

STONE
KEEPERS

THE CHOSEN

KARLANA KASARIK

STONE KEEPERS - The Chosen



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For Julia

I had this idea when you were ten years old. You are now a few years older, but I hope you can still enjoy a story about teenagers who, through no fault of their own, must save their world from evil. Something I'm sure you could do quite easily.

– 1 –

In the dark of night, Kiara Floriant found herself awake. She pressed a button on her Rubik's Cube alarm clock and the backlit numbers told her it was just after midnight. She turned and looked out at the sky through the uncovered window, but there were no stars or moon to be seen. Then, in the silence, she was certain she heard the back door close. Curious, she got up and looked down into the garden and as she stood staring into the night, a sharp wind sprang up, quickly intensifying. It swept the clouds away and the full moon illuminated the yard with an unearthly white glow. A chill ran through her and she picked up an old grey hoodie from the floor and slipped it on, raising the hood over her long, light brown hair. It was at that moment, by the light of the midnight moon, that Kiara saw the most unexpected thing.

Walking across the windswept lawn in elegant dark full-length robes were her parents. Patterns worked in silver thread at the necks, cuffs and hems glinted in the moonlight. Her mother looked noble, her light-auburn hair blowing in loose waves around her shoulders. Her father, though, just looked weird in a robe. She watched them in astonishment for a few moments before she moved to open her window, intending to call out to them. But at that point, they stopped at the first of the two old oak trees in the middle of the lawn, looked at one another and then back at the tree. With a strange feeling of anticipation, Kiara let her hands fall from the unopened window. She sensed they were waiting for something, for someone. In front of them, the trunk of the oak tree lit up with an orange haze. She stared at it, utterly bewildered.

The wind dropped as suddenly as it had started, and a woman stepped out from the orange haze. That was the only way to describe it. She didn't come from behind the tree or from the side of it;

she simply stepped out from the wide trunk and stood before her parents. Her pale hair and fair skin shone in the moonlight, giving her an otherworldly appearance beside Kiara's parents' darker tones. Her sage-green robe was of the same style as theirs, but with even more intricate designs reflecting back the moonlight. She greeted them with a slow nod of her head, which they returned.

Just as unexpectedly, a second person stepped out from the tree and stood casually beside the woman. He wore long, loose black pants and a long, dark grey hooded jacket. As he pushed the hood back, Kiara saw that he was a boy, perhaps a couple of years older than her. He had fair skin, unruly blond hair that touched his shoulders and an air of defiance. She didn't think he wanted to be there, standing in her garden in the dead of night. The woman stared at the boy for a few seconds, a look passing between them. He then turned to her parents and appeared to make an effort to smile.

Kiara was mesmerised by the scene before her. Her parents were such normal parents. Well, maybe that wasn't exactly true. Fascinated with ancient things, they were historians and archaeologists who spent a good deal of time travelling to far-flung places in unpredictable locations overseas. On their return, they wrote papers and gave lectures about what they had discovered. This seemed a bit extreme, though. Maybe they were re-enacting some ancient ritual? But how had two people just walked out of the oak tree?

From within the folds of her robes, the woman produced a small box which she held out towards Kiara's mother. The box glowed softly with a rainbow of continuously changing colours. She watched as her mother hesitated slightly, before taking the item with both hands and bowing her head in thanks. The woman then placed something in her father's hands. He looked at it and slipped it into his pocket. A few words were exchanged, and the woman smiled, touched them both on the shoulder as if to reassure them, then turned and walked back into the tree.

The boy also nodded at them, but as he turned away, he raised his gaze and stared straight at Kiara. He smiled just a little and mouthed the words 'happy birthday'. She caught her breath in surprise and took a step back into the shadow of her room, but as she did so, he too disappeared into the orange haze. A few seconds

later, the tree was back to normal. Her father took the box from her mother and looked at it before he gathered her into his arms. They stood like that for what seemed a very long time. At last, they broke from their embrace and walked hand in hand across the lawn to the back door. As they did, clouds filled the sky, and the garden was once again plunged into darkness.

Kiara remained at the window, her mind reeling. She guessed she wasn't supposed to have witnessed what had just happened in the garden, but she wanted to know what it meant. Maybe, if she crept downstairs she could eavesdrop on them to find out; after something as strange as that, they would be probably be sitting in the kitchen having a cup of tea to talk about it. But what if she got caught? That would be awkward.

Feeling cold, she got back into bed but lay awake, unable to stop thinking about what she'd seen. It was close to dawn before she finally drifted off to sleep.

– 2 –

Kiara stared at the new boy and immediately knew that his arrival at her school, three weeks before the end of the school year, would affect her more than anyone else. Standing before the class was someone whose mind she couldn't read.

As soon as Ethan Green had walked into the classroom, she had known he was different. There was a blank space around him where there should have been numerous thoughts swirling. It was three months since her parents had given her the flower pendant for her fourteenth birthday. It had been in the strange box they'd been given by the woman who'd stepped out of the oak tree. Since then, the only people whose minds she had been unable to read were theirs. So why couldn't she read the thoughts of the new boy? She saw Ethan direct his gaze to her, a puzzled look on his face and quickly averted her eyes, suddenly self-conscious.

She sensed her best friend, Phoebe, looking at her and heard the question in her friend's head.

Why are you staring at him?

I can't read his thoughts, Kiara thought into her friend's head.

Phoebe looked at her in surprise, seeing the confusion in Kiara's turquoise eyes. Phoebe couldn't read minds herself, but she knew her friend had been able to read everyone's since the day of her fourteenth birthday. However, they were able to converse silently by Kiara sending her own thoughts into Phoebe's mind. Kiara made no more comments to Phoebe but was clearly distracted for the rest of the lesson. When it finished she hurried out to her locker, Phoebe close on her heels.

