



Chapter Twelve

Zekai Manci lives in an upside-down world, or as he would like to think of it, the right way up. The Lair Empire is his. He made it. Just as a paper wasp makes its nest upside down under a leaf or bough, he has attached himself to the underside of the world and built his Empire, Lair City, Mount Paris – the Undercity, the large tract of forest inside the snail cages, the Lairs themselves. All this he has made and much more.

He lives in a perspex Dome. He is alien, any way you look at it. He is permanently plugged in, wires and tubes, hosing interlace the Dome from every part of his complex body, a body he has evolved over the hundreds of years he has lived here, experimenting, designing, manipulating human genes. His voice seemingly comes from the Dome itself. The ultimate surround-sound. He is a machine yet, somehow, he is not. He lives on decaying Half-lights: their rotting bodies, their fluids pumped directly from the bowels of the Undercity's discarded citizens. Humans from the Chute percolate, as wine ferments in a barrel. The sewage from his perverse world is his nourishment. He is waiting, waiting for Dr Hasame. Hasame has failed him for the first time.

Hasame is standing, admiring himself in the reflective steel doors of the lift that will take him directly to the Dome and to his Master. He has his best uniform on. All spit and polish, his boots shine, his medals swing across his chest, his uniform is crisp and clean. The grey leather coat falls immaculately to his calf-length boots, his bowler hat, the one he wears when addressing Zekai Manci, has a white strip that follows its contour as a skunk's stripe follows its body. His screen, a belying calm, hums a cool arctic green. He has executed the remaining Lairs from his aborted pursuit of Solo. He has convinced himself they

were to blame. He has a plan. He doesn't see failure. He will catch Solo and the others on the other side of the Desert of Circles, if they can survive such a place. He has never let the Master down. The Master will understand.

The doors slide open. He enters, full of pride, his fingers at ease by his side, feeling safe in his best gloves.

Down the lift he travels, like a bullet from a gun. He drops the thirty-eight floors to his Master's Dome. The capsule comes to an abrupt halt. Hasame expects the sudden bounce. His medals rattle, like an empty can thrown against a wall.

He knows what will happen, how he will be delivered, transported across the inner space of the Dome to address his Master. He is waiting. He has waited whole shifts in this cubicle. He understands the Master is a busy God, with much on his mind. He will wait happily for his audience. He will wait for the gyro-chair to lock him in place, to be shot out on the rail, to be tipped upside down. He will be awestruck by the labyrinth of wire hosing and tubes, seeing the Master's shimmering face dialling up the numbers, ethereal, white, controlling his world; controlling Lair City.



Chapter Thirteen

The struggle had left its mark. Kart's ugly handprint was tattooed onto Solo's calf, an imprint that would remind him for the rest of his life of that fateful day. He limped through the gap in the fence, retrieving his hat. Bella noticed the pain trickling across his face, but said nothing. The sun blasted heat across the Desert of Circles and a breeze escalated to a stiff blow.

The flat horizon seemed limitless, punctuated by a debris of stumps, limbs and foliage that collected in abandoned piles. These piles retreated as ever-decreasing dots across this otherwise empty space. They slumped down, their backs against the wire fencing, relieved, but frightened by their close call. Knowing they could only go forward, not back. The children had troubled expressions. Solo found it near impossible to look into their eyes. A look that summed up Solo's own emotions. They were bruised and grazed. Sweat stained their brows. Their clothing looked like rags hanging limp from their tired and sore bodies. Only Ubu seemed unscathed. He trotted out into the Desert to the first pile of debris. They could see him dipping his head, prowling the perimeter of the entangled broken branches. Then he started barking, looking back to the forlorn group of exhausted humans.

'What's wrong with Ubu, Solo?' Race managed to ask, his words raspy across a dead-dry tongue.

'I'm not sure,' Solo managed to reply, his voice sounding no better. Ubu kept up his commotion, his excited canine voice reaching them with ease upon the ever-increasing wind. It sounded sharp, as if close by. He ran towards them, stopped, barked and returned to the same pile. This he did twice before Solo dragged himself to his feet to limp away from the snail cage towards Ubu.

'You two wait here. I'll see what the fuss is about,' he sighed.

This didn't sit well with the children, yet they were too worn out to complain. They sat, crumpled up together, watching Solo make his way to Ubu.

Ubu sat with his tail wagging, wiping the fine sand in an arc like a windscreen wiper, revealing the true nature of the surface that they were on. But it wasn't this that excited Ubu. Trapped inside the logs and branches were small collections of water. Solo fell to his knees, blessing his dog with a croaky voice. The water stung his lips on initial contact. The relief was immediate. He gulped down the small reservoir in seconds and moved to the next. It was then, and only then, that he heard the sound. A howling, subtle, a distant moaning coming from the crest of the logjam and through its weave. The water had returned his senses and now he felt a draught coming from around the back of his head, being sucked through the pile with a whining, greedy echo.

He turned back from the pile, still on his knees, praising his dog with kisses and long stroking pats, cooing words of love. Then he looked back to see his children like torn scraps of paper, litter against the bottom of the wire fence. They were sunburnt and drowsy, listless. He returned to them with news. 'Water,' he said. 'Ubu has found water!' He helped them to their feet, and guided them out onto the Desert of Circles, to their salvation and collected pools of water. Like wild-eyed animals, the children devoured the life-giving liquid. Solo inspected their situation. He now understood what Ubu had uncovered – revealed – under the sand. Metal. Metal plating. He kicked away the sand to expose more and more of the hard, mouldy yellow skin. He could feel the heat radiating from its surface. They were still within the world of the Lairs. This shocked him. So did the temper of the wind, which lifted the sand and threw it across the desert with stinging accuracy against his tattered leather coat. He still had to investigate the pile of rubble, where the whistling howl came from. He saw the children now, heads cocked towards its constant moaning. He was pleased to see the light return to their eyes. He wished he had kept the pack and bottle Lek had left for them. Then he remembered his staff and hat back at the fence and returned to get them. He looked back through the fencing, across the snail cage and its sand dunes, and for a moment, thought he might return to get the pack. Then thought better of it. What if Hasame had left a guard, a group of Lairs? Hadn't he yelled out to him: 'You won't make it Half-light'? Hasame knew what was in front of them. Solo had no idea. It was a matter of life and death, with

only one escape route. The sun now burned high above them and the ever-increasing wind sung above the desert's metal floor.

The children, their thirst quenched, huddled together for protection, their backs to the gale, their hair whipping at their eyes. Even Ubu had curled up next to them, disappearing under a coat of sand.

Solo climbed halfway up the pile before he was clamped by a downdraft so fierce he could barely lift his hands and feet to move any higher. The wood was shuddering under his body, vibrating, threatening to be sucked down into whatever it was that pulled at him and his cover. He inched his way back down the pile, trying to peer through the lacing of limbs and dead branches. All he could see was a black hole and all he could hear was a constant voice calling his name. They needed protection and the snail cage's forest sparkled like a lure in his mind.

At least they had water. It was near impossible to talk. The wind caught his voice and flung it away before it had left his mouth. He joined the huddle, hoping to ride it out. It was a pitiful sight. They were being pushed up against the base of the pile from the gusting gale, and like flies on flypaper they were now stuck, vacuumed towards the mindless Siren that wanted their souls.

He put his arms around the children and held them tight, pinned, as a moth is in a museum showcase. Too helpless to help themselves.

The groaning and creaking sounds of the wood, high-pitched and troubling. The whole stack started to shake as if an earthquake rumbled underground. A terror spread amongst them. If they could have heard each other, their fear would have increased. Ubu whimpering, Bella and Race sobbing and Solo yelling for strength to hold his two charges next to his weakening body. Pieces of the logjam started to fold, flipping over the crest, screaming down the inside of their citadel past their curled up bodies. They could hear crashing against the steel walls of what Solo now believed to be a Chute, much the same as the one in the Library corner. He felt they could easily all be snatched by its hideous mouth, grabbed by the jaws of death. This saddened him. After so much hope and belief that he could save them all. He started to cry openly, his tears falling at right angles to his face to be sucked into the chute. His acceptance of this inevitability seemed curious to him. He hung there, waiting for the end, gripping the children tighter, wanting not to be separated when their time came. His mind wandered to Ubu, and his tears turned to a river, uncontrollable. He

yelled out the dog's name, through gritted teeth, hoping at least Ubu, now disappearing amongst the sand and wood, buried beneath the wrath of the Desert of Circles, might survive.

The sun was dropping. This they could not have known, but as the sun fell so did the gale. The maddening shrieking and scraping sounds of the cast branches being flung down the Chute stopped, and the feeling of being pulled by a magnet subsided. Solo could now remove his arms from the children. Ubu was first to uncover himself, shaking his coat, spraying Race with more sand as he emerged. Solo appeared, holding onto Bella. It would have been a funny sight to stumble across, if the circumstances hadn't been so dire. To their amazement, almost disbelief, they had survived. The wind abated quickly as the sun lowered. They were a mess, yet they managed a smile, through sand-caked mouths. Before long, it was perfectly still. All they could hear was a low humming sound coming from what was left of their timber fortress.

They wiped each other's faces, clearing the sand from every orifice and crevice, spitting out sand that had seeped into their mouths with what spittle they could muster, brushing each other down with a hard slapping action, and surveyed their environment.

They walked around to the far side of the pile, till they found where its height was lowest. Solo climbed very carefully to its summit to understand, to see if his idea of it being a Chute was correct. His staff had been jammed in the woodpile. It was like finding a long-lost friend. He used it to push the top pieces of bough over the edge until he felt he could trust it was safe enough to balance his whole weight on top of the pile.

'Oh yes,' he called back to the children. 'It's a Chute alright.' He climbed back down, jumping the last few feet to the desert floor. It was unforgiving, hard on his feet, and he landed with a muted thud. The sand squeaked under his shoes. 'They must all be Chutes,' he said, with open arms, arms that accepted the situation. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of piles of rubble stood like ants' nests. They dominated the skyline into infinity, and at each and every pile, a Chute. It was a desert full of vortexes. Vortexes that would suck you down, whole, in one piece. A direct route to hell.

They collected themselves and accepted their situation. In an inspired moment, Race said, 'Solo, let's look at the feather.' Bella chimed in with excitement, 'Please.'

A sudden chill spread through Solo. His hand shot out, scrambling shakily towards his coat pocket. He feared it might have fallen or worked its way out of his pocket, but the creases left his forehead as his fingers found the quill. It was good watching his smile return.

Bringing the feather out into the dusky light, he smoothed out the silky soft down at the base of the feather. He spun it in a circle. Slowly it rotated. All their eyes fixed on its colour. But it didn't change, nor did it try to fly out of his soft grasp. They could see his disappointment. He passed it to Bella. The two children immediately turned to face each other and Race cupped his hands. Solo stood tall, leaning into the circle as Bella let go of the feather.

As if switching on a light, the feather – an exquisite cerulean blue – vibrated, hovering above Race's cupped waiting hands. 'You can move your hands, Race,' Bella squealed. 'It will just hover. I know it will, Race, trust me.'

