huge fierce-looking dog there was no doubt. Even disgruntled over Drong life in the tunnels to a certain extent. But ready to join the Leaf Children? That was far from certain.

The problem was magnified by the fact that the children soon realised they would have to take the Drons with them whether they liked it or not. Kerry and his gang had already gone to the forest camp, they learned, and there was the possibility he might have succeeded in overrunning it. Whether that was true was something the children would have to face soon. In the meantime they could not leave the captured Drons behind. Having arrived at that initial conclusion the other decisions fell into place.

The seventeen would be completely disarmed and bound. Ankles would be hobbled and the soldiers would then be linked together by a rope looped around the hobbles and threaded in a long single file. That way the Drons were restricted severely in their movements. And that meant they could more likely be controlled by the Leaf Children who were fewer in number.

With the Drons marching in the middle the children left the cavern and headed out on the second leg of their journey. They passed along the illuminated tunnels with their fading sketches on the walls, through the caves with the unusual art objects and the lookout tree, and into the museum. They lingered briefly spending a few minutes in silent farewell to the two Leaf Children in the recess in the wall, and then climbed the stone staircase to the passageway above. When they arrived at the ladders that would take them to the hollow boulders and into the Dead Place they halted.

"This is as far as he goes," Jason said to Jordon and pointed to the dog. "Make him go back. We can't take him any further."

Jordon would have liked to take the animal back to the forest but he realised that was impossible. There was no way he could be taken up the ladder, and in any event there was agreement among the children that he belonged in the tunnels. He was not a creature of the outside world. Patting the dog's neck and shoulder Jordon said quietly: "You can't come with us. You have to stay here," Then he stepped back and said sternly: "Off you go. Go."

The dog licked the boy's face with his huge green tongue but did not do as instructed. He roared and sat on his haunches refusing to budge.

"Go," said Jordon. "Go on. Go back." The dog remained where he was and roared a second time. "He's not going to leave," said Jordon.

"Alright," said Jason. "Then we will. Come on, up the ladder. I'll go first and then the rest of you follow. When we're outside he'll have to go. He'll be ok." With that he started the climb up.

The others followed, again with the line of Drongs in the middle, bunched closely together and following each other one rung at a time. Jordon was last. With a final pat and a "thank you" he climbed the ladder. As he pulled himself through the opening into the heavy heat of the Dead Place he looked back and saw the dog far below still sitting watching him. "Bye," he called down and the dog roared in reply as the boulder slid back over the hole.

Nikko walked to one of the other boulders and searched the ground nearby. Soon he found what he was looking for. There was a small plate under the soft earth with a rod protruding slightly, held by a metal pin. He looked at Gabryisia. She nodded and Nikko pulled the pin out. The rod dropped from sight. His action had dismantled the mechanism for mobbing all the boulders, sealing the underground maze.

"Dom you think we'll ever see them again?" asked Porky.

"That's not up to us any longer," said Gabryisia. "That's for Fusan to decide. Only he from the inside can open the way now."

The sun was nearing its apex as the Leaf Children and their Drong captives headed across the Dead Place, and by the time they reached the jungle edge they were covered in sweat and their feet were cut and burning. In the shade and cool of the thick foliage they rested. Then as one they rose and with Jason, Porky and Josh scouting ahead the group headed deeper into the jungle.

As they walked Nikko retraced the time from when he last trekked through the jungle. So much had happened it had already begun to blur. The details were individually clear and fresh in his mind but they raced into one another and became tangled, out of sequence with no respect for accuracy of time. The dingy evil of the tunnels that had been the scenes of flight and fear. But they also led to fantastic sights and ultimately to the wonderful meeting with the Keepers. Then Yshon with its contrasting, illogical beauty of winter and summer, and the other jungle which hid the incredible secret of the Keepers' tree-house colony. All of it was fantastic, made more so by the beauty and sensitivity of the Keepers themselves.

Nikko would not see any of it again and he sighed, gently touching the silver globe given to him by Fusan and safely tucked into his breeches. Instinctively he looked down and for the first time in more than a week he noticed his appearance. He was startled. He was wearing only breeches and they were torn at the knees and filthy. His legs and torso were covered in grime and he had no doubt his hair was matted and his face grubby. He looked at the other children and saw they were the same. In fact, there was little difference in appearance between the Leaf Children and the Drongs. He recalled when he had seen the Drongs for the first time in the forest as they advanced on the camp, and he thought then what an unsavoury bunch of urchins. Now he was much the same.