'Are you sure you can't get anything out of his head?' she asked, glancing up to look at Ethan, who was standing only a few lockers away.

He caught her gaze and looked at her searchingly. Phoebe quickly dropped her eyes, her wavy dark red hair falling across her freckled face.

'I don't understand it,' Kiara whispered. 'I mean, I guess it was bound to happen that I'd find someone whose mind I can't read. There are seven billion other people on this planet. But why is *he* different?'

'Maybe you could ask him.'

Kiara pointedly ignored this suggestion and they headed off to their next class. Of course she couldn't do that when Phoebe was the only other person who knew of her strange gift. To her surprise, Ethan was beside her a few moments later.

'Hi,' he said, a small smile on his lips.

'Oh, hi,' she replied awkwardly, caught off guard. Then, she blurted out the first thing that came into her head. 'Are they all like you in Sydney?'

A tiny smile crept onto his face. 'I didn't find anyone else like me, or you there,' he said quietly.

She looked at him and saw that he was no longer looking at her face. He was looking at her flower necklace, its silver and white bright against her olive skin. It hung outside her dress, but she never bothered to hide it as over the past few weeks she'd realised that no one else could see it, except for Phoebe. Kiara figured this was because she had shown it to Phoebe and wanted her to see it. She felt herself freeze inside. She couldn't read Ethan's thoughts, and he could see her necklace. Who was this boy from Sydney?

'I think we might be the same,' he continued in a low voice.

Before she could say anything, Ethan was forced to drop back as they passed through the door into the classroom. Kiara went to the back of the room, Phoebe right behind her.

Ethan can see my necklace, she said into Phoebe's mind. I think I know why I can't get inside his head. I think, she said, pausing to consider the possibility, maybe he can read minds too.

Are you sure? There could be a million reasons why you can't read his thoughts and he can see your necklace.

Okay, tell me one.

Umm, well, the light was shining on it and created a strange shadow

on your neck?

But what about not being able to get inside his head?

Maybe when you like someone it stops you being able to. You know, so you don't have an unfair advantage in the relationship, Phoebe replied, raising her eyebrows and smiling cheekily.

Kiara rolled her eyes. *But I only just met him. How can I know if I like him?*

Love at first sight. He's kind of cute in a tall, pale, thin sort of way. His eyes are amazing. So blue, they almost don't look real.

Kiara looked at her in surprise. 'Who likes him?' she asked aloud.

A wave of colour blushed across Phoebe's cheeks, but she was saved from replying by a stern glance from their teacher.

The rest of the school day was a waste for Kiara. It was hard not to stare at Ethan in class and she barely took in anything the teachers said. Later, when they were put into the same team for a dodgeball game, they were both so preoccupied that they were the first two to go out. They sat apart at the edge of the playing field, eyeing each other curiously. It was with great relief that Kiara heard the bell sound at three-thirty. Grabbing her bag, she almost ran for the gate without even waiting for Phoebe, who jogged to catch up.

'Have you considered that if Ethan can read minds, then he'll have read everyone's in our class, including mine?' she asked, trying to match her friend's pace. 'He'll know all about you being able to read minds from me.'

Kiara didn't reply as she sensed someone coming up behind her. Ethan strode past, turned around and stopped right in front of them.

'We have to talk,' he said abruptly.

'Yes, I think we do,' Kiara replied, an unexpected feeling of nervous excitement rising in her.

'You've worked out what I meant then? Are you free tonight after school?'

'Er, sure,' she agreed.

'Here's my number.' He gave her a slip of paper torn from a workbook. 'Call me when you get home.'

She nodded as Ethan's intense gaze moved from her to Phoebe before he turned and walked away across the yard. A girl who was

clearly his slightly younger sister joined him. She had the same pale features, high cheekbones and nearly black hair.

Kiara looked at the piece of paper in her hand, the number written neatly in blue ink. She'd barely said two words to this boy, yet somehow what was happening seemed inevitable. She knew she was going to call him.

'I'm coming home with you,' Phoebe told her as they watched them go, and the girls ran for the bus.

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting in Kiara's kitchen eating chocolate brownies, with Kiara's phone on the table between them.

'Well, are you going to call him?' Phoebe asked, picking it up. 'Or am I?'

Her friend took it and dialled the number written on the scrap of paper. Ethan answered immediately.

'Can you meet me somewhere soon?' he asked, getting straight to the point.

'We'll take the dog for a walk. Do you know Centennial Park?'

'The big one with the old stone tower?'

'Yes. See you there in fifteen minutes?'

Both girls were silent as they walked quickly, pulled along by Kiara's dog, Sabre, who was eagerly tugging on his lead. Each was busy with their own thoughts. Phoebe hoped this mysterious boy would be able to shed some light on the extraordinary power her friend had acquired three months ago. She knew Kiara worried that she was a freak, so finding someone else like her might help explain things.

Kiara, while excited and nervous, felt more relieved than anything else. When she'd woken up this morning, she had been, as far as she knew, the only person in the world who could read other people's thoughts. Now, just a few hours later, there was a chance she was not alone after all. If Ethan could read minds, logically it followed that there were more like them, maybe even hundreds more. Had he been able to read minds all his life? Did he also have something like her flower necklace which gave him the power? Did he know of any others like them? Could his sister read minds too? So many questions whirled through her head.

As they arrived at the park, Ethan was riding in from the other

side. He raised a hand in recognition and headed towards a small group of trees with a bench nestled in the shade of their sprawling branches. The girls followed his lead and the three stood in the shadows while Sabre wagged his tail and looked at them expectantly. Realising no one was paying him any attention, he lay down with a sigh and waited. There was awkward silence for a few moments.