Race laughed, giggled really, as he dropped his hands away. Ubu pranced around them, making joyful yaps. Solo, nailed to the floor, seemed paralysed like a wax statue. He was spellbound. The children skipped around the feather, in the opposite direction to Ubu, like workings in a clock or the cosmic orbits of the planets. The children, both laughing: sang 'Epic of the Superbird, Superbird, Superbird'. Solo broke off his revelry and snapped awake, like a man late for work, as the feather dimmed. Bella skipped by to snatch it from its fall and passed it back to Solo. It was like the chorus at a pantomime. They laughed and called to each other, bowed and hugged Ubu, who was on his back legs pirouetting with his master.

The feather had rejuvenated their spirits and life was returned to their limbs. They forgot that they were hungry. They were alive and they were free. They had escaped Hasame and his henchmen. They were off to find the Sansvira, and see Powerflower again.

'Solo, you will love Powerflower, won't he, Bella?' Race beamed.

'Then we should go,' Solo said. 'Let's go and meet Powerflower.'

They moved from pile to pile. They found more collections of water that had accumulated after the gale. Behind them, the sun was setting and a cold air settled on their shoulders. 'What will we do when it is dark?' Bella wanted to know. 'It feels like it's going to be very chilly.'

'We'll keep walking,' Race brightly replied, 'that will keep us warm, won't it Solo?'

Solo's mind was somewhere else, thinking not about the oncoming

night, but the awakening of a monster. A monster called the Sun, and its sibling the Wind. He doubted they'd be safe a second time. It was easy walking in the night and, indeed, it did keep them warm, but they were tiring. Race's enthusiasm was flagging, Bella was envious of Ubu's extra legs, still full of bounce. They walked until they started tripping over odd branches, pieces of trunk that hindered their progress.

'We'll have to stop here the night,' said Solo. 'We'll make a shelter on the side of this pile. We'll have to leave at first light to beat the winds tomorrow.' They erected a primitive shelter from parts of the pile and strewn branches. They surprised themselves in dropping off to sleep with such ease. The night passed uneventfully, sombre and silent.

Solo woke them with a gentle shake. 'Wake up you two, time to get going. Come on, wake up.' He felt an overwhelming love for them at the sight of their angelic faces. He admired their gritty hardiness. 'Come on,' he said again with a final shake.

They were slow to their feet, groggy, sleepy-eyed. They crawled out of their temporary shelter to see the silhouetted shapes of piles of debris still in front of them. Their stomachs ached for food. They drank from the collections of water trapped amongst the shattered timber towers. They had to step over logs, ever-bigger stumps as the sun poked its head over the horizon.

They marched on as fast as the terrain would permit. Even this was enough for Ubu, who didn't leave their side. Up and over they went, saddling another log like getting on a horse. It was then that in the distance Solo thought he could see treetops. Only just, but he was sure they were there.

'Can you see the tree tops in the distance?' he asked.

'No,' the kids replied, but they'd hardly looked. Their energy was sapped and their stomachs empty.

'I can see the trees in the distance,' Solo yelled. 'I can. Come on children, we must keep going.' Solo moved off towards the next obstacle, towards what he believed to be the edge of the Desert.

Bella and Race, nearly dead on their feet, unwillingly followed. Their bodies were slumped and heavy. Solo was squeezing himself through a tangle of branches when the first gust flicked at his hat. He turned in time to see the terror on the children's faces, and an instant surge in their step. They ran to Solo.

Solo had climbed up onto the largest trunk he could find. There it was in its full glory, the tops of trees, some broken and twisted. He could

just make out a river glinting in the sun, but this was only a slither and he thought he might be seeing things. He called the children over and helped them up onto his perch. Ubu jumped up beside them. 'Oh, there it is, Bella.' No sooner had Race said this than Bella was blown off the log. She landed indignantly, all legs and arms, but managed to laugh. Ubu bounced down next to her, licking at her face. Solo and Race had spun around and tried to save her from falling; now they also laughed at the wind. 'It's building up,' Solo said. 'We'll hide here under this log. We will be as safe here as anywhere.'

The four of them sat with their backs to the log, as pieces of the forest sailed over their heads, smashing to the desert floor with horrendous bangs and the sounds of snapping, tearing of branches as they collided in mid-air, or came skidding across the metal floor, charging towards the chutes and piles of rubble. More than once wood ricocheted from the edge of their cover. The noise had them covering their ears with their hands. The wind grew in intensity to gale force, as it had done the day before, and the very trunk that they hid behind started to shift, sliding them towards the direction they had come from. Solo screamed, 'It's okay, we'll be alright, stay under cover.' They rode the gale out better than they'd expected to and the wind dropped to a breeze, then stillness, repeating the pattern of the day before.

They climbed back onto the log and surveyed the bombed-out landscape, looking apprehensively towards the tree line in case it wasn't really there. Yet it was – swaying lightly in a zephyr breeze.

'Look, it's waving at us, Solo,' Bella said. She was waving back although it was still in the distance with much root, stump and log between them and the waving trees.

They made good speed until nightfall, the tree line advancing ever closer as they traversed the obstacles that stood in their way. Then it became too dark to continue.

'What I wouldn't give to have some fruit from the snail cage,' Race said. 'Or, be like Ubu,' Bella replied. 'Look at him! He's eating insects and grubs.'

Ubu had stopped his fossicking at the mention of his name. His tail wagged as he went back to turning over branches, crunching up any insect he could find.

'We may have to do the same,' Solo said, a seriousness in his voice that made the children pretend to puke. 'No, I mean it.'

'Yuk, no never,' Bella said.

‘Me too – never.’ Race agreed.

‘If you get hungry enough, you will,’ Solo added. ‘We’ll have to keep going. I’ve seen a large body of water not too far ahead of us. The tree line is on the other side. I’m sure we will find food near there.’

They stumbled their way through the maze, mostly having to feel their way in the gloom. ‘Shh, shh.’ It was Solo, stopping their progress. ‘Can you hear that, it’s running water. We’re very near now.’ Their pace slackened towards the sound, a gurgling noise that had a soothing effect upon the travellers, lulling them into a false sense of safety. It was Race who saw the Lairs first.

‘By Jingoos,’ he squealed. ‘It’s them. Lairs, over there.’ He pointed a shaking finger in the Lairs’ direction. Solo made them all lie low, Ubu too. Solo sneaked through a few more trunks to find, in a clearing, a bunch of Lairs, glowing faintly in the night. The river rushed beside them in a torrent of water. He made his way back to the group, his finger to his lips, clutching his staff with a choking grip. He led them back a small way into the debris and explained that Race was right. Yes, there were Lairs, four of them.

‘Pull out the feather,’ Bella whispered. ‘It wants to help us. I know this.’ Race agreed. ‘Yes, Solo, so do I.’

Solo didn’t hope for the feather to glow for him. He knew now that the power was in the children. He passed it directly from his pocket to Bella’s outstretched hand. Its glow ignited with her touch. She removed her fingers, watching it hover.

‘Epic, help us, we need your protection. Epic of the Superbirds, hear our plea.’

The feather rotated on itself, spinning into a blur until it no longer seemed real, just a hologram floating in the midnight air.

The voice came from over her shoulder. At first she wasn’t sure, but it repeated itself.

‘That’s Powerflower’s voice,’ Race yelled.

‘Shh,’ Solo said quickly, as he put his hand over the boy’s mouth, his brow crossed in annoyance.

Race pulled his head back into his shoulders, realising his mistake. ‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered.

‘Hello children, you’ve made it. We always knew you would.’

‘Oh Powerflower, we have missed you,’ Bella said, a little tremble in her voice.

‘You had better save your feather,’ Powerflower said. ‘I have answered

your call.' Bella passed the now extinguished feather back to Solo, who seemed flummoxed by the scene.

'Who are you talking to?' he asked.

'It's Powerflower. We told you about it. The one who showed us where to find Epic's feather. Isn't that right Powerflower?' There was a touch of pride in Race's voice.

'Are you sure that this creature is here?' Solo asked, 'For I can't see it.'

"Oh yes, it's here all right, just look at Ubu,' Bella said. Ubu sat gazing into space above the children's heads where Powerflower floated, its petals moving, to the rhythm of the river, transparent, special.

Powerflower and the children talked. It was all a one-way conversation to Solo. He removed his hat and scratched his head, rubbed his eyes and said, 'Oh well' to himself. Even his dog, mesmerised, paid no attention to Solo's private reverie. 'Okay, this way.' Race was pointing off to his right.

'We have to swim the river, but we can't swim,' Bella moaned.

'Well, it's the only way.'

Solo found it hard to believe Powerflower was there. It was as if they were talking to the ether. He sat down on his haunches next to his dog and emulated his gaze into the nothingness, the void that the children were so intent on conversing with.

'Okay, yes, alright, at first light. Yes, we will try, as you say.'

They turned to look for Solo. They laughed at him sitting like his dog, staring into space.

'Thank you, Powerflower,' Bella said.

'Yes, thanks,' Race also said.

As Solo gathered himself again to an upright position, he felt a brilliant warmth touch his face. Like chiffon or silk, it trailed in one easy movement, transporting his expression to one of pure joy. His hands reached for the feather – he brought it out by index finger and thumb. It glowed momentarily, to his absolute happiness. A smile exploded across his sunburnt lips as he, also, called out 'Thank you Powerflower.'

'What did it say?' Solo beamed, not quite himself, his voice child-like and small.

'It said for us to move upstream away from the Lairs. It also said the Lairs won't move about in the night unless ordered to.'

Bella interrupted Race's relayed advice with, 'We have to swim the river at first light, and we can't swim.'

'Swim?' Solo blurted out, 'Swim? Nor can I.'

‘Well,’ Race continued, ‘It’s the only way across the river. Unless you would prefer to cross the Lair’s bridge, which is heavily guarded,’ – there was no other way but to swim the river.

Solo still had the feather in his hand. He replaced it in its hiding place deep inside his coat pocket.

‘Well, we had better keep moving in the direction Powerflower has told us to,’ Solo said at last. Again, the troupe set out to manage the maze of debris. They moved towards the river and sat on its banks, the far side lost in the darkness. ‘Let’s get some rest amongst the fallen trees,’ he said. ‘First light will be here before we know it.’

It was a fitful night and not much rest was had, all three quietly thinking about their chances of swimming such a torrent of water when none of them could swim. They were all awake at first light, nervous and frightened. They tried to bolster each other’s spirits.

‘It can’t be that hard to do,’ Bella said. ‘I’ve seen frogs do it in Mount Paris, kicking out their legs and arms, in the butcher’s tanks.’

‘By jingoes, you’re right Bella, that’s it. We will swim like frogs.’ Solo had no idea what they were talking about.

Race gave a demonstration, swinging his arms forward and kicking out with his feet. ‘It’s like this,’ he said. Solo mirrored his actions. It was too funny. They all laughed.