He must have made an involuntary sound because Danielle who was beside him asked: "Sorry? Did you say something Nikko?"

“No,” he replied. “I was just thinking to myself what a sight we must be. A bedraggled band of urchins. Anyone would think we were all Drongs who had been underground for ages,”

Danielle smiled. “I suppose now that you mention it we are pretty dirty aren’t we.”

From ahead Jason urgently called back: “Shhh! Something’s coming.” The children dropped to the ground and waited and watched.

“What is it?” asked Danielle.

“Shhhh,” repeated Jason. He was crouched behind a large tree with a thick bush in front of it. To his right, five meters away Josh also crouched and slightly in front of him Porky stood erect, side on and flush against a big tree trunk with strong roots plunging from overhead into the moist earth at his feet. A narrow path ran between Jason and Josh and whatever was approaching was coming on quickly, unconcerned at the noise it was making. It could not be seen but Nikko figured it would be upon them in seconds. He braced himself and saw that Jason sank lower to the ground ready to spring if needed into the path.

Nikko was transported back to the day, now seemingly long ago and not far from where they now were, when Jordon had been surprised by very active ants and Porky and Josh had referred to black bears. What if it was a bear crashing through the undergrowth? What would they be able to do? For all intents and purposes the children were defenceless. There is nothing we can do he told himself, and his muscles became as taut as steel and his eyes blazed.

Suddenly the bush in front of him parted and through came not a bear but a Drong soldier running as fast as he could, his head slightly inclined and his arms in front of him forming a shield for his face.

Without thinking Nikko stood up and waved his own arm in the air and shouted: “Wei!” the soldier saw the movement. He also certainly heard the cry for almost at the same time he let out a yell and tried to veer to his left. But his momentum kept him going and Nikko pivoted on one foot, twisting his hips, and shot out his hand. He caught the soldier’s shoulder and the deflecting blow propelled the Drong further off balance and he smashed into a tree. He rebounded like a rubber ball and ended up flat on his back in a clump of bushes.

Almost at once Jason was on him. He leapt onto his chest pressing the Drong further into the bush and pinned his shoulders with his knees. One hand he clamped over his mouth and the other he waved impatiently up and down as a sign for the other children to stay where they were. For thirty seconds nobody moved or said anything. Then Jason hissed at the Drong: “Where are the rest? How many are there?”

Securely held and with Jason’s hand over his mouth the Drong was unable to answer. He shook his head and mumbled incoherently. Jason lifted his palm slightly and repeated the questions; “How many? Where?”

The Drong was clearly frightened and breathless. “None,” he exhaled. “Just me.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Jason and moved his knees back and forth across the Drong’s arm muscles. The Drong groaned and closed his eyes. Again he said: “There are no others. Only me. I’m alone.”

Jason was still unconvinced and looked to Josh a few meters away. “Check it out,” he ordered, “Take Porky and scout up front. If you see anyone stay where you are. But five us a whistle. Go on, quickly.”

Josh and Porky ran off through bushes near where the Drong soldier had burst in on them. The others remained where they were and three minutes later the two boys returned with the news that the soldier was apparently telling the truth. They had seen and heard no-one.

Reluctantly Jason accepted the Drong was not lying. He eased himself off his chest and removed his hand from his mouth. The other children crowded around and Fallon asked: "What's he doing here?"

"You heard him," said Jason and gave the boy on the ground a not too hard kick in the ribs. "What are you doing here? And while you're at it, where have you come from and where were you going?"

At first the Drong did not say anything, but then he added: "We've taken your camp. It's ours."

"What?" exclaimed Porky. "You couldn't have. He's lying Jason."

"Hold it," said Jason. He looked back at the Drong still on the ground. He had made no effort to stand. "If you've captured our camp you'll know where the toys are. Tell us."

The soldier smiled. "I can do better than that," he said. "They were in the chamber in the big tree. But they're not there any longer. They're heaped on the ground. Or at least some are. Some accidentally got dropped in the river. Like one of your Leafie pals."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jason. "What have you done?"

"Like I said, we've taken your camp. You might as well give up." The Drong was still smiling. Then he went on: "You're completely outnumbered. There's nothing you can do. And anyway, there's more of us on the way."