‘Can you read minds like Kiara can?’ Phoebe blurted out.

‘Yes, but I can’t read *her* mind.’

‘And you read *my* mind to find out about Kiara, didn’t you?’ she asked accusingly.

‘Well, I needed to know why I couldn’t see her thoughts and as you were obviously her best friend, I guessed you might have the answers.’

‘Great!’ exclaimed Phoebe, flinging herself onto the wooden seat. ‘You must know everything now.’

‘Yes – and no. When you were mind-talking to her in class, I could pick up your side of the conversation from your replies to what Kiara must have been saying to you. When I tried to get more information about her, though, I met with a sort of – I don’t know – a wall in your mind where she was concerned.’

‘What do you mean?’ Kiara asked curiously, glancing at Phoebe.

‘Well, normally I can get wherever I want in people’s heads, but when I tried to find out more about you from Phoebe, I couldn’t. She’s very protective of you. Anyway, I did learn enough from your conversations to know you’re a mind-reader like me and you were as confused as I was because you couldn’t read *my* thoughts.’

‘It’s weird having someone else in my mind,’ Phoebe said, with a pointed look at Ethan.

Kiara sat down beside her. ‘Have you always been able to hear what people are thinking?’

‘No, it started on my fourteenth birthday,’ Ethan replied, dragging his gaze away from Phoebe.

‘So, your sister can’t read minds then?’

‘No. Do you have any brothers or sisters?’

‘It’s just my parents and me. They are the only people whose thoughts I couldn’t read, until today.’

‘I can’t read my parents’ either, but I can read Tara’s, my sister.

It's a bit tricky sometimes because I know things I'm not supposed to, and she thinks I'm spying on her.'

'Do you know any others like us?' Kiara asked hopefully.

'No, I'd really started to believe I was the only one. That's why it was so strange to meet you today. I'm not a freak after all!' he said with a smile.

Phoebe, who hadn't moved her gaze from Ethan, found herself thinking how cute he looked when he smiled. At that moment, he glanced at her and she knew he'd heard her thought. Flustered, she bent down to pat Sabre. 'Maybe you're both freaks,' she muttered.

Kiara glanced at her and then at Ethan, but continued the conversation, her heart beating a little faster as she asked the next question. 'Do you have any idea why it started on your fourteenth birthday?'

'Yes, I think I do. What about you?'

Kiara pulled her necklace out from beneath her shirt. On a delicate silver chain hung her flower pendant, its centre a smooth, milky-white luminescent stone about the size of a five-cent piece. This was encased by a thin, circular silver rim and surrounded by six solid silver petals. As she held it up, the stone seemed to glow from within. 'You noticed this at school, didn't you?'

Ethan nodded.

'My parents gave it to me for my fourteenth birthday. They told me it was a traditional gift in our family, and that I was to look after it and treasure it. The treasuring bit is easy because it's beautiful. Strangely enough, the bit about looking after it is easy too. It never gets dirty and the chain is much stronger than it looks. They never told me what it would do to me, though. I'm not sure if they even know.' She paused and gently ran her fingertips over the stone. 'I haven't taken it off once. I can't really explain, but it's like this is a part of me now. And even weirder, no one else can see it. I never bother trying to hide it at school anymore and no one has ever noticed it, except for you today.'

'Do you know where your parents got it from?'

'Well, my parents didn't say anything when they gave it to me, but what they don't know is that I saw where the necklace came from.'

'You never told me you knew where it came from!' Phoebe interjected.

'Well, I don't know where it came from *originally*. I know I should have told you, but every time I nearly said something, I just didn't. It's so unbelievable, I sometimes wonder if I dreamed it up myself.'

'The whole magic pendant and mind-reading thing makes no sense anyway,' Phoebe pointed out. 'What's one more unbelievable thing?'

'You'll see.'

Kiara proceeded to tell them of the strange events in her back garden on the night before her fourteenth birthday, three months earlier.

'Really, Kiara, I would have believed you,' Phoebe said when she'd finished, a little hurt that her friend hadn't told her earlier.

'I thought I'd given you enough to worry about.'

Phoebe put her arm around her friend's shoulder and gave her a hug. 'I know you're not crazy, Kiara. I just wish I could have what you have. I wish I could understand what it's like for you.'

'Can I have a look at your necklace?' Ethan asked.

Kiara held the pendant out to him. He took the flower in his fingers and as he did, it began to glow softly. To their surprise, it didn't glow white but was infused with the palest rainbow of opalescent colours.

'How did you do that?' Phoebe asked curiously.

Ethan let go of the flower. 'I think this might have something to do with it.'

He held out his right arm and pulled up his sleeve. On his wrist, he wore a wide black plaited leather band, around which curved a silver wildcat. Its oval body was made from the same luminescent, milky-white stone as Kiara's flower, and the head, legs and tail were crafted in silver. As Kiara touched the feline, the stone at its centre glowed a very soft green.

'It's never done that before,' Ethan murmured, staring at the faint colour.

'Where did you get it?'

'I can't imagine my parents in robes in the garden at midnight,

but otherwise my story is the same as yours. The bracelet was a gift from them for my fourteenth birthday, which I thought was quite cool but a bit strange. Mum said it was a family heirloom, and I was to look after it and never take it off. It's funny, you know, because I'm pretty careless with it, but the leather still looks new. I can get it wet and dirty, but it always looks the same. I'm sure no one else can see it either, or the teachers would have asked me to take it off.' He looked at Phoebe. 'You can see it, though?'