‘Well, I suppose drowning would be better than a death at the hands of Hasame,’ Race gaily spouted. ‘Or the jaws of death,’ Bella replied, a shudder running through her body.

They walked to the edge of the river. Now they could see the other side in the gloom. A light mist rising in swirls rolled along the river’s surface. ‘It’s a long way across,’ Bella whispered, recoiling from the embankment. Race stepped back with her. ‘I don’t think I can do it, Bella,’ Race murmured, his heart jumping almost into his throat. ‘We should take our chances on the bridge.’

‘What did Powerflower say to you?’ Solo wanted to hear it again.

‘We must swim the River.’ Race confirmed. ‘It’s the only way.’

‘Well, that’s what we have to do then,’ Solo confirmed. ‘Steel yourselves, and swim like the frogs you have described to me.’

The mist was lifting as the sun filtered through the trunks of the trees, one red-hot ball like an angry eye flicking, blinking at them through the trunks on the other side.

They stood there, totally out of their depth, staring into the rapidly moving water, when Ubu ran past them, springboarding from the

grassy bank into an unknown sea. He splashed his paws, working hard, barking. All his effort countered the drift. They all followed the brave canine, hoping to emulate Ubu's struggling actions, but they were swept away immediately, like flotsam in its raging waters. Their clothing floated above their heads, which disappeared and resurfaced. They were coughing out the heavy fluid, splashing wildly with all limbs. They were dragged out into the middle, where they managed to link arms, spinning, creating a vortex. Ubu drifted past at a much greater pace, biting at the foam.

'Kick out,' Bella screamed, 'like Race showed us.' They turned a bend in the river, which, as fortune would have it, sent them on the right course for the far side.

At last, it seemed possible and they renewed their efforts. Ubu had vanished well down the stream. Solo broke away, kicking like a maniac with all his might. Then he felt it. The bottom. And the safety of the far embankment. He scrambled up onto the side, clutching his staff, dripping, his clothes heavy and unmanageable. He flung his coat off. It landed with a squishy sound on the grass, as he ran at full pace down the river's bank, screaming for the children to hold on to his outstretched staff. Like corks, they bobbed. One moment he could see them, the next they were gone.

'Please Powerflower, help us,' he called. They were so close, if only he could stretch a little more.

'Grab the staff,' he yelled almost hysterically. 'Please, Bella, grab it.' She made a lunge towards the wooden pole, and missed, but it caught in her coat snagging, her to an abrupt halt.

'Grab the pole, Bella,' Solo yelled again, and this time she did, with her final breath. Solo reeled her in. She was half-drowned. But Race had drifted apart and could be seen, like Ubu, bouncing down the river, fighting against its flow.

Solo laid Bella out on the grass, turning her on her side. She spluttered and choked up phlegm and water.

Solo was off again, bounding down the river's edge. He could see that Race had connected with Ubu. He hung off the dog's mane, exhausted. He was a burden to the canine, pulling him under in the struggle. It was then that Solo's heart sunk to its lowest. He could now see Lairs on the other side, moving towards the bridge, gesticulating in their sub-human way. Their screens erratic, looping madly in their haste. Yet Ubu was making ground towards Solo.

Solo jumped back in. The current was demanding against his thighs. He grabbed hold of Race by his coat, dragged him up onto the embankment and threw him over his shoulder. Ubu also made it to shore at the same time. They were bedraggled and weak, but they were alive. The bridge was still far too downstream for them to be able to see Hasame, going out of his mind, throwing Lairs from the bridge to their watery graves. They fizzed and flew apart like rag dolls, with only a puff of steam lingering on the surface as the next Lair met his maker.

Solo carried Race back to Bella, who now sat, her head between her knees, coughing and trying to get her breath back. He gently placed Race down on the grass next to her. His lips were blue and his eyes shut. Bella, seeing her best friend prostrate and bedraggled, pounced on his limp body, shaking him. ‘Race, Race,’ she screamed. ‘Solo, he’s not breathing.’

Solo pulled her aside and rolled Race on his side, and thumped his back, then again, harder. A stream of water gushed from his mouth and nose, followed by a fit of coughing. The relief on Bella’s face said it all. Race blinked, then opened his eyes fully. Ubu was down at the river’s edge, barking fiercely, growling at the Lairs gathering on the other side of the river.

Solo walked cautiously towards Ubu on the embankment to see Hasame arrive. He was pushing Lairs into the current, yelling at them to swim, but just as it had been for the others, they too exploded into puffs of steam and disappeared in the torrent.

He was going berserk, threatening his soldiers, his fingers growing, extending them grotesquely long trying to close the distance between himself and Solo.

Solo turned his back and called his dog to his side. He could hear Hasame’s voice, rattling in his voice box, screaming out his name. ‘Half-light, stinking Half-light!’ Solo smiled to himself, as he went back to the children, knowing they were safe at last, a little worse for wear, but together and alive.

Race had lost his shoes, Bella had only one on her foot, and Solo was devoid of his hat, a hat he knew he would miss. The children were shivering. Yet Solo felt the sun warming his back and understood it would soon do the same for Bella and Race. It was just a matter of time. He would find a place for them to sun themselves and rest. Then he would find food. He knew in his heart that they were safe. They were in the TRUTH STREAM – THE OUTER-WORLD.



Chapter Fourteen

It was the first day of summer in the Truth Stream, but this meant nothing to Zekai Manci. He would have the world gloomy, smoggy, perpetual night, in endless winter. Just like Lair City. Here he is in his gravity-free dome, a sailor in a submarine, submerged, in his evil intent and manic desires. He floats, attached by many tubes, umbilical cords, that keep him alive, as some alien space walker in an upside down world built under Lair City.

Manci is manoeuvring himself into his throne. It is upside down, but for him it is the right way up.

He has Dr Hasame sitting in a gyro-chair opposite him. Hasame is truly upside down, relaxed and contented. The chair holds, like a vice, Dr Hasame's wrists and ankles so he doesn't float away to the dome's ceiling.

'You have failed me, Dr Hasame!' The words wash around the dome's interior like honey dripping from a hive. His voice is hypnotising. It sways as a cobra, lulling Hasame into a false sense of security.

'You have failed me, Doctor. They have escaped into the Outer-world, where they will find friends, creatures with great power who could cause me some delays, slow down my progress, maybe even cripple my Empire, the great world of the Lairs and Lair City. You, Dr Hasame, have served out your usefulness to me in your present form.'

Hasame sat snatching at fragments of his former life. His hat had been removed, a rubber tube protruded from his top plate in a loop vanishing outside of his vision. He was grubby, dishevelled, and unkempt. How long had he been here, inside Manci's dome, stuck to this chair, incapable of knowing his own name? All seemed pleasant enough, but difficult for him to comprehend. The Master was there, yes, and he was talking to him, yes, but what was he saying? That he had

failed? Was that right? What was it that he had failed in? He thought he should ask, but no sooner had the thought reached him than it evaporated. So he gave up trying. Yes, that was much better. He looked upon his Master and bathed in his magnificent peace. He could hear his Master talking, feel his gaze – a gaze that could open a can.

‘Yes Doctor, I have other plans for you. Your time as a Lair is over.’ Mancini said this while leaning over to disconnect the Doctor’s rubber tube from his top plate. The head Lair’s screen began to loop; his fingers slid up inside his coat cuffs, gripping the arms of the chair like a knot of water snakes. He felt his toes squirm inside his boots. Suddenly, as a bolt of lightning strikes, Hasame’s cognisance returned, and fear spread across his screen.

‘You’re back,’ Mancini said. ‘Just a little reprieve Doctor, for you must tell me how many managed to cross into the Truth Stream.’

‘Master, that stinking rotting Half-light Lek helped them to escape. I’ll pull him apart and bring him to you in a jar. They would never have made it except for Lek. Also, the guards that let them through to the snail’s cages. They too I will crush and send to you. I shall do it straight away, as soon as I have returned to Lair City. I have cowards to throw to the Chute as well. Lairs that refused to obey orders; orders to follow the traitor Solo and his shitty Half-lights out into the Desert of Circles. Unfortunately, they made it to the River before I could, otherwise you would have them now, to do with them what you will. Eat them alive while the traitor Solo watches. They will never return; I have tripled the guard at the bridge, so all is well.’

‘Doctor, how many of them made it to the other side, and who were they?’

‘Just the putrid Solo and his dog. The dog you made for him. The rotting child Half-lights drowned. They will be no problem to us.’

‘Where are their bodies? The two children Half-lights, why have you not brought them to me?’

‘I have Lairs looking for them Master. They will be recovered.’

‘Doctor, I admire the way you lie. After all, I have made you to do so, but not to lie to me. I know the two children made it to the Outer-world and I know you saw this happen. Doctor, now I will tell you what the truth is. The whole company escaped. Bella, Race, Solo and the experimental dog as well. They are the first, and they will be the last, and I want them back. Back here in Lair City. For now, I will put an end to bringing the Half-lights above and I will put an end to Dr

Hasame. I have already replaced you Doctor, with a superior model, Dr Monkspike.”

Hasame was shaking, shuddering within the grips of his chair. His screen was popping and looping wildly. An oily smell escaped through his uncovered voice box. He was tipping his screen from side to side.

‘No, no, Master. You need me in Lair City. I have made the city strong in your name.’

‘Shut up, Doctor. I have a new place in the Empire for you.’

Hasame started to complain again. Zekai Manci laughed a milk-curdling laugh as he attached the rubber tube back into Hasame’s top plate. The Lair relaxed again – a puppet in his Master’s manipulative hands.

‘Ahh, Doctor, I like you more when you are like this, putty for me to play with. You will make a wonderful new weapon. You will be able to live in the light, amongst my enemies in the Outer-world. You will bring back the Half-lights, for none shall ever escape my domain.’

Manci uncoupled several tubes from his own body. They silently retracted into a few of the metal boxes that lined the floor of his dome. He then floated off across its vast area to a heavy, brooding coffin-like casket, which was suspended by a frame at either end. There was a panel of buttons, levers and lights that stood fastened to the floor just off to its right. Manci landed next to this as gently as a butterfly on a leaf. He pressed one of the buttons and the casket started to rotate in an anti-clockwise movement, spinning faster and faster until it became a blur. A stinging high-pitched whine dominated the Dome. Manci then stopped its movement with another button. He took a small step towards the casket and lifted its lid.

‘Ahh, Doctor, Are you ready for this? I hope so, because here I come.’

With this, he floated back to Hasame and unfastened the binding that locked the Lair in position. He started to fall in a catherine-wheel motion, all arms and legs. But it was all in slow motion and Manci easily grabbed him by the tubing protruding from his top plate.

‘Come Doctor, it is time for you to metamorphise.’

Manci now had Hasame lining the casket. It looked like a funeral and in some ways it was, for this would be the end of Dr Hasame as we have known him. He was about to be born anew. A creature so evil that even Manci was a little afraid of his own invention. He was to create a creature that could live in the light.