Jason had assumed the role of inquisitor with no objection from the rest of the group, most of whom still stayed in the bushes out of sight. He maintained it now and continued: "There are no others coming. You were alone."

"Not this way, behind you. You'll be caught in a trap. You might as well surrender now."

Jason feigned worry. "You mean more Drons from the tunnels? Oh dear, you mean they're on their way too?"

"That's right. We've called them up. They will be around here any minute."

Jason kept the worried look in his face. He turned to Nikko. "Nikko. Quick. Go and see if there are any Drons behind us will you? And you might as well bring the others up here too. All of them."

Nikko looked concerned and ran back into the bushes. A minute later he returned with the Leaf Children. "No-one there," he reported. "Except us." He hesitated and then added: "Oh, and these guys of course."

With that Simon led forward the twenty Drong soldiers, seventeen of them hobbled together and the other three clearly showing no intentions of doing anything other than what they were instructed by the Leaf Children.

"Is this your rearguard force?" Jason asked casually. "I don't think we need be too worried about them. Do you?"

The soldier's smile had disappeared. He said nothing and glared at Jason.

"Well," Jason said. "I think you're right though. You should join them." He bent down and pulled the soldier to his feet, "Now, while we're making you secure and safe with your friends here, why don't you tell us all about our camp and what you've done. Everything. You can start by elaborating on your remark about one of our family."

Ten minutes later the Leaf Children knew all they had to. With a but of coercion from Porky the Drong had been forthcoming with all the details of the capture of the trees, the punishments meted out and the general layout and situation when he had left a few hours before.

Porky had struck the solider when he heard of the whippings and especially when he learned of the boy David who was obviously at that moment partially submerged in the river. Fallon had been the one to pull him away. And it was Fallon who had cautioned: "Let's not lose our heads. We have to think through how to retake the trees. Calmly."

The Drongs were forced to sit at a distance from the Leaf Children as they huddled together to devise a plan of action. It took nearly half an hour. There was a great deal of discussion and scratching on the ground with sticks. Finally Jason said: "It's decided then. That's what we'll do." He faced Gabryisia: "Gabryisia, you are in charge. You're our leader and we'll take out lead from you."

"Thank you Jason," she replied. "But I think we all know what we have to do. Let's not waste any more time."

They reformed with the Drongs in the middle again and set off for the forest. It took them three hours to reach the edge of the jungle. They were only minutes from the camp and they could see they had no more than an hour of light before the sun dipped and long dark shadows fell, a short prelude to night.

"Josh, Simon, Danielle and Jordon," said Gabryisia. "You have fifteen minutes at most. In twenty minutes we move. You know the plan. Good luck."

Without a word the four departed, heading to the right, parallel with their present position.

"We wait," said Gabryisia.

The minutes seemed to drag. The Drong captives were untied but retired to trees, even the three who had said they would join the Leaf Children. No chances could be taken. They were also gagged with strips torn from their own jackets. After about five minutes Gabryisia said: "Jason. Take up your position with Fallon and Porky. When you see Nikko's signal make your move."

"Good luck," replied Jason and he and the other two moved off to the left.

"Not long now," Gabryisia whispered to Nikko who was the only one to remain behind with her. "I hope this works."

"So do I," he said. "So do I."

Side by side they sat in the grass concealed from the clearer expanse in front of them by low but coarse bushes and a cluster of leaves on an overhanging branch. There was nothing to say so they sat quietly and concentrated on their own thoughts. Nikko's mind travelled over the sequence of events which he hoped would soon take place. Then he moved on to the future, his future, in which he saw himself in the yard of his own house with its familiar metal clothes hoist, the flower beds and the shrubs. And his mother and father. It had been so long. So very long since he had seen any of those things. He wanted to reach out, to touch them and feel their security. Instead he felt alone. As if he had departed from his body he looked down and saw himself crouching in the grass. Alone.

Like a camera drifting silently away the scene grew larger and larger with his self diminishing by the second. Further it sailed until all he could see was the vast empty landscape with himself a dot almost gone. Just as he was to vanish he felt a warmth on his arm and the vision disappeared. He looked down and saw Gabryisia's hand resting on

the warmth. There was a gentle squeeze and he heard her say: "It's time Nikko. It's time to go."