'Yes, but it might be because I can already see Kiara's or maybe it's because you wanted me to see it. What did you do when you found out you could read minds? Did you work out it was the bracelet? Kiara had a horrible time while she got used to all that noise in her head.'

'I know what you mean, but I guessed it must be this. What really made me sure was when I realised I never wanted to take it off. It's like you said, the bracelet was part of me. So I figured I just had to learn to control what it allowed me to do. It's okay now and very useful at times, as you would know.'

Kiara nodded. 'It is, but ...'

'But what?'

'Don't you wonder why? *Why* you've been given something that allows you to read minds? *Why* on your fourteenth birthday? *Why* from your parents, who didn't tell you what it could do?'

'Every single day,' Ethan replied slowly. 'Now, I'll wonder even more after hearing your strange story. I thought a rainbow box was weird enough, but a woman and a guy stepping out of a tree?'

'You know, your parents must know each other,' Phoebe said suddenly. 'Think about it. What sort of a coincidence is it that you both have these stones you got on your fourteenth birthdays?'

'My parents said they didn't know anyone else in Melbourne,' Ethan said thoughtfully.

'Do you think your parents know what your bracelet allows you to do,' Kiara asked him, 'but just haven't told you?'

'I don't know. They've never hinted it would do anything and I've never told them what it does. I thought they might take it off me or drag me away to the doctor because I was hearing voices in my head. I wanted to try and sort it out myself. Sometimes though,

I think they're looking at me like they're about to say something, but don't quite know how to.'

'Have you told anyone else? A friend?'

'No, it's not exactly normal what we can do, is it? There wasn't really anyone I wanted to tell anyway. I *nearly* told Tara once, but I thought I'd wait until she turned fourteen as I guess she'll probably get something like this then. It must be different with girls, telling someone,' he said, looking at Phoebe with his piercing blue eyes.

'Now you've found each other and compared your magic powers, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to try and find out more about the stones?' Phoebe asked, returning his gaze.

'We could ask our parents,' he suggested, not sounding very enthused by the idea.

'If they've chosen not to tell us anything so far, what makes you think they'll want to tell us now?' Kiara asked. 'They either don't know what the stones do or don't want to tell us. I'm not going to get taken to some head doctor because I can read minds and I'm *not* letting anyone take my necklace away to study it. Can't we just do nothing? I mean, for now at least? We could wait a few more weeks and see if anyone else like us turns up. If my parents knew anything, surely they would have told me,' she added, as if trying to convince herself.

Ethan sensed the resentment Kiara felt towards her parents for the strong possibility that they knew what they'd done to her world in the last three months, but hadn't discussed it with her. He didn't feel the same way about his parents. Then again, maybe he would if he'd seen them in the garden, dressed in robes in the middle of the night talking to people who lived in a tree, and then neglected to tell him.

'There has to be another way,' continued Kiara. 'There must be something we can find out from our parents, without actually asking them.'

'You mean ... going through their things?' Ethan asked, a little startled.

'Sure, why not? They've turned my life upside-down. I think I have a right to snoop.'

'What are we looking for?'

'I don't know. Anything that seems ... unusual, I suppose. Just be careful.'

'I hate to think what Mum will say if she catches me,' Ethan said, shaking his head.

'What if you don't find anything?' Phoebe asked. 'Then what?'

'We'll wait until we find another person like us,' Kiara replied stubbornly.

'That could take ages! That's if there *are* any more like you.'

'She's right, Kiara,' Ethan agreed. 'Maybe in a couple of months, if we haven't found anything out or met anyone else like us, we should ask our parents.'

Kiara looked at Ethan for a few moments before reluctantly nodding her head.

'Well, time to go home and start snooping,' he said with mock enthusiasm.

'Just one thing before you go,' Phoebe said. 'Can you promise not to go into my head? I'm used to Kiara, but she's my best friend.'

'I'll try. Got some secrets?' Ethan teased as he picked up his bike. 'See you at school tomorrow. Maybe we'll know everything by then.'

With Sabre tugging on his leash, the girls ran back to Kiara's house. When they were in her bedroom with the door firmly shut, they both started to talk at once.

'You first,' Phoebe said.

'I can't believe I've met someone else just like me! Now I have someone who understands.' Seeing the look on her friend's face, Kiara quickly added, 'I know you want to help, but because you can't actually read minds, you can never really know how I feel.'

'I try to understand. I just wish I could read minds too, then I could really help.'

'You wouldn't wish that once you tried it a few times. Sometimes it's great, other times it's awful. I try so hard not to see all the thoughts everywhere around me and I've got a lot better at controlling it, but there are days when I'm tired or not concentrating. Then, I see someone or hear part of a conversation and I'm in that person's mind and it's too late. I find out things I wish I hadn't.'

'Well, you've got Ethan now. Maybe together you can figure

out what's going on with your necklace and his bracelet and learn how to control their power together.'

'It's really strange, but I feel like I've known Ethan for ages, even though we've just met. I hope we find more like us, but even if we don't, I think everything will be okay now we have each other.' She saw Phoebe's thoughts as she said the last few words. 'Don't worry, I won't steal him from you.'

'What do you mean?'

'I can read your thoughts, dummy. Anyway, you couldn't take your eyes off him.'

'Do you think he knows?'

'You really aren't thinking, are you? He reads minds too. And he couldn't take his eyes off you either.'

Phoebe smiled. 'So, when are you going to start looking through your parents' things?' she asked, changing the subject.

'Tomorrow. Maybe I'll start in the study. I might find a letter or a book that explains the whole thing.'

'Let's hope it's that easy.'