Manci removed the tube from the Doctor's top plate and cast it aside. For a moment, Hasame's screen came to life and he tried to pull himself out of the box, but Manci soon had another tube to replace the one that was discarded. This one was from inside the box itself. The Lair reclined again, into a kind of stupor. His screen completely faded and went black. The Doctor's legs and arms threw themselves upwards as if he was in the throws of death, his fingers wrapping themselves into a bird's nest of digits like a windmill in the breeze, then it was as if he had perished. Died.

Manci closed the lid. He then uncoupled a tube from his own head, screwed this in place, at the end of the box, returned to the control panel, and reset the program.

'Goodbye Doctor,' he squealed. 'Goodbye.'

The casket took off, spinning once again into a blur. The whining sound returned and Manci collapsed to the floor, holding tightly to the consol. He was trembling, his face became transparent and you could see the workings inside his head. It seemed at the top, where there should be a brain, sat two old-fashioned telephone hand receivers. They rattled around as if they were ringing, jumping in the cradles. The couplings, fixtures, where the tubes connected to his skull and bypassed thin air to his shoulders were visible. He didn't have a neck to carry this head. It was just a series of cables that worked as arteries joining body and brain to each other. It was as if he was having a fit, his body convulsed, kicking madly about. Fluid was being moved through the lengths of tubes that connected his body to Hasame's casket and back to the mainframe, computer-like machines that were also bolted to his weird airless home. Then it was over, and his face returned to the hazy opaque glow that seemed featureless until now. To look at him was like looking into a light bulb, impossible to focus on. Manci made it to his feet, climbing hand over hand up the consol as the casket's rotation slowed to a stop. He removed the connection from the casket and replaced it back into his own head. He then sprawled across Hasame's coffin, a purring sound filtered throughout the Dome.

'Are you there, my pretty? My redeemer? Are you ready to meet your maker? It is time for you to be released into the world, my world, to do my bidding, to walk in the Outer-world and bring back my children.'

He unclipped the lid and flipped it open to the howl of a beast that defied description. All trace of Hasame was masked by this creature's new form. It was Lair-ish in that its head was square, but it had no

screen. This thing had eyes, black and huge. It had a nose and mouth. A mouth that revealed teeth, razor sharp, as it howled out once more. It sprung from the casket and floated off, as Mancini floated close by to watch it roll over into a position much like a dog on all fours. It tilted its square head and sniffed at the airless vacuum with its bulbous nose, then glared at Mancini maliciously.

He still had Hasame's coat and boots on, but the buttons had snapped off, and disintegrated in the casket. Mancini now had a hosing in his possession and floated atop of his creation waiting to connect the coupling into the back of the creature's head and, as quick as a flash, he had the coupling clipped to the beast. Mancini floated back to his throne, pulling the monster behind him to the gyro-chair, and fastened it in, as the Doctor had been not long ago. Sitting, it looked more Lair than animal, yet it was hard to see any resemblance to Hasame, even now while it was sitting quietly in the chair.

Mancini leaned across and pulled its boots off and inspected its feet. There were claws where there once were toes. He replaced the boots and, removing the gloves, looked at its hands. These too had claws where there once were fingers. He had trouble replacing the gloves, so gave up, tossing them over the animal's head.

'Yes, yes, you will do, my pretty.'

He replaced the buttons on the coat and buttoned up the jacket to hide the hideous bloated torso that had a thin covering of hair.

Mancini moved around the creature, his fingers searched the side of its head. Two small pointed ears could be seen. He pulled open the rubbery lips to reveal a mouth full of teeth much like a shark's. It had double rows that were pointy and mean. They had pushed forward, protruding into the weightless air. Mancini let the lips go and the teeth snapped back into its head. He now had his finger up its nose; the creature wriggled in its chair. The nose was very human on the flat face. Mancini seemed satisfied, telling himself, 'Very good. Now to program you and name you, and then, to set you free. Free to do my bidding. To walk in the light amidst the Truth Stream.'

Mancini spun the creature's chair around to face a screen against the wall. Once again, he moved tubes around connecting the beast's head through himself to the screen. It flicked into life, and Bella's beautiful presence appeared. She looked as she had in the Library, Calliced to the eyeballs; then Race with Solo in one shot.

'You will bring these Half-lights back to me, dead or alive, it does

not matter, but you will return them to me. You will answer to no one but me, your Master. They are in the Truth Stream waiting for you.

‘Your name is Smelt. You are my precious son, my favourite, my pretty, my greatest creation.’

The video stopped and Manci uncoupled Smelt from himself and the screen. The creature’s head was still staring at the blank wall.

‘Smelt,’ Manci whispered. The monster’s head spun around like a whip, its evil eyes wide. It smiled and its teeth moved outside its head.

‘Smelt, who is your Master?’ Manci asked. The creature lifted one of its arms, snapping the binding in an effortless gesture and pointed with a claw-like talon at Manci.

‘You are my master, I am your son.’ Its voice hissed and crackled.

‘And what will you do for your Master?’

‘I will return the rotting Half-lights to you, dead or alive, Master.’

‘And where are they?’

‘They are in the light.’

Manci could hardly contain himself. For a second his face revealed its transparent self before returning to its normal mask.

Smelt smiled again, all teeth and eyes. Then in a bizarre show of affection, Manci moved close to Smelt and patted the foul creature on the head.

‘Its time for you to do your Master’s work.’

Manci floated next to the gyro-chair as it moved along the rail to the elevator. The door shut and Smelt was sent 38 floors above into Lair City.

Smelt walked upright as a Lair, but soon he was on all fours pounding the cavernous streets of Lair City, amongst its shadows and smog, loping along past startled Lairs on Rims who thought they were seeing things. He headed towards the Truth Stream. Manci watched on a screen from his dome. Deep into Lair City towards the Outer-world, a black shape that knew the way disappeared from his control.

Smelt’s tongue slid between his teeth, lather coated his face. He panted like a dog, stopping from time to time to stand upright to check his direction. Soon he came upon the bridge. Many Lairs loitered around the entrance; their screens glowed faintly in the misty light. They talked quietly amongst themselves, happy that the night had come, pleased not to have to wear their protective sheets to shield the daylight.

Smelt crawled, crept low to the ground and waited to catch his breath. His eyes were slits, almost closed; nose to the air, he licked his teeth. He was now only feet away from the sentry. They must have felt his presence. The nearest turned, and the others followed their companion's sudden swivel. Smelt rose in one fluid movement to his full height and stepped amongst them. Collectively, they retreated a pace. Smelt howled, turning his box-like head from side to side, hunched his shoulders. His teeth glinted in the glow of the petrified Lairs' looping screens. Smelt stepped on to the bridge unopposed. He spun around to bare his teeth and howled again at the quivering Lairs, a banshee in the shadows. Then he fell to his fours and sped the length of the bridge, to the relief of the cowering Lairs, halting in an upright position against a dead tree trunk at the edge of the Truth Stream. He blended into the tangled, tortured limbs, a swath of no-mans land where the midday wind throws the dead wood across to the Desert of Circles, towards Lair City. A curtain of pain blighted by the city's smog and poisons, a perimeter of death that lined the Truth Stream's banks, where Bella, Race, Solo and Ubu had been only a few days ago.

A squall of rain pelted down sending splashes of mud against Smelt's boots. He protected his eyes with a claw-like hand and peered around the decaying tree, sliding down its trunk to the earth, and as a bloodhound might do, placed his nose into the rich dark soil. Dashing from one snapped dead branch to the next, he searched for the scent of his prey that was gradually being washed away in the rain. Frantically, he prowled the embankment until finally he was back at the spot he'd already checked. In utter frustration, he stood and howled, his shark-like teeth tearing a hole into the night. As the rain intensified, forcing him back to his fours and the cover of his bowed head and coat, he slid up to the closest fallen log and circled into a ball to ride out the storm. You could see his eyes, two hot coals dancing within a curtain of rain. He started muttering to himself, 'Bella, Race, Solo. Yes Master, I will get them for you. I will get them.'



Chapter Fifteen

Solo guided the children through the outer edges of the Truth Stream. Race and Bella looked an odd couple, Race shoeless, Bella with only one shoe. The hatless Solo could be heard issuing warnings to watch their step, carefully pointing at each obstacle that hindered their way – broken branches, logs and holes in the ground where roots had rotted away. Race looked the worse for wear and moved gingerly through the landscape, a landscape that felt lifeless. Broken trees and scattered limbs – it was a tortured environment. Bella waited for Race and grabbed his hand. She gave him a little smile, knowing inside herself that he felt dreadful, and was lucky to be alive. Ubu had vanished up ahead of Solo. He could see they would need to rest but was hoping to move as far away from the river as possible, so he kept the children in motion, be it at a very moderate pace.

‘Solo, we need to rest,’ Bella said. ‘Look at Race, and our feet are sore.’

‘I’m okay,” Race murmured, ‘let’s just keep going.’

‘Are you sure? You look terrible,’ Bella replied.

‘I’ll be alright. I just want to get away from the Lairs and the river.’

So Race and Bella bravely continued on.

It wasn’t long before the uneven earth settled down and the patches of grass gave their sore feet some kind of comfort. Solo was the first to see the terrain improve. Leaf-covered trees started to be the norm, displaying an amazing variety of colour and form. Solo could see a small clearing bathed in sunlight, and made a beeline towards a cluster of boulders that sat off to one side.

‘This will do,’ he said. ‘We’ll rest here.’ Race flopped down in the lush grass; Bella lowered herself down next to him. Solo was on his haunches checking Race’s feet and condition.

‘You might as well go bare-footed as well, Bella, One shoe’s no good to you. Here, take it off.’ Solo helped her out of her only shoe and tossed it up against the nest of rocks they were next to. Race’s feet had a few little cuts, but really, nothing to worry about. In fact, they were in remarkably good condition considering what they had endured over the last few days. A few bruises and bumps; the problem was mainly exhaustion. Food would put them right.

The sun was friendly and warmed their spirits and their bodies, not to mention drying their battered clothing. Soon they were dry, and they started looking around the clearing and the bush that surrounded them. A light breeze could be heard overhead, pulling at the foliage.

‘Doesn’t that bush over there look like it has the same orange balls as the ones that Delpha left for us in the snail cage?’ Race said, pointing in a direction to his left.

‘You might be right,’ Solo said. ‘Wait here while I look.’ Solo walked over to the fruit-laden tree. He plucked one from its lower branches; put it to his nose and smelt its tangy fragrance. Timidly, he bit into the soft flesh. A smile spread across his face as he pressed what was left into his mouth. He tried yelling, the juice dribbling out of the corners of his lips. He held his hands up in the air and was jumping up and down on the spot.

‘You’re right, Race, it is.’