"Right," he said and they rose and walked together into the clearing.

Gabrysia and Nikko strode straight ahead for a hundred meters and with every step the forest opened up more until they stopped and looked at the scene directly in front of the, fifty meters away was the camp with the Drongs standing or lounging about the central trees. They appeared disinterested. There were also many Leaf Children. Their faces were long and they were mechanically going about their chores or carrying firewood, grass baskets of food or rubbish that had been left lying around by their guards.

One of the Drongs with his back against the nearest tree straightened and called to a girl: "You. It's time to get the water. Take her over there with you and bring it back. And be quick about it or else."

As the Drong finished his order the girl spied Gabrysia and Nikko and was about to call out when Gabrysia said sharply: "Stay where you are. Don't move. You don't have to do anything that idiot says."

The soldier wheeled around. For a moment he just stood there and then he raced into the centre of the clearing and shouted: "Kerry. Kerry. She's here. Come quick."

All the Drong guards ran to join him and more appeared from inside and behind other trees. Two raced from the direction of the river and four more appeared from the bushes at the back of the camp, dragging three Leaf Children carrying baskets with them. For their part the Leaf Children congregated in a group to one side and looked on eagerly.

"Where's Kerry?" demanded Gabrysia. "Where's your leader? I don't see him among you rabble. Is he hiding?"

From above the massed children Kerry called down: "Here I am Queen Gabrysia. I'm up here. In your headquarters. Where you used to be."

Gabrysia looked up and saw Kerry standing on the platform outside the main chamber. He had hands on his hips and was grinning broadly. "So," he called down. "You've come back. Managed to find your way. How clever of you."

"Give up Kerry," she said calmly. "You've had your fun. You and your ruffians are finished now."

Kerry guffawed. "Finished? Us? I'd take a closer look if I were you, we are in charge. As for looking like ruffians you don't look so good yourself."

"Give up Kerry," Gabrysia related.

Kerry laughed again. "You really are amusing Queen Gabrysia. You know that? Here we are, in control of your camp, armed, in large numbers with more on the way and you ask us to give up. Just you and your friend there." His grin slowly was replaced by a sneer. "You're a fool," he said. "You annoy me still. Take them."

Six Drongs moved forward, each carrying a solid wooden baton at the ready.

From behind the group of Leaf Children Josh, Simon, Danielle and Jordon stepped into the open. "I wouldn't go any further if I were you," said Josh. "You might end up getting hurt."

The Drongs stopped. They stared at Josh and then looked at Kerry for instructions.

"Well, well, well," said Kerry. "There are six of you now. Good. But not good enough. you'll still lose the fight."

"We don't want to fight," said Gabrysia. "Give up."

Kerry nodded slowly. "You don't want to fight. Alright. I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll settle this by compromise. You give yourselves up to us and I won't drown one of your Leafies down at the river. How's that for a bargain?"

"If you mean me," said the boy David stepping around beside Josh, "I don't see how you can keep your side of the bargain."

The Leaf Children cheered and some of them ran to him and threw their arms around his neck. Then the rest of them joined them and squarely faced the Drongs on the ground who were beginning to look a little unsettled.

"You've done well. I'll give you that," said Kerry. His face was stern, no longer slit by the lopsided grin or sneer. "But you forget my reserves. They'll be here any minute. You can't win."

"They're not coming Kerry," answered Gabrysia still very calm. "All seventeen of them and the three you had locked up are back in the jungle. And so is your messenger. But they're tied up. You've lost. Give up."

Kerry was silent. He stood on the platform glaring down at Gabrysia. His eyes never left her face. She looked back at him. Then very relaxed she and Nikko walked slowly forward. When they were only ten meters from the Drongs she stopped and said: "You've failed. You've lost. Drop your weapons. We have the numbers now. You have no-one coming to your aid."

Clearly the Drong soldiers were undecided what to do, they shifted their feet and a few of them tried to peer into the jungle in the distance to see if the other Drongs were coming.

"They're not coming," said Gabrysia. "They really are tied up. They gave in. without a fight."

"Don't listen to her you fools," shouted Kerry. "It's all lies. Take them. Take them now you cowards."

"He calls you fools and cowards," Gabrysia said. "I think you are all intelligent enough to know what you should do. Forget the foolishness of the past. Do the right thing now. Join us."