– 3 –

The end of the school year arrived quickly and each long, summer day of the holidays dragged by slowly for Kiara. As the weeks passed, neither she nor Ethan found out anything more about their Stones, their origin or how much their parents knew. He had spent most of the holidays back in Sydney with his parents, but before he'd left, like Kiara, he had looked everywhere he could think of for a clue about his wildcat bracelet. Between them, they'd flipped through thousands of pages of books looking for hidden pieces of paper, skimmed over hundreds of journal articles and read many letters not meant for their eyes.

On the first day of the new school year, she was up early and arrived at the school gates just as they were being opened, keen to see Ethan and talk about what they would do next. While she was walking over to her new building, he rode up beside her and hopped off his bike, falling into step with her.

'Hi!' Phoebe called out as she ran to join them.

She grinned madly at Ethan, ignoring her friend who had spent most of the summer with her, as Kiara's parents had gone away to dig up some buildings in a jungle somewhere. Kiara felt awkward as her two best friends just smiled at one another.

'Come on, we'd better find out where we have to go,' Ethan said, slightly embarrassed as he saw Kiara's expression.

The first half of the day passed quickly as they found their classrooms in the unfamiliar building and met their new teachers. After lunch, the bell to start the lesson had already rung, but the science teacher was late. The kids were standing around the room in small groups, talking about anything but school. Slowly, the class became aware of a man standing in the doorway, watching them.

Kiara turned around, and her first thought was that he didn't

look like a teacher. Olive skinned and quite tall with almost black hair greying slightly at his temples, he wore jeans, a white T-shirt, black jacket and cool looking Vans.

She and Ethan glanced at one another, confused yet excited. There was something else about the man – the space around him was blank. There were no thoughts coming from him that they could read.

The class quickly settled into an uncertain silence. Slowly and deliberately, the teacher closed the door and crossed to the front of the room. Ethan and Kiara watched him intently. He definitely wasn't wearing a pendant around his neck, but there was the possibility he wore a bracelet hidden under his jacket.

'Good afternoon. My name is Professor David Dwight. I am filling in for Mr Warren, who is unable to be here today.'

His gaze slowly roamed the room and seemed to be analysing every student who sat before him. Kiara's breath caught in her throat as Professor Dwight's green eyes met hers. Was he going to give her a sign that he knew she was a mind-reader too? Unexpectedly, his eyes flickered down to her collar and then back to her face, but his expression didn't change. Her mind was racing. Had he been able to see her necklace, even though he'd given absolutely no indication that he had? Confused, she looked away.

Professor Dwight began the lesson and once they were all working quietly, he moved slowly down the aisles between the tables. As he approached Kiara, her tension rose. Was the man now going to acknowledge that he was like her? She became acutely aware of every step as he came closer and then she froze, pen mid-sentence, as he stopped and looked down at her page. It was then she realised that while she couldn't read the Professor's thoughts, she could feel his emotions.

She knew in that instant he was aware of her necklace. What surprised her more was she was certain he *wanted* her necklace. She felt trapped, but the Professor moved on without a word. Out of the corner of her eye she watched him pass Ethan without stopping. He didn't look at her again and when the bell finally sounded, he walked out of the room without a backward glance. Before she could say anything to Ethan, he raced out of the room.

Phoebe put her hand on Kiara's arm. Startled, she jumped.

'I've been trying to get your attention for ages.' She looked intently at her friend. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'I can't read Professor Dwight's mind, and I'm sure he saw my necklace,' Kiara whispered apprehensively.

'That means he must be like you and Ethan!' Phoebe said with excitement. 'Maybe he'll be able to explain everything.'

'I don't know. When he stopped next to me, I got this awful feeling he knew about my necklace and wants it for himself.'

'He probably has his own necklace or bracelet if he's like you. Why would he want yours?'

'I don't know,' Kiara replied worriedly.

Ethan walked back into the classroom, looking perplexed.

'Where did you rush off to?' she asked him.

'I went to see if Professor Dwight would say anything to me about mind-reading,' he said in a low voice, glancing at the other students nearby.

The girls looked at him in surprise. 'Did he?' they asked in unison.

'No, he ignored me completely.'

'Well, I can't read his mind, but I'm sure he saw my necklace,' Kiara told him under her breath.

It was Ethan's turn to look surprised. 'If he can see it, he might be like us.'

'I don't know. There's something strange about him.'

'Kiara thinks he actually wants to take her necklace off her,' Phoebe told him.

'Why?'

Before Kiara had time to answer, the teacher for the next class walked in, and they were forced to end their discussion and rush off to their last lesson.

'What are we going to do about Professor Dwight?' Kiara asked Ethan as the three of them walked to their lockers at the end of the day.

'Why do you have to do anything? Just wait and see what happens,' Phoebe interrupted.

'I can't just do nothing if he wants to steal my necklace!'

‘You don’t even know if he’s like you two and can read minds at all. Maybe he’s just got a mind you can’t read, that’s all,’ Phoebe said. ‘And if he can see thoughts, maybe he never tried to read any today, so he didn’t realise you two were different.’

‘He’s a teacher with a bunch of kids he doesn’t know. Of course he’d be listening to our thoughts,’ Kiara said. ‘And I’m still sure he saw my necklace.’

‘I know you can’t understand what it’s like, Phoebe, but in a room full of people like that, you just pick up random thoughts from everyone,’ Ethan explained. ‘They’re always there, even if you don’t want to hear them. Some are louder than others, and some just seem to leap out and you can’t avoid them. I’ve learned not to take much notice of them most of the time, but if there was someone in a room of only twenty-five people who had no thoughts, it would become obvious. There’d be a complete silence around them where there should be some noise. Like it was when Kiara and I met. If Professor Dwight *can* read minds, he would know we are different after taking a fifty-minute class.’