The children were at his side in a flash, grabbing their share, stuffing themselves with the delicious bounty that stained their faces and hands with a faint yellowish tinge. They must have seemed gross at first, quaffing down the delightful juicy balls as they laughed and squealed with piggish noises and grunts of joy. Three famished humans, who obviously had been deprived of food for too long, clambered around the base of the tree greedily packing as many as they could into their mouths at once. Their eyes flashed at each other and they had trouble breathing while they tried to chew, adding to the already base sounds they made. Their heads tilted back, sucking in air through their nostrils. It was a banquet. When they had quelled their hunger, it would have been funny to watch as they became more picky and discerning in their choice of fruit, looking for the perfect piece, squeezing the fruit before they pulled it from the tree, examining its colour before taking a dainty nibble out of its side.

‘This is good, very good,’ Bella said, ‘these are even better than the last ones we had.’



Smelt

‘Mmmm, yep, by jingoos, I think you’re right, Bella, the best yet. Too bad Ubu doesn’t eat them.’

It was then they realised Ubu was missing. Solo called out for his dog several times before Ubu came bounding across the clearing towards our group.

‘There you are boy, what have you been doing?’ Solo asked.

‘I’ll bet he’s been eating grubs and worms, insects and the like,’ Race said. ‘Look at him, he looks happy to me.’

They all laughed and Solo patted the children on the back. ‘What do you say to a little sleep in the sun back by the boulders?’ Solo asked.

‘Yes, a sleep would be wonderful,’ Bella agreed. ‘Do you think we will be safe here, Solo?’ Race inquired.

‘I hope so, I can’t see why not. Isn’t this where Powerflower told us to come? The Truth Stream? We know the Lairs can’t stand the light, so yes, I believe we will be perfectly safe here.’

They all stretched out next to the collection of rocks. They were lost in their individual thoughts. They dropped off one by one, for once happy, full of food and dreams of a new life amidst the Truth Stream.

Solo woke after a couple of hours. The rocks now cast shadows over Bella and Race as they slept on. Solo knew this was a good thing and left them to their rest. He yawned, stretched, swivelled his body around on his hips. He thought he would have a look around their immediate location. As he began to walk away from the campsite, Ubu languidly opened one eye to look at Solo and shut it again, falling back into his own world of sleep. It was all so peaceful and serene. A chorus of cicadas stopped as Solo walked by and he wondered aloud to himself, ‘What could they be?’ The dart of wings flashed in amongst the treetops and bees hummed at their work, the smell of summer grass permeated the air around him. It wasn’t long before he stumbled upon a small tarn of crystal clear water. He bent down to drink, catching his reflection in its pool. His hair was matted and his eyes bloodshot. There were scratches on his forehead and cheek, his face looked darker than he remembered it. A creature flew over his head. He felt it, and also saw it mirrored in the water. He was startled by the quickness of its flight. He cupped his hands and brought the water to his lips. It was cool, refreshing. He splashed it over his face momentarily enjoying the mixture of pleasure and pain as it stung his skin. He became aware of Ubu sitting quietly by his side. The cicadas

started their song again. He sat there staring into space, quite vacantly, relieved that at least for the present, all was well.

‘I guess we had better be getting back to the children, fellah, what do you think?’ he said, patting Ubu’s neck. They ambled back the short distance to Bella and Race, who were still asleep, now in the full shadow of the rock. He could feel the sun dropping and a slight chill accompanied its departure. The cicadas now silent.

Race was first to stir, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles. He parted his lips and tried to swallow. He scratched at the back of his head and pushed his arms high over his head, then looked down at Bella from his sitting position and across to Solo.

‘By jingoes, that was a good sleep. Look at sleepy head there. Come on Bella, wake up,’ he called.

Bella opened her eyes, blinked. She looked confused for a second.

‘Wakey, wakey, Bella, time to eat again,’ Race said with a wicked chuckle. He helped her to a sitting position. ‘Time to save Superbird, Epic, remember?’

‘Come on you two, there is a small pool of water just over the back, I’ll take you to it, so you can drink and freshen up. I think we should plan our next move, although I’m not sure what or where we should head to.’

‘Just as long as it’s not back towards Lair City, I don’t care,’ Race said. Bella chimed, “you’re so right.’

With their thirst quenched, Race became chirpy, prattling about how they were going to live forever in the Truth Stream, how he hoped Hasame would get the Chute, but then he remembered the other children in the Library and a sad note came into his voice. ‘I hope they will some day see all this, don’t you Bella?’

Solo listened in silence, knowing full well the fate of those left behind.

They filled their pockets with fruit. Solo thought it would be wise to do so, not knowing the layout of the Truth Stream. He felt uneasy, though he knew he shouldn’t. What could happen now, now that they were safe on the right side of the River?

‘Well,’ he said, ‘Shall we just go straight ahead for a while?’ Ubu raced off again.

‘Follow that dog,’ Race said. They all laughed.

‘After you.’

‘No, after you.’

‘No, you first,’ Bella giggled as Solo did a little jig and stepped forward to lead the way.

They started to climb a slow gradient, hardly noticeable at first, but before long they knew they were climbing and a track started to form a zigzag trail leading them to the top of a hill. They could see back to the clearing with the boulders devoid of sun where they had come from. They could see the battered edge of the Truth Stream and the horrid river twinkling through broken trees in the distance. They stood there receiving the last rays of light across their faces and held each other’s hands. They had changed, hardened by their experiences. They smiled at each other. Race lent down and kissed Ubu on the nose. ‘Thank you Ubu,’ he said, ‘for saving me.’ Ubu gave a small yap, tail rotating, tapping the ground. They could just make out the Desert of Circles and its piles of debris receding into the distance towards Lair City, unaware of Zekai Manci in his Dome doing his handy work, transforming Dr Hasame into a creature that could live in the light. A creature called Smelt who would be sent to retrieve them, dead or alive.

‘What do you think? Shall we stay here the night?’ Solo asked, ‘Or keep going? We might be better served having the cover of trees to keep us warmer.’

They dropped back down the side of the hill and found a dell that was covered in fern and ponga trees. Some of the fronds had dropped to the ground and they gathered these to act as a ground sheet for their comfort. It was Bella’s idea to use others as blankets to cover themselves. ‘By jingoes Bella, you’re such a clever girl,’ Race enthused. They settled in under the covers of the fronds for the first time in days, without fear. Ubu curled up at their side with his snout peeking out from under their cover. They slept soundly and uninterrupted through the night, and were woken by birdsong in the first rays of light, blissfully unaware that they had been watched as they bedded down for the night.

Nua, for that was his name, a strikingly handsome man of the Kuaha Tribe, had watched their progress all day, blending into the environment unnoticed. Now he disappeared as silently as he had the day before into the landscape of his homeland, the Truth Stream. His dark face was tattooed with an intricate design revealing his ancestry. His hair, tied high on his head in a knot, displayed two feathers of grey and blue – from the native bird, the Kakapo. Muscular and tall,

his feet bare and solid, he moved with grace and power. He wore a feathered cloak and a grass skirt covered his hips down to his thighs. He left a gift of shoes woven out of flax for Bella and Race. They were wrapped within themselves by the string lacings that held them to the wearer's feet. It was Solo who found them. Recognising their function immediately, he spun around in a circle looking in vain for those responsible. He was amazed at the intruder's skill in managing not to disturb Ubu.

'We had a visitor in the night,' he said. 'Look what they have left us.' He held up the two pairs of shoes to Bella and Race. 'Someone is interested in your welfare.' The children were excited, slipping their feet through the bindings and lacings. Solo helped tie them around their ankles. They stood and walked around the campsite, proud as punch in their new attire, and happy to have their feet protected. Solo felt slightly apprehensive. It was unnerving to have had company without his or Ubu's knowledge, even though it was obviously friendly company.

They ate what fruit they had in their pockets, some of which was now squashed, and ascended to the plateau. The sun struck them full on and they had to squint to see across to the hilly landscape that clung to the other side. They walked through grass that had grown tall; at times they disturbed clusters of birds that flew out above them in sudden bursts of emotional clatter. This frightened them, while Ubu pranced skyward, snapping at thin air in the hope of dinner, but without success. The ground became mushy and the children's sandals soon became wet and uncomfortable, chaffing their toes. So, with some disappointment, they removed them. Solo cautioned to keep them. They would have their use. He strung the pairs together and draped them over the children's shoulders to dry as they walked.

Ubu had vanished. They could hear him rustling through the long grass and the squishy sounds of his paws in muddy pools. It was hard going for a while. Solo felt he might have made a mistake in heading across the grassland. The sun poured down on their heads. They removed their jackets and wrapped them around their waists. Their calves and feet were splattered with mud. Their only relief was the small pools of water that was available to drink. But at last the ground firmed and the tall grass receded, and the going improved. They started making good time towards the hills that were now somewhat closer,

and much larger. The children replaced their shoes, glad that they had not discarded them in the swampy marsh of the grassland.

They walked all day until finally they reached the foothills and the cover of trees once more. The sun was at their backs, lowering itself into the smog and haze of Lair City many miles behind them. But no food was to be found. No fruit or water. They all collapsed, burnt and exhausted, next to a large tree trunk. As the sky covered over with dense black clouds, they donned their jackets and sat in silence, fatigued from the long day's march. The sky was getting darker, brooding overhead, menacing. They huddled together while Ubu went missing as usual in pursuit of his own needs.

'Perhaps I could eat worms and insects,' Race offered.

This lightened their mood and they all chuckled. Just then a loud cracking sound boomed overhead and lightning flashed across the grassland, sending the group into a cringing, groping tangle. Ubu came flying back, his tail between his legs, whimpering, forcing his way into their terrified embrace.

'What is it?' Bella shouted. Her words were hardly audible. 'I'm frightened, Solo.' Just as suddenly, the clapping sound of thunder rolled across them, shaking the ground they sat on. Their faces were lit up by the violent display of the electrical storm. Then it started to rain. It poured down, torrents of water fell vertically, and in sheets so thick they could not see more than a yard in front of themselves. The deluge soon drenched them. 'We have to find shelter,' Solo screamed. 'We can't stay here. Come on, we have no choice.'

They stumbled up the hill looking for the safety of some kind of cover. They found it in the form of a rock shelf that protruded out over a knoll, and they scrambled under the roofing. The rain kept tumbling and the sky burned bright with each new flash of lightning. They were wet and miserable. Water ran off the ledge, creating a waterfall at the front of the dwelling, landing with heavy splashes at their doorway. Bella was shivering, her teeth chattering. 'Here, take off your coat,' Solo said, and he wrapped her with his own arms and body. Ubu was not much help, shaking his loose hairy coat to make a shower of water.

Little did they know that another much more sinister creature had also taken shelter – under a log at the edge of the Truth Stream. Smelt, who was also riding out the storm, was howling in frustration at losing their scent.

They clung to each other for warmth, spending the most uncomfortable night of their lives. Bella started to sweat. She began to rave and her temperature climbed. 'I'm so cold,' she complained through gritted teeth. Solo held her closer as she dropped in and out of sleep. Race was worried and rubbed her hands and feet, talking all the time to his dearest friend in the world. Both he and Solo had a sleepless night as the rain bucketed down and Bella's condition deteriorated. They must have dozed off, for Solo woke to Bella's voice. She wasn't in their cave, nor was Ubu. Solo jumped to his feet and out of the entrance in one movement. He came to an abrupt halt outside their retreat and spun around to follow Bella's voice. She was on the ledge above him. He scrambled up to find her covered in a feather cloak humming to herself, her legs dangling over the rock face. Beside her, Ubu and a bag made of grasses.