One of the Drongs at the front of the group looked up at Kerry in the tree. "Maybe she's right," he said. "Maybe we could start over Kerry. We could stay here. It's better than the underground."

"Coward!" screamed Kerry. "Traitor! You're all traitors. You've got no guts. You're all cowardly girls. Do what I say or you'll pay for it."

The Drong who had spoken dropped his baton and called back. "You do it Kerry. You're so brave up there. Do your own fighting for a change. I've had it." He turned to Gabrysia. "I'll join you," he said.

Another Drong dropped his baton. "I will also," he said. He was followed by the soldier next to him, and then another, and another. Without exception the Drongs on the ground gave up.

"Come down Kerry," said Gabrysia. "It's over."

"No," he hissed. "I have the tree."

Gabrysia turned to Nikko and nodded. He withdrew the silver globe from his breeches and caressed it gently. Then he tossed it into the air and closed his eyes. The ball sailed higher and higher until it was about three meters above the platform where Kerry stood. But he didn't see it. Like all the other Drongs and the Leaf Children below he had turned away quickly and covered their eyes. He protected his face for two minutes and then

carefully opened his eyes. There was no flash, but he saw the globe above him, slowly turning and remaining suspended in the air. He stared at it, his jaw slack and his arms by his sides. The globe hung there, mesmerising him. Finally he forced his gaze away and looked down. Nikko was standing like a statue, his head bent and with his eyes tightly shut. Gabrysia was looking up smiling.

“Come down Kerry,” she said softly. “You know we have the power.”

The rest of those on the ground opened their eyes and stared in disbelief at the silver ball. There were exclamations and sighs as they pointed into the air. The sun was entering its last journey of the day and was nearly at the horizon. Shadows were falling giving the globe a misty, unreal shimmer.

“I’m not coming,” said Kerry but there was a tone of faltering assurance.

From behind him in the frame of the window onto the platform Jason said: “Then I’ll have to carry you down.”

Kerry spun around. He had not thought to lock the window as he could see all that went on below him. But when he hid his face from what he expected to be a blinding flash Jason had rushed into the tree and had silently climbed the ladder to the master chamber. Behind him now and also in the room were Fallon and Porky.

“It would be best for everyone if you came of your own free will,” Jason said. “Gabrysia has given you a choice. You can join us if you want to. If not, you will have to face the consequences. Either way you’re going to have to come down.”

“You’re going to have to make me Leafie,” Kerry replied. “Because I’m not going down there.”

Casually Jason reached behind him and slowly pulled the window shut. From inside Fallon securely locked it and waited. No more words were spoken. Enough had been said. Kerry had made his position clear. No matter what had happened on the ground below he was not going to give in without a fight. Jason had quietly stated his position by fastening the window behind him. He was not leaving without the Drong leader. There was no need for argument. That time had passed.

The platform on which the two boys stood measured about nine meters square and most of the onlookers below could see from where they were what was happening. Those who could not move out and joined the rest. There was a hushed expectancy among them.

As the boys began to circle around the edges of the platform the sun finally dipped out of sight and darkness fell. Moon light sprinkled through the trees and provided a haunting glow so the combatants lost their features and became mere outlines against the matt background.

On the second circuit of the platform the boys closed to within a few meters of each other., initial sizing up completed. Nikko’s silver globe suddenly dropped and as though it was a signal Kerry swung a wide roundhouse punch at Jason. It was easily evaded as Jason leaned out of range. But his upper body sprang back and he shot out a sharp left jab at Kerry’s face. The punch was short and crisp and snapped Kerry’s head back bloodying his lips. Kerry didn’t seem to flinch and the children below were not sure Jason had even made contact. But Jason knew. He could see Kerry’s eyes harden and he felt the hard whack of bone against his knuckle. It surprised him how much it had hurt his hand.

Again Kerry threw a looping punch. Again he missed and Jason jabbed him in the same place on the lip. This time Kerry jerked his head back and wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand.

They continued circling a few meters apart and for a third time Kerry dropped his right shoulder, ready for a sweeping blow. Jason raised his arm to protect his face but instead of throwing the punch Kerry leapt and grabbed him around the waist in a bear hug. He squeezed as hard as he could and Jason let out a painful grunt as his ribs bent in and his spine was forced backwards. Kerry lifted him off the wooden planks and dropped him heavily and punched him squarely in the stomach.