‘Well, maybe we’ll just have to watch him for the moment, but I don’t want to go near him again,’ Kiara said decisively.

* * *

Later, as the girls walked part of the way home together, Phoebe looked at her friend worriedly. She hadn’t said anything since they’d left the school grounds, but she knew what the look on Kiara’s face meant.

‘You’re planning something, aren’t you?’

‘I might be able to avoid the Professor at school as he’s not our proper teacher, but I don’t think that will stop him trying to get my necklace.’

‘Are you sure he wants it?’ Phoebe asked dubiously. ‘Why didn’t Ethan feel anything bad about him?’

‘I don’t know. Once Professor Dwight saw it, he seemed to stop looking around the class. He wasn’t looking for Ethan, he was looking for me, or at least for my necklace. Maybe he doesn’t know anything about the bracelet.’

‘But *how* would he know about your necklace or where to find you?’

‘I have to find out more about him,’ Kiara said determinedly.

‘How will that help?’

‘Because,’ she said, stopping and looking at Phoebe seriously, ‘it’s just like you said. How did he know to look for someone in our class with a necklace like mine? That scares me.’ She continued walking. ‘Maybe I could google his name and find out where he lives.’

‘Why?’

‘I could go around to his house and, umm, well ...’

‘What? Ask him questions?’

‘No ...’

‘You want to spy on him?’ Phoebe asked, shocked her friend would even consider doing such a thing.

‘I could be in danger if I don’t find out more about him,’ Kiara replied, attempting to justify her idea.

‘Kiara, I know we’ve been through this before, but why are you so stubborn? *Please*, just ask your parents about your necklace. It would be so much easier. Then they could talk to Professor Dwight.’

‘Yes, but only if they know what my necklace can do, and I don’t think they can know. If they did, they would’ve told me and my fourteenth birthday at school wouldn’t have been such a nightmare. Remember, I couldn’t think properly with all the noise in my head and missed a few days of school, pretending to be sick because of it? If they don’t know anything, I can’t tell them now, just when I’ve found Ethan. What if my necklace was taken away to study? I would rather *die* than lose it.’

Kiara fell silent. Although it was true she couldn’t imagine being parted from her necklace, she knew she was not being entirely honest with Phoebe or herself. Did she really believe that her parents knew nothing? She had seen them receive her highly unusual birthday present from a woman who walked *out of a tree* in the middle of the night. But if they knew what the necklace could do, why hadn’t they told her? Didn’t they know what she would go through, especially in those first few days and weeks? The continual roar of noise in her head, which she’d mostly learned to control, and the unexpected things she’d discovered about people that she would rather not have.

If they wouldn't tell her about the power and help her with it, she wouldn't tell them anything about the problems it caused her. It would serve them right if Professor Dwight stole the necklace, and then they told her it was valuable.

'Are you going to talk to Ethan about spying on the Professor?'

'Let's wait and see if I can find anything out first.'

Phoebe looked at her friend but said nothing, although she was certain Kiara knew exactly what she thought about not telling Ethan. Instead, she said, 'Well, if you're going to google him now, I'm coming home with you.'

As soon as they arrived at Kiara's house, the girls dashed upstairs under the pretence of starting some homework. Kiara's mother raised an eyebrow at this unusual studiousness on the first day of the school year but made no comment. A minute later, Kiara was sitting at her computer, staring uncertainly at the keyboard. Then, seeming to make up her mind, she typed in the Professor's name and hit the Return key. There were a lot of results to choose from that seemed to be connected with the man. She selected the most likely looking one at the top. It took them to a professional website about Professor Dwight, which surprised them even more. The Professor, it seemed, was quite a renowned historian. He had written several books and travelled to many parts of the world for archaeological digs.

'Why did he take a job at our school if he's so clever?' Kiara asked, feeling even more uneasy about the teacher.

'Maybe he likes all the holidays.'

'Maybe. Or maybe not.'

'Why are you so suspicious because he does other things apart from teaching? He could use the holidays to go and dig things up like your parents do.'

'It's all wrong, can't you see? He's working in some random high school when he's an expert in archaeology. There *has* to be another reason.'

'Well, your parents might have met him. They study old stuff like he does, and they've travelled and written heaps of papers and books too. Maybe they've even discussed your necklace with him.'

'If they do know the Professor and that's how he knows about

my necklace, I'm sure they won't know anything about his dark side and him wanting to steal it. If I tell them, they'll think I'm paranoid.'

Phoebe raised her eyebrows. 'Well, aren't you?' she asked in frustration.

Kiara looked at her intently and held up her pendant. 'If Professor Dwight knows about my necklace and the gift it gives the wearer, then perhaps he knows more about me than I do and that really scares me. I have to find out who he really is and why he's at our school. Without asking him,' she added.

Phoebe nodded, but her thoughts gave her real feelings away; she hoped the Professor's address wouldn't be listed or the house would be too far away, and Kiara would have to think of something else.

A short time later though, Kiara had on the screen what they assumed was the teacher's address. She felt excited yet apprehensive. He lived about ten kilometres from the school, close enough to use their bikes.

'So, you're not really going to sit outside his house and spy on him, are you?' Phoebe asked, trying to sound relaxed about the whole thing.

'I've got another idea,' Kiara replied, her eyes distant and bright.

'I have a bad feeling about this. Really bad,' Phoebe muttered.

'I need to get into his house.'

'Please tell me you don't mean what I think you mean?'

'Could you come and stay at my place on Friday night?'

'Why?' her friend asked warily.

Kiara's turquoise eyes were almost glowing. 'We'll have to wake up very early.'

'I was planning to sleep in on Saturday, but I can see you have other ideas.'