'Good morning Solo,' she said, bright and clear, 'look, we have food and water. My friend left it for us.' Solo stood, perplexed and worried, but what could he say? She did indeed have food and a gourd of water.

'What friend, Bella? I see no one.'

'No, he has gone. Oh Solo I wish you could have met him. See? He gave me these leaves to eat, to make me feel better,' she said, holding them up for Solo to see. "And I do, I feel much better.'

'What did your friend look like?' Solo asked.

'Well, he was a shadow, really, but he did have feathers, yes, feathers everywhere. He pulled his feathers off his body and wrapped me in them. They're beautifully warm. He made me eat these leaves, and then he left. We will see him again.'

'Did you talk to him?'

'Oh yes, but he didn't talk back. He just made me eat the leaves, covered me, and left.'

'Well, how did you get up here?'

'I don't know. I just did. Are you angry?'

'No, no, no, my sweet, I'm very happy for you. You had us scared last night. You were very sick.'

Race came out, screaming for his companions. 'Bella, Solo,' he called.

'We're up here, silly,' she replied.

'Where are you?'

'Up here,' and she leaned over her parapet and laughed.

‘Bella, are you okay? But, how, where...by jingoes, and Solo?’

‘He is up here too, with Ubu. Come on, we have food and water.’

Race joined the group up on top of the ledge. He had too many questions and they all came out at once. His words were tripping over themselves.

‘Don’t worry, here eat this. It’s so delicious. Taste it.’ She opened the grass bag and brought out a long piece of eel meat that was wrapped in a broad, bright green leaf. Race and Solo tucked into the fresh fish. Ubu was licking his lips, hoping to also be in on the feast. The morning was bright and clear. They could see down into the marshy grasslands. Large pools of water had gathered from the night’s violent storm. Race ran his hands over Bella’s coat of feathers, marvelling at its colour and softness. ‘It’s not mine,’ she said to him, ‘but you should try it on.’ She removed it and Race slipped into the cape. It was tent-like on him, almost touching the ground.

‘Oh, it’s lovely and warm.’ Race purred. ‘What do you mean it’s not yours? Can I have it?’

‘No, Race, you can’t. It belongs to the birdman and I know I must leave it here for him. It’s his. He won’t be able to fly without it. Now take it off. We have to leave it for him.’

Solo retrieved Bella’s jacket from the cave. It was still damp. He spread it on the rock ledge to dry in the sun.

‘How are we going to find Superbird?’ Solo asked. ‘Where do we go?’

‘His name is Epic and I’m not sure where we will find him. I guess he’ll find us, just like Powerflower did,’ Bella said, as she helped Race out of the birdman’s cape.

‘Well, I don’t know what direction we should head, or do we sit here and wait. What do you think?’ Solo asked.

It was Race who answered. ‘We should just keep going. Look how we have been helped along the way. I reckon we must be going in the right direction, or these things wouldn’t be happening. What with our shoes, and now with Bella. I mean, she’s better, overnight, just like that. And helped by a birdman!’

‘I think he was a birdman. He was a shadow with feathers coming out of his head so I just call him that, Race. He didn’t talk. He just gave me these leaves and made me eat them.’ Again she held up the leaves, but this time to show Race. Ubu pushed his nose at them, sniffing. ‘No, Ubu, they’re not for you,’ she growled. The dog lowered his head, gave a grunt-like sound and trotted off up the hill.

‘That was a bit harsh,’ Race said. ‘Ubu’s our friend. Give Ubu some of the meat, Bella, it won’t hurt.’

Bella looked at Solo. Solo just shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’m sorry, Ubu,’ she called. ‘Come here Ubu. Ubu, Ubu.’ The dog walked back towards her, quite sheepishly, close to the ground. ‘Here,’ she said holding out a good-sized chunk of eel in her hand. ‘We love you Ubu,’ she said as he gobbled down the fresh meat, licking the rock for the crumbs that had escaped his mouth.

‘Solo, what do you think we should do?’ Bella asked.

‘Well, I guess Race is right. We must be doing something right,’ he replied, looking up through the tree trunks that receded steeply into the hills. ‘It’s quite a climb we face. We can take our time, so it should be okay.’

They left the feather cloak where they had sat. To Race, it seemed a crazy thing to do; yet Bella was adamant that it had to stay. She had the grass carry-bag with the water, leaves and food in her hand. Her eyes sparkled. The energy in her voice confounded Race and Solo. Solo took her bag from her and placed his arm through the loops the handle made. ‘Well, let’s go,’ he said.

It was about midday, by the time they had climbed to the ridgeline. A stiff breeze whipped at their clothes as they followed the ridge up onto a flat expanse of lush forest. Birds followed them, spreading their fan-like tail feathers across the path as they walked, chirping in single notes. They could hear the rushing sound of water and moved towards it, happy to be on level ground. As they progressed, the noise became louder, until they broke out of the forest to stand in awe of a thunderous cascade. The water fell from above their heads in a constant rush, landing in a roaring whirlpool next to them, where it gathered its strength to wind its way towards the hills that they had just traversed. Mist clung to their feet. A rainbow danced amongst the spray. The three of them stood speechless as the rainbow moved up and down the column of water, which had carved a bowl into the solid rock.

‘It looks as if we have to climb again,’ Solo yelled above the pounding waterfall. ‘We’ll never get across this, it would rip us apart and sweep us away.’

They climbed around its outer edge over boulders wet with spray. Hand over foot they went inching their way to its broad lip, to find themselves looking at a perfect, cone-shaped snow-capped mountain

looming, towering behind more ranges and hills. Below them were the tops of the forest they had just walked through.

‘By jingoes, this place goes on forever. Just look at that hill. It disappears into the sky,’ Race muttered, ‘and trees, how many of them are there? They never stop.’

They followed the river upstream from the waterfall. Pigeons, big and fat, glided, crashing into trees; lizards scrambled away, rustling amongst fallen leaves and undergrowth. The river flattened out, with large grassy verges; flax plants dipped their fronds into the water and dragonflies skimmed the surface. They could see fish swimming in the current and many fruit trees lined the banks. ‘This must be heaven,’ Bella whispered. ‘Solo, can we stay here a while? I could stay here forever.’

They were ambling along without a care in the world, soaking up the sun, the perfume of flowers. A constant hum accompanied the working bees.

‘Yes, why not, let’s find ourselves a comfy place to rest, perhaps stay the night. There’s water and fruit and we have some eel meat left.’

It wasn’t hard to find a sheltered spot and soon they were all reclining except for the hyperactive Ubu, who was down at the river, pawing at its shallows in a vain attempt to catch fish. The sun was now low, sending golden shafts of light bouncing off the languid moving water. Lair City seemed a lifetime ago. They laid out their food and shared its bounty, calling Ubu back to partake in the rich-tasting eel meat. Race gathered a handful of the sweet fruit they now knew to be edible and they washed it down with fresh water.

‘Let’s collect some ferns for our bedding,’ Solo suggested, ‘while there’s still some light.’

‘By jingoes, Solo, you’re getting as clever as Bella.’

‘Why, thank you Race, nice of you to say so.’

Bella gave Race a small push. ‘Don’t be such a smarty pants.’ Race tumbled to the ground and rolled around laughing. Ubu came rushing over to join in the play. Solo helped Race to his feet and they all skipped towards the fern trees, light of heart, readying themselves for the night.

It was Solo’s arm, held out, that stopped their progress. Race wondered what was wrong. In a low voice, Solo quickly told them to be quiet. There, in front of them a creature of immense beauty stood by a stand of ponga and fern. It tilted its head back and trumpeted

a long, melodious call into the sky. It stood taller than Solo, its neck long, swan-like, and its magnificent head ended with a trumpet beak, now closed, pointed directly at our troupe. A mane of feathers spread from its crest down the beautiful neck. It was the most astounding colour. Earth-green. So radiant, it seemed to be translucent. Its four feet were marked in triangles of black. Its tail-feathers curled from its body and hovered shimmering over its arched back. It lifted its head again and called into the evening light.

‘Don’t move,’ Solo said. ‘Here, Ubu, get in here.’ Solo grabbed at Ubu, who had no intention of moving from under Solo’s feet anyway.

The creature moved towards them with a proud even step. Solo had the children sit. Their eyes wide, mouths opened in amazement. ‘What is it Solo?’

‘Shh, be quiet, I don’t know what it is.’

It moved closer and then circled them in an exquisite way, looking them up and down as it pranced with even steps. The group swivelled with its rotation. Then it stopped in front of Bella. It lifted its front paw and tapped Bella’s hand, which she withdrew under her jacket. It leaned down and sniffed Race’s hair. The group huddled together, afraid to move.

Solo said, ‘this is Bella and this is Race, I’m Solo, and my dog Ubu.’ Ubu gave a snarl. The creature wheeled around at the dog, and stared him straight in the eyes. Ubu whimpered and moved closer to his master.

The creature stepped back a pace or two and pushed its head towards the sky, called out once again, with a strangely gorgeous sound. The light was fading and the first stars of the night were starting to fill the canopy. Then miraculously, across the top of the trees, appeared the translucent outline of the flying flower.

Solo at first could not believe his own judgement. After all, he had never before seen Powerflower, although he knew it to exist. But to see the flower floating, flying towards them was almost too much for his mind. But the children jumped to their feet calling out Powerflower’s name, and this was enough to tell Solo it wasn’t an illusion; that indeed, the supernatural flower was there with them also.

‘It’s Powerflower,’ Bella called.

‘Powerflower, by jingoes,’ Race yelled. They danced around the luminous creature as he hovered just above their heads.

‘We’ve found you again! Yay!’

‘No you haven’t, you have found Keywee, my darling humans, and Keywee has found me. Yes, Keywee.’ Powerflower turned and gestured with one flowing petal towards the wondrous Keywee. The creature bowed its head towards the vibrating flower. As the light faded, the two supernatural creatures glowed, throwing an even light on the immediate environment.

‘I can see you, Powerflower,’ Solo said. ‘How is it that I can see you now?’

‘You are in the Truth Stream, Solo. You have proven yourself; your faith has made it so. Your love of Bella and Race has given you the eyes to see; to see in the Truth Stream. So welcome, good Solo. Time is not on our side. Keywee will guide you to the Sansvira. Only they know how you will find Epic of the Superbird and only Keywee knows how to find the Sansvira. So you see, Keywee found you. The Truth Stream has waited many, many years for your arrival and, thanks to Solo, you are here. Keywee will guide you. You must follow wherever she takes you. Do you understand?’