Jason doubled over gasping for breath. At the same time he backed away and moved in an anticlockwise direction away from his opponent. Catching his wind he stared at the Drong leader's face. He was grinning and his eyes were huge with excitement. Jason continued to circle out of range and collected his thoughts. The Drong was tough and strong, and he was enjoying the fight too much. He wanted it to last.

Jason recalled one of the teachings of the Keeper when they were learning self defence in the tunnels. *Remember, your opponent is always an expert. Do not underestimate his ability. Get your distance, make it your timing, not his, and act swiftly.*

He knew then what he had to do. If the fight went on he was sure the Drong would be very hard to beat. He would not be able to overpower him with strength. Kerry not only could withstand hard blows, he seemed to enjoy the feeling of pain. And if he tried to fight him on his terms, Jason sensed it would be a long and drawn out battle. He had to end it and end it swiftly.

He moved in the anticlockwise direction. With each measured step he began to edge closer, never taking his eyes from the Drong's. Kerry grinned his lopsided grin. His eyes suddenly grew wide and he started to lean his weight onto his back leg. Jason acted. He jabbed his left out fast and hard. Kerry raised his arm to block it, but he was slightly off balance and Jason punched hard with his right to the stomach. He caught Kerry just under the heart and he sighed and bent double. Jason spun around and kicked with his right leg. His heel struck Kerry in the ribs and he was sent reeling sideways. He rolled onto the platform and teetered on the edge. He balanced for a few seconds and then toppled over, grabbing frantically for a hold, all thoughts of the pain in his stomach and side gone.

As his hands clawed at the planks Jason threw himself over to the lip and grabbed both of Kerry's arms above the elbows. He pressed his body into the wood and pinned Kerry's arms as hard as could Kerry slipped a few inches and then stopped, all but his head and shoulders dangling in the air.

Below them the group of children gasped and held their breaths. In the dim light all they could see was Kerry's precariously hanging silhouette, the legs kicking wildly searching for support that was not there.

Jason could see Kerry's face and could see he was terrified. Kerry said nothing but his eyes were silently pleading. Finally the Drong spat: "OK. OK, you win. But get me up. Please."

Jason did not respond straight away. Then he called loudly: "Fallon. Porky. Quick, give me a hand."

The window in the tree was roughly pulled open and the boys rushed out. They had not seen the fight and did not know what to expect when they heard Jason's call for help. However they quickly sized up the situation and rushed to the edge of the platform, kneeling beside Jason.

"You beat him," said Porky excitedly. "Great."

Jason's hands were slipping and Kerry began to slide away from him. "Forget that," he said. "He's going. Get hold of him. Pull him up."

Porky and Fallon got hold of Kerry under the armpits and heaved him up. When he was safely over the edge he lay sprawled on the platform with just his feet visible from below. "You're finished," said Jason looking down at Kerry who did not move but lay flat on his stomach breathing heavily.

Porky was about to say something but Fallon caught his arm and nodded his head in Kerry's direction. Even in the gloom the Leaf Children could see the dampness from Kerry's tears starting to stain the wooden planks.

Jason walked to the edge of the platform and looked down on the group. Before the loud cheer went up he said quietly: "It's over. We'll be down in a minute."

He turned to Kerry: "We've just got to get ourselves ready." But his last words were drowned out by the din from below as both Leaf Children and Drons threw their arms in the air and about one another's shoulders in delight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“We’re sorry to see you go Nikko,” said Gabrysia. “But we do understand your desire to see your home and to be with your parents.”

“In a way I’m sad to leave,” Nikko said. “But while I have made good friends here I do not belong. My home is back there.”

“Of course,” repeated Gabrysia. “We appreciate that. Just remember us, that’s all. Please don’t forget that you have friends here who care for you and wish you well in the future.” Nikko smiled. “You can be sure of that. I will always remember my time with you. It has been a wonderful experience, one that I shall never be able to repeat. And one which I will miss.”

“Then don’t go,” said Jordon. “If you’ve enjoyed it so much, and like us, why don’t you stay?”

Nikko laughed. The youngster was apparently quite sincere with his question and it touched him. “I do like you Jordon,” he said. “But this is your home. It’s not mine. I have a mother and a father who must be worried sick about me. And I have to admit that despite all the excitement and pleasure you have given me I want to be back there with them.”