'It's our only chance. The Professor is going to be at the cricket team's breakfast. Don't you read the notices?' Kiara added, seeing the astonished look on Phoebe's face.

'Our only chance for what?'

'Breaking and entering, of course.'

Phoebe groaned, grabbed a pillow and threw it at her friend. 'That's just plain dumb. Where do I start? It's against the law, it's

wrong, there'll probably be alarms and big dogs with sharp teeth and if they don't get us, the neighbours will see us and call the police anyway,' she said, counting off the possibilities on her fingers.

Kiara cuddled the pillow and looked at her friend's worried face. 'I'm going whether you come with me or not.'

Phoebe sighed. 'Somebody has to go and keep an eye on you. At least I can keep you company in juvenile detention,' she added miserably.

'We'll be in and out in no time. I just need to have a quick look inside his house and his study. All professors have a study. We'd better wear gloves too, those little white cotton ones.'

'But *what* are you looking for? What do you expect to find?' Phoebe asked, frustrated by her friend's determination to get them both into trouble.

'That's just it – I have absolutely no idea. I'll know when I see it.'

'What about Ethan? Is he coming?'

'No, three of us would be too many. We'll surprise him with what we find out.'

'Yep. He sure will be surprised,' Phoebe said with a hint of sarcasm. 'You're just worried he'd try and talk you out of it.' Kiara threw her a defiant look, but Phoebe didn't pursue the matter. 'How will we get in?' she asked instead. 'You *can't* break a window.'

'We'll work that out when we get there. Hopefully, he's one of those people who leave windows open or a key under a doormat or a pot plant.'

'I'm going to jail,' Phoebe muttered, flinging herself down onto the bed.

– 4 –

It was five-thirty on Saturday morning. Kiara lay in the darkness thinking about what she was going to do. Maybe she should just knock on the Professor's door instead. What would she say, though? *Hi, can you see my invisible necklace?* or *Hi, can you read my mind?* Of course not, that was ridiculous! What she was planning now was even more ridiculous, but somehow it seemed to be the easier option.

The clock finally crept around to quarter to six, and she roused Phoebe. Quietly the girls dressed, crept downstairs and slipped out through the back door. It was unlikely Kiara's parents would come looking for them on a Saturday before nine o'clock but just in case she'd left a note on her pillow saying they'd gone for an early bike ride; she just hadn't said where they were going. Sabre came over to them, wagging his tail excitedly.

'Sorry,' whispered Kiara, 'you can't come with us this time.'

The dog whimpered and looked at them with sad eyes as they closed the gate. They rode at a constant pace along the deserted dawn streets, but it took them over half an hour before they reached the area of the Professor's address. The blocks became larger and the houses more imposing. When they arrived at his street, they dismounted and pushed their bikes the rest of the way, quietly discussing their plan, or lack of one.

'It's simple, really,' Kiara explained. 'Check for guard dogs, cameras and spotlights, get into the shadows of the house, find a way inside and find the Professor's study ...'

Her friend looked at her dubiously.

'I will *not* change my mind at the last minute,' Kiara said.

Phoebe returned to quietly reading the house numbers. 'Thirty-six, thirty-eight, forty.'

When they reached number fifty-four, they stood in front of the

wrought-iron gates, sure that they must have the wrong address. On the massive corner block, a slate drive curved towards an imposing double-storey, white Georgian-style house set well back from the street. The sun was just rising over the tall conifer trees that edged its back boundary, casting deep shadows across the manicured lawn.

‘This can’t be right,’ Phoebe whispered, looking at the size of the place.

‘It could be. He could have gotten rich from all that research and all those books he’s written, which makes it even stranger that he wants to be a teacher,’ Kiara reminded her friend.

‘As I said, maybe he likes all the school holidays. I do.’

‘Well, if we wait a bit, we should see him leave and then we’ll know if it’s his place.’

At that moment, a light went on upstairs.

‘He’ll see us,’ Phoebe said, looking nervously around.

‘We’ll hide in his garden. There are plenty of bushes.’

Phoebe was not too keen on this but knew it was better than standing in the street. She gave the gates a push, but they didn’t move. She looked at the high, grey stone wall that surrounded the gardens with a tinge of relief. There was no getting over that easily.

‘A locked gate is not stopping me,’ Kiara told her, and she walked past the double gates to the corner and turning it, found what she needed. A large tree grew beside the footpath with a thick branch stretching over into the Professor’s garden. ‘This might work but we need to hide our bikes first.’

‘We could leave them over there between the hedge and the wall,’ Phoebe suggested in defeat, pointing across the road at the house opposite.

A couple of minutes later, Phoebe gave Kiara a boost up to the first branch and with some difficulty, Kiara then pulled her friend up beside her. They climbed a little higher until Kiara was able to crawl along the branch. She studied the garden for a few moments to be certain no one was in sight and then leaped. It was a fair drop to the ground, but the mulch in the garden beds cushioned her impact.

She beckoned up to Phoebe. *Come on, jump!* she said silently, but as she landed, her friend let out a muffled cry of pain. *What’s wrong?*

My ankle.

Can you stand on it?

Phoebe stood up and carefully put a little weight onto her right foot. *It hurts, but I'm not staying here,* she replied, glancing around the garden.

The girls crept along beside the garden wall, hidden from the house by shrubs and bushes that pulled at their clothes and caught at their hair, until they were in a position to see anyone who drove out of the front gate. Thirty minutes later, although it seemed like hours, the garage door opened and a shiny black sports car emerged with the Professor at the wheel. They held their breath as the car glided past, the gates opened, and it was gone. Phoebe made Kiara wait a further five minutes, just to make sure he didn't return, before they made their move. At least there were no dogs roaming the garden.