‘You sound very serious Powerflower,’ Solo said

‘These are very serious times, my friend Solo. Just follow Keywee. Nua has risked his being to watch over you in the last few days. It is he who left your shoes and healed Bella. It was his own cloak that he shared. It is good you left it for him. He feels great warmth towards Bella for that, as a feather coat is very rare. Hard to come by, and you only get one in each lifetime.’

‘So he’s not a birdman, then?’ Race asked.

Powerflower chuckled.

‘No Race, he is not. He is human just like you. His people are called the Kuaha, which means the Doorway People. They have kept the doorway to the Truth Stream safe from Lairs for many generations. They sing their songs of Epic and have waited like, us all, for you two children. For it is sung that you would come and find Epic of the Superbird. Listen to me. Follow Keywee. She will keep you safe for now. Tomorrow she will take you to the Sansvira. She is the Egg keeper and no Kuaha has ever seen her. She, too, has been just a legend. But as you can see, she is much more. She does exist.

‘Now is the time to free the Truth Stream of the Lairs and Lair City, to cast it from the side of the world, to free it from the powers of Zekai Manci. Keywee has revealed herself. Now there is no going back.

‘Nua and I will now watch your backs. We will try to keep you safe.

But these are dangerous times. Nua's people will give their lives for you, so do as I ask. Till we meet again, children, be safe. Goodbye Solo. You are brave, as is your dog Ubu.'

Powerflower dissolved into the dark night. Questions followed from the mouths of the children but they fell like stones to the ground, unanswered.

Ubu barked a farewell, than nudged into Solo's legs, staring at the silent Keywee.



Chapter Sixteen

Smelt crawled out from under his log, half Lair, half animal. His eyes flashed in the cold dawn. The rain had eased to a trickle. He talked to himself. ‘Bella, Race, I will eat you. Pull you apart for my master.’ He rose to his full height, sniffing at the air. His box-like head swivelled, and his small bat-winged ears twitched as the vile creature lurched back to the ground on all fours. Weasel-like, he scurried off, all claws and teeth, in search of his quarry. He dug at the ground, rolled over branches and tree stumps, hunting down a scent, with manic, frantic, demented gestures in his movements, all the time muttering to himself.

He cornered a startled rabbit by its burrow, ripped it apart, and ate it fur and all. His evil little teeth, razor-sharp, devoured the terrified creature alive. All this while, on the move, desperately looking for a sign; a smell. ‘Smelt wants smell. Smelt will find you. Rotten Half-lights.’ He scoured the river’s edge and howled in frustration.

All day long he looked, crawled, smashed and howled. All day long he raved, ‘stinking Half-lights, I will find you,’ until he found himself covering ground he had already covered. Blood, mud and sweat matted the small hairs on his face, chest and arms. He stunk to high heaven, relentless in his effort to do his Master’s murderous bidding. His horrendous energy seemed endless, not even the Truth Stream winds could halt his desire to fulfil Mancì’s needs.

He had returned upstream when he caught it on the wind, faint though it was, the scent of Bella. He pulled himself from under a pile of branches and sniffed at the air. His lips curled into a smile, exposing his needle-sharp teeth. He tipped back his foul head and howled once more, now with a satisfaction that was chilling.

‘Got you. Got you. Got you.’ He pounded inland, at last believing he knew the way. But the workload was telling, and even Smelt could not

sustain the manic pace he had set himself. Slowing, his brutal tongue could be seen in his gaping mouth as he struggled for air. The wind had dropped, as it did each day, undermining his belief that he was on the right track. He walked upright, stumbling from stump to trunk, cursing the rotten Half-lights. Finding a small tarn, he lapped at its restorative wetness. The silence that prevailed around him was constant. It was eerie. Not a living creature stirred. The only sound, his ugly panting breath, rasping as a saw through wood. He was on all fours again, feeling sorry for himself, his talon-like hands and feet cut and bruised. Then it hit him like a train. The clear and even smell of Bella was close at hand. His eyes grew in his head, which he turned back over his body, towards the unmistakable odour of the rotting Half-light.

Low to the ground, he sneaked towards a cluster of boulders that sat at the edge of the clearing. He was cautious, slinking around each tree, worming his way around each obstacle, until at last he reached the place of his quarry. The scent was strong. He slid his way from the forest side of the rocks to its summit, ready to pounce upon any and all that were hiding on the other side. Hatred rushed through his veins, with the desire to wreak havoc on the rotting flesh of the Half-light bodies. He ran his tongue over his teeth in expectation of the joy he would have in tearing them apart. At last he was ready to spring at them. He stood to his full size, and jumping from the top most rock, turned like a cat in mid air, and landed on all fours. His disappointment shattered the silence. He went berserk, flinging his limbs in every direction, howling out Bella's name into the empty clearing. It took some time for him to calm down and find the source of Bella's scent – one shoe, wedged under the base of the further-most rock. He pulled it out from its hiding place and ripped it to shreds. Pieces, slashed to ribbons, hung in the air like confetti. He kicked at what landed and howled in total frustration.

Finally, his senses returned. He realised he at least had a trail, and at last he would trap them. They were ahead, yes, but he knew in which direction they had gone. They were his to dissect. To take his anger out on. They would feel his power. It was just a matter of time. He would rest a while, then hunt them down. He would take their eyes back to his Master. Just their eyes, for now he wanted to eat them, one at a time, while the other watched. They would pay. But the traitor...that traitor Solo...he would return alive. Alive, so the Master could have his way.



Chapter Seventeen

The silent Keywee sat a short distance from Bella, Race and Solo, who were in a huddle whispering to each other. She had brought them here to this secluded dell amongst ferns and ponga not far from the river. She had disappeared for a short time, skirting their campsite before returning. She sat alert, her four legs folded up under her body. Occasionally she looked across at Bella, her eyes shining like two stars in the night. Ubu had spent some time inching his way over to her and nestled up against her luscious coat. She tipped her trumpeted beak and touched his head. A melody of exquisite notes accompanied her affection. Her long graceful neck held proud as Ubu curled up closer.

‘So your birdman is a human,’ Race was saying. ‘It was so clever of you to know to leave his cloak. By jingoes, you’re the best, Bella.’

‘Yes, and Nua has been following us all the time. It’s amazing how he did it without us knowing. He is most likely out there now, watching over us with Powerflower. What do you think Solo?’

Solo was mesmerised by Keywee, his gaze penetrating the night. ‘What, Race? What did you say?’

‘Never mind, Solo. She is beautiful, and it looks like Ubu has made a new friend. Had you ever heard of her before Solo?’

‘No Race, no. But there is no doubt she has a real interest in you two children. The way she looks at Bella is so tender. To think she has lived here in the Truth Stream for so many years and never till now revealed herself. Not even to the Kuaha. You must be very important children to her.’

‘Do you think the Sansvira will all look like she does?’ Bella asked.

‘It’s hard to know. I mean, seeing Powerflower for the first time has addled my mind. Even though I had a sense of him, to see him was extraordinary. Now with Keywee being here, and after seeing her

fantastic form, I doubt that the Sansvira will be anything but unique. Keywee must be very special, being the only creature that knows how to find the Sansvira. Tomorrow, we shall meet them.'

'Yes that's what Powerflower has said. But he thanks you Solo, for delivering us to the Truth Stream. And we thank you too. Without you none of this would be.'

'I did it for selfish reasons, Bella. I needed to talk with another Half-light. I had no idea of your futures in the Truth Stream. I hadn't even heard of such a place.'

'Nevertheless, without you,' Race chimed in, 'we would not be here.'

'Thank you children. You are my family now. 'My' children as well. You have made living life worthwhile. If I'd known you were so important to others, I might have frozen and kept to myself. Worked for the Lairs until I too would have been fed to the Chute. We have come a long way. Through many hardships and now we are safe. For the moment anyway – with Keywee. But we must remember what Powerflower said, that these are dangerous times. We should sleep, get rested for tomorrow. Who knows how far we will have to travel. We will need all our strength.'

The three travellers gathered together to sleep under the covers of fern tree fronds.

'I want to meet Nua, Solo' Race murmured into the still night before nodding off.

They were woken by Keywee prodding them with her trumpet-like beak. It was early. Dawn. Ubu stood at her side. She brushed aside their coverings. They stumbled down to the river's edge and splashed their faces and drank some water. The water was icy cold, waking them with a sudden shock. Race picked some fruit, and they ate while on the move. Ubu kept pace at the side of Keywee.

'I think you have lost your dog, Solo,' Bella said.

'It looks that way,' Solo agreed.

'Ubu, Ubu, come here,' Race called.

He turned his head and gave a yap of acknowledgement, though never lost step with Keywee. They all laughed. The piece of fruit in Race's mouth caught in his throat and he started coughing, spluttering. Solo whacked his back to save him from choking. They stopped and coiled themselves around the hapless boy who was gathering his breath, looking at them through watery eyes. Then they became aware of Keywee's presence. She walked sternly around them,

her feet stamping the ground. Her displeasure showed in her eyes and one by one she covered their mouths with the funnel of her trumpet. She studied each face; her intensity demanded their attention. They were being chastised. Race lowered his gaze to look at his feet. Keywee nodded her head in agreement.

'I think she wants us to follow in silence,' Bella offered. Keywee nodded. Her head feathers moved in a wave motion over her neck. A growling noise came from the back of her throat. Ubu added his bit with a similar telling off, mimicking Keywee. She turned and trotted off up ahead again, Ubu at her side.

The children pulled faces at each other. Solo covered his mouth with his hands and scrunched up his shoulders. They all looked at each other. Solo wagged his finger at Race. It was all they could do not to fall over laughing. Then Solo knitted his brow; his eyes said it all. They fell in behind, lost in their own thoughts, Solo thoughts reflecting on Powerflower's words: these are dangerous times.

For the most part, it was easy going. They kept mostly to tracks that dissected stands of bush. Occasionally, they had to cross swaths of grass. Keywee accelerated her pace in these open areas. All the time, they were travelling towards the looming mountain that was shaped like a cone. Its snow-covered blanket reflected the sun. As they started to climb into the foothills it disappeared behind a set of ranges that circled its feet. Ever higher they went, winding their way around rocks; monoliths that towered over them. The four-legged creatures made it look easy. But the children were struggling. Many times Keywee had to wait for them to catch up. This did not seem to worry her. She patiently stood scanning the surroundings while they crawled their way to her. Then she was off again, Ubu at her side.

Now there was no track to follow. She brought them to a ridge and stepped over to the other side to begin the descent into a basin they could see below them. It was bathed in sunlight. The going was slow and more than once Solo had to help them, one by one, over and through the nooks and crannies. At times they lost sight of Keywee. Then her head would pop up, and then vanish again, behind the next obstacle. At other times, they would see a flash of Ubu's tail. The climb down was much harder than the ascent. They knocked their knees and elbows, scraped skin from their shins. Their flax shoes started to unravel. Their throats were as dry as sandpaper, and they constantly wiped away the sweat from their foreheads.