Jordon pouted. “I don’t know why you want to go somewhere like that. It seems dull to me.”

“Listen brat,” Jason said in mock seriousness. “If you weren’t here it would be dull for us too.” Then he added: “Tell you what Nikko. We’ll make you a deal. Take this nuisance with you and we’ll make it worth your while. Anything you want is yours. No. More than that. Everything we have is yours. Including Jordon.”

The children all laughed and Jason reached over and ruffled Jordon’s hair with his hands. “Don’t worry squirt. Only joking.”

They were all seated in the main chamber of the central tree where Nikko had first met the Leaf Children. There were all the familiar faces, freshly washed and with the toys once more adorning the walls, though fewer in number.

Since their return to the camp things moved quickly back to near normalcy. There had been much rejoicing and story telling in brief staccato chapters. The Drong soldiers had pledged they would fit in with the community and abide by the rules laid down and even began by helping to clean up the place and replace the toys. And Kerry had reluctantly agreed he had no choice but to go along with them also. Only time would tell if the promises and plans would actually work out. But for the moment the future seemed bright.

Long into the night the children sat and exchanged tales of their experiences over the last week or so. Repeatedly the explorers as they were now called were asked to recount details of their meeting with the Keepers, the tunnels and their hidden treasures as well as the beautiful Yshon. It was a warm, joyous communion of friends, but at the same time there was a sadness of sorts because one of them would be going away, never to return.

The time came only too soon with the rising of the sun the next morning.

The children were gathered in the centre of the forest camp. Porky was shaking Nikko’s hand. “Goodbye Nikko,” he said. “We’ll be alright. Look after yourself.” And he stepped back.

Gabrysia leant over and gave Nikko a kiss on his cheek. Then softly she held his hand in hers. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for everything. I shall think of you always."

There was a piercing shriek and a loud flapping noise as out of the central tree flew Torpah and gripped Nikko in his strong talons. He seemed to hover for a moment and then with a second shriek he lifted Nikko off the ground and rose into the air.

"Bye," the children called. "Bye Nikko. Good luck."

Nikko looked down and waved, but emotion prevented him answering the Leaf Children. Torpah rose above the tree tops, paused, and then flew off, continuing to soar higher and higher until even the island disappeared as clouds engulfed them. On they flew at the great height so that the last thing Nikko saw was the damp, cool mist brushing against his face. He closed his eyes and thought of the little white cottage with its green trimmings, its flowering shrubs and gardens, and his parents gently rocking him in their arms with his head resting peacefully on their shoulders.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Nikko's mother bent over the cot. "Look at him," she said. "He's got a lovely smile on his face. He's beautiful."

His father reached over the side and brushed Nikko's hair with his hand and stroked his back. "He's a beauty alright. Our little beauty."

As they stood holding hands Nikko stirred and screwed up his face. Then he let out a wail.

"Back to the real world," said his father. "I think the temporary peace and quiet has ended."

His mother rolled him only to his back and Nikko opened his eyes. He smiled broadly and gripped one of his mother's fingers in his own tiny hand. He held it tightly as his wet nappy was taken off and a pair of bright orange pants put over the fresh one. His mother picked him up and carried him into the sitting room where some of Nikko's favourite toys and playthings were. As she left his room she said over her shoulder to her husband: "Would you tidy up his bed please, it looks like he has fought a war in it."

In the sitting room Nikko had his bottle of milk and his mother placed him on the carpeted floor. Immediately he crawled to the fireplace where there were a toy fire engine, a colourful cube and assorted other toys. But he ignored these and instead reached up and pulled a Japanese kokeshi doll from the side table.

"What's this?" asked his father walking into the room, holding something in his outstretched hand.

"What's what?" said his mother. She looked at her husband who was holding a small silver ball in his hand.

"I didn't get it for him," he said. "Did you?"

"No," his mother answered. "He must have found it in the garden." She turned to Nikko.

"Little kleptomaniac. We'll put it away safely for you. You can play with it later if you want to."

Nikko did not notice. He had tried to grab the kokeshi doll in his tiny hand but it had only succeeded in slapping one end. It spun around and around on its side as Nikko sat staring at it, his mind seemingly transported on an adventure to a wonderful distant land of oriental mystique.

end