Just as Kiara was about to stand up, Phoebe put a hand on her shoulder to hold her back. 'How do you know Professor Dwight lives by himself?' she whispered. 'This is a huge house for one person. Does he have a family?'

'I don't know. I can't pick up any thoughts inside. That would be normal if there's someone else inside like him, but I don't care. I can't leave when I'm so close to finding something out.'

'Yeah, like what the inside of jail looks like,' Phoebe muttered under her breath.

With hearts pounding, they walked as quickly as Phoebe's injured ankle would allow over to the side of the house.

Here, put these on, Kiara said, handing her a pair of white cotton gloves. *We don't want to leave any fingerprints.*

Phoebe slipped them on and followed Kiara as she crept along beside the house. Rounding the corner at the back, they found an open window.

How thoughtful of him, Kiara commented.

What if there's an alarm?

If he left a window open, there won't be.

Kiara pushed the window higher, jumped up onto the ledge and slid into the room. It was a traditional conservatory with a dark grey floor, white wicker furniture and oversized plants in striking blue-glazed pots. In one of the chairs, an unusually large, sleek

black cat was curled up on a blue-and-white cushion. Sleepily, it opened its brilliant orange eyes and gazed at Kiara with seeming uninterest as she turned to help Phoebe inside.

'Hello, beautiful,' Phoebe said, stopping to pat the cat. She moved on quickly when she saw Kiara frowning at her. 'Sorry,' she whispered.

Kiara frowned again and raised a finger to her lips.

Passing through a gleaming modern kitchen and dining room beyond, they entered a large black-and-white tiled foyer. Phoebe could feel her heart pounding and felt as if she couldn't get enough breath. She was terrified they would be caught. To their right was the impressive front door and to the left, a wide staircase rose to the first floor. Two other doors stood opposite.

Nothing here, Kiara said, as she quickly checked behind them. *The study must be upstairs.*

If there is a study, Phoebe thought, as she leaned on the stair railing to take the weight off her sore ankle.

A dark streak whizzed past and the black cat stood on the top step, looking down at them. Reaching the landing, Phoebe gave him another pat but stopped as she looked apprehensively up and down the corridor. The cat turned and walked to the nearest closed door and sat in front of it, staring intently up at the handle. Kiara followed him, her eyes drawn to something painted on the wood. It looked like a small silver mountain with five golden rays of light shining out from it. For a moment, she felt she understood its meaning, but the idea vanished before it formed and she was left with a strange, empty feeling.

This is it, she said, as she opened the door and peered cautiously inside.

The girls slipped in and closed the door quietly, but not before the big cat had squeezed inside too. They looked around at the rather old-fashioned study. To their left and on either side of the doorway behind them, the walls were lined with tall, dark wood bookcases, carved with intricate motifs from nature and symbols they didn't recognise. Behind their glass doors, the shelves were overflowing with old leather-bound volumes and bundles of papers in all shapes, sizes and states of repair. To their right, a large desk of the same

style stood in front of heavy, half-closed dark green velvet drapes. Adjacent to the desk and opposite the door, two large, well-worn green leather armchairs were drawn up in front of a fireplace which was framed by a large, black marble mantle.

What are we looking for again? Phoebe asked silently, casting her eyes around the room.

Anything that looks like it might have something to do with my necklace and Ethan's bracelet.

Still feeling certain the study door would open at any moment, Phoebe mustered enough courage to cross the room and pick up some papers on the desk. She didn't know anything about archaeology, but most of them seemed to be results from the Professor's field trips overseas, as well as articles on excavations, conservation and the like. Another much smaller pile was to do with their school. The cat jumped up and settled on the desk with his tail curled over his front paws. He watched Phoebe with his intense orange eyes as she put the papers neatly back and opened the first drawer in the desk. It contained a random collection of pens, rulers, tape and paper.

She looked at the cat as she reached for the second drawer knob. It hadn't taken its eyes off her and she felt uncomfortable under its scrutiny. *It's only a cat*, she told herself.

Kiara was skimming quickly over the titles in the bookcases, but there were many she couldn't understand as they were written in unfamiliar languages. She took one out and carefully opened the old, tattered cover to reveal equally old and fragile pages covered in a language of symbols she didn't recognise. She glanced up at the other books. It would take hours to look through all of them if she had to be this careful. She was just taking her third book off the shelf when she sensed Phoebe's excitement.

Over here, Kiara, Phoebe motioned. *Two of these drawers are locked.*

Kiara joined her and pulled at the second drawer in the desk but couldn't open it either. However, when she tried the third drawer, there was a soft click and it slid open easily. Phoebe frowned. She was sure it had been locked. Kiara stared, captivated by the single item sitting on the black lining inside the drawer. Slowly she reached down and took out a book, but it was clearly not just any book. On

its cover of fine black leather, a picture of a mass of stars shimmered. They seemed incredibly familiar, yet at the same time caused her great anxiety, and she was overcome with a wave of loss and longing which seemed to well up from within the book and sweep over her.

Kiara, what's wrong?

Kiara put the book gently on the desk. *It's this. This is what I was looking for, or maybe it was looking for me. The picture on the front is just like looking through a telescope at the night sky.*

Phoebe picked up the book and looked more closely.

Can't you see the shimmering light?

No, I just see a picture of some stars, she answered, handing the book back.

The cat moved closer to Kiara and stared at the book, as if waiting for her to open it. She slipped off her gloves and patted the animal absently, before tentatively lifting the cover.

In the centre of the first page, in shades of silver and gold, was the same symbol she'd seen on the study door. The next page was covered in an unfamiliar script in black ink and around it, the edges of the pages were decorated with swirling patterns in