Finally, they made it to the valley floor. Keywee and Ubu met them. She was impressed by their tenacity and grit. Her expression was open and friendly. The children collapsed to the ground, panting, bruised and bleeding. Solo too, was exhausted and relieved to be able to rest. They were cocooned inside a clearing; above them in every direction were ranges. The mountain retreated towards the sky. They were at its foundation, its roots. They tried to gather themselves and take it all in. The silence rang in their ears, a hum that was alive with secret meaning. At the end of the clearing a wall of rock blocked any further advancement. The mountain was to one side, the range that they had just climbed down behind them. A thick forest completed the circle. This forest that climbed its way from the valley floor seemed as steep and impenetrable as the rock wall that dominated the clearing. It was impossible for them to appreciate their environment. They were too worn out from the exertion of getting there.

Ubu licked at the cuts on the children's skin with a warm tongue.

Keywee, nowhere to be seen, had made her way over to a spring and sucked up water into her trumpet. This she carried over to the group and sprayed them with a fine shower, until they came around to a realisation of where they were. A shadow crept towards them from the forest, a wriggly line that mimicked the stand of trees. Solo found the spring and called them over. They struggled to their feet, despite their aching bones, and stumbled towards Solo like sleepwalkers.

They found relief in the refreshing water, also finding their voices for the first time that day since Keywee had reprimanded them.

'It's cold in the shadows, let's get back to the sun,' Solo suggested. He helped them to their feet. They could see Keywee studying the surface of the rock wall, her head moving in broad, swaying circles. Ubu was on his haunches at her side, emulating her swaying actions.

The sun warmed their spirits as they made their way back to a set of rocks that formed chairs. They sat around in a tight knot, leaning on their thighs, heads down, enjoying the last rays. 'I'm a little afraid it may be very cold tonight down here. I'm not sure I'll be able to handle it,' Bella murmured. 'I felt it in the shadow, and there are no ferns for cover.'

'What do you think Keywee's looking for?' Race asked. 'She's certainly interested in the rock face. Perhaps she has got us lost and is frightened to admit it.'

They watched her prowl up and down the rock face, Ubu under

her feet. She eventually had to stop and stamp her feet and growl at the dog to keep him out of her way. His feelings hurt, tail between his legs, he knew in himself to give her room. He stepped back in an ungainly way with a roguish plea that said, 'I didn't mean to get in your way.' Solo called his dog over to the group. He trotted to them with a hangdog head. 'It's okay, boy, she means you no harm. Just sit here with us.' He patted the dog's neck.

The shadow lengthened across the clearing as the four sat in its arms watching Keywee at the rock wall, which vibrated in the sun's golden radiance that was magically hypnotic, with an intensity all-consuming. Every head turned, every eye riveted to the fantastic light. The hairs on their heads, arms and necks stood on end. Their mouths were open in awe.

Keywee started to dance in a circle, bouncing up and down on her back legs, making cooing sounds, completely lost in her own actions. Her long neck moved snake-like. Then she tipped her head back and trumpeted a long, single note. It blasted up against the wall, spiralling around the clearing. It was as if you could follow its resonance in slow motion, as if it was a solid line of sound that could be captured as a specimen and held in a jar. They followed its progress. The single note circled, wrapping a whirling dervish that sped up until it joined itself and peaked in a high-pitched hum that reached a crescendo and exploded into a final boom. It hung in mid-air above their private amphitheatre, which stood in a dusky sky. The only light, that of the rock wall, illuminated Keywee, as the leading actor in some bizarre play.

They were all on their feet, and had forgotten their bruised bodies and the chill that had seeped into their bones. They were warmed by the radiance of the rock wall.

Transfixed by this amazing, magical scene, they held each other's hands. Solo in the middle; Ubu by his feet all were speechless in the wonderment of the moment. The rock wall's inner glow intensified to white light. Keywee chortled in ecstatic delight.

It was slow to appear. Faint watercolours, blotches of pale blues and sooty blacks, irregular in line and focus, came into view as a giant ectoplasm filled the vast heights of the rock column. For a moment it disappeared, struggling to keep its form – a form that looked more and more birdlike. It was a collective of four that stood shoulder to shoulder, trapped inside the rock itself. They wobbled, snapping in

and out of clarity as if they were debating together whether to solidify or not. Keywee danced, called loud notes, frantically spinning like a top in a kind of spiritual ecstasy. Her face was covered by her long head feather; she seemed to be in a joy she could not contain.

Still the wall shimmered with the Sansvira, as the outlines fought to find themselves.

Now Bella was calling out to the Sansvira, emulating the language of Keywee. Race too, clapping his hands and dancing on the spot. It was a frenzy of activity. Ubu pranced around, barking at the stars. Solo squatted, his hands pushed through his hair, completely enveloped by the radiance, drama and noise. A cacophony of sound and light.

Time stood still. Solo had flashes of his life in Mt Paris. He saw his parents, and it was revealed to him that they still lived – lived in Lair City as humans amongst the Lairs themselves. He saw their cottage. Bare gardens, slap bang in the middle of that bleak city. They were old and grey, but they smiled. Smiled at him. And for some reason, they were safe, left to themselves in the yellow haze. It was then he knew he would have to return to Lair City. Why, he couldn't say. He just knew he would.

Pulled from this vision by Ubu's barking, he realised the children were standing still. Keywee's dance had finished. The very environment was fat with the promise of birth.

The Sansvira came together intact. Transparent, as is a hologram. They spoke with one voice, but as if from a choir in four-part harmony. They were birds that walked on their tail feathers, upright like humans. They were the deepest blue. Their wings folded over their breasts. Their breasts held the pure white shape of an egg. Their tail feathers were like that of a swallow: parted, forked, black, giving the impression they were wearing boots. They were connected to each other and moved as one.

'Keywee has called,' they said together.

In a language of her own, Keywee said, 'It is time, Sansvira. I have found Bella and Race of the Half-light humans. The very ones we have waited for, for so long. Look, here they are.' And Keywee turned her head in the children's direction. The Sansvira bowed to the children and for the first time, talked amongst themselves in an excited fashion.

'Sansvira, they have Solo with them and his brave dog Ubu,' continued Keywee.

The Sansvira bowed again, then turned their heads to each other and babbled away once more.

‘Come closer, children, Solo, and you too, Ubu,’ the one voice said. ‘Let us see you. Come.’

The group advanced in a line towards the impossible mirage, not quite believing in their own sanity. They took little steps and with each step the Sansvira shrunk, until on the final step, the Sansvira had reduced their size to that of the humans. The size of Solo. A wonderful warmth spread from their vibrating bodies. Their bodies so transparent you could sense the rock wall through them.

‘Yes, it is you, Bella. Yes, it is you Race. We have waited so long for your presence,’ the one voice said.

They reached out their wings and touched the two children and a flash of ecstasy spread through their limbs. They smiled at each other, happy in the knowledge that this wasn’t a dream. It was real.

‘Children, you of the Half-lights, you who are human. You are our saviours. You will free the Truth Stream. You will free us from the eye. The eye of Lair City. The evil one. Zekai Manci. For it is you and you alone that can find the egg – the egg of Epic – Epic of the Superbird. The last and only body of the Sansvira. Our only son. You will find him on the Tundra above us, on the Range.’

The Sansvira turned and pointed above. ‘Only you and you alone, Bella and Race, can achieve our destiny. This you must do. Tomorrow you will start this journey. Find Epic’s egg and return it here to us. We will be waiting.

‘Solo and Ubu. You too have important tasks to complete. Though to what end, it is not for us to say. You must leave your beloved children, for they alone can find Epic. No other may go. Your journey is to the Kuaha. Keywee will lead you to their village. It is there that you will find your destiny – your own personal truth stream. Keywee has awoken us. We will meet again in the future. In the new Truth Stream. One without fear. One of love and care.’ Their words had been loud and clear but tailed off with the words love and care. They became unstable, visibly moving in and out of focus.

‘Wait, wait,’ cried Bella, ‘Where will we find Epic? How?’

‘You have the feather of Epic, don’t you?’ the Sansvira asked.

‘Yes, Solo has it, don’t you?’ Bella said, turning to look at Solo. The feather. How could they have possibly forgotten the feather? Solo stood, stunned that the Sansvira knew of the feather of Superbird.

‘It’s in Solo’s pocket,’ Race blurted out, also turning to look at Solo.

There was a moment of suspense. Time stood still; the Truth Stream seemed to hold its breath, as all eyes locked onto Solo.

Solo stood, paralysed. A sudden fear raced through his body. The fear that he might have lost it in the river. Why had he not thought of this? He patted the side of his jacket near his hip, where the pocket sat at his side, with a slow movement as mechanical as a sleep-walker.

‘Solo,’ Bella urged. ‘You do have it, don’t you?’

Her words snapped him out of his paralysis; the air was heavy with expectation. At first he fumbled his way to his pocket, till at last his hand was deep inside. Anguish spread across his face, as he rumbled inside the empty holding. Frantically, he realized it was in the other pocket, on the opposite side of his coat. His fingers spread across his body, reaching in panic for its opening. By now the children too, were fearful, turning back to look at the Sansvira. But they were cool and calm, as if they saw the humour of the moment, knowing full well all was in order.

Then, the world remembered that it had to take a breath; a smile of relief spread across Solo’s face as he brought the feather from its place of safekeeping. As soon as he brought it out into the open it started to glow, to take on a life of its own. It sprung from his grip and rotated in mid-air. It looked a tad tatty, but the quill itself was undamaged. It moved amongst the Sansvira, brushing up against their luminous selves, combing its down back to a perfect state. Then it flashed across the small divide to hover in front of Bella’s outstretched hands.

‘I think you have the answer, dear child, to how you will find the egg of Epic. You will know,’ Bella heard, as the Sansvira melted back into the rock. No more than the original blotchy watercolours were visible to their eyes.

‘Please,’ she called, ‘please Sansvira, tell us where in the Tundra we will find Superbird. Please...’

It was no good. They had vanished as if they had been an illusion.

They found themselves alone again. If Keywee hadn’t been there, they might have questioned their belief. But it was real. They had all seen it, heard it, understood their mission. It wasn’t as if they hadn’t been told already. Powerflower had told them how it would be. But to actually meet the Sansvira, in their spirit form, was almost unbelievable.

For a while, they stood around like stunned mullet, with quizzical expressions on their faces and with an empty feeling of loss that they

couldn't explain. They had basked in the glory of the supernatural – the Sansvira. Even Keywee was subdued, not her sparkly self. Ubu had walked away by himself, full of doggy thoughts that only he could understand.

Solo gathered the children to his side. Bella was weepy; Race did his best to hold back his tears but they trickled down his face. Solo beckoned Keywee to join them in their cluster. She limply toddled over. Soon Ubu returned.

'We must talk,' Solo said. 'Work out a plan. A plan so we shall meet again. This is not goodbye. It's just a parting. A time for personal revelations. Do not be sad. The Truth Stream will look after us. You have the feather of Epic. It will show you the way. We will meet again. Right here. Soon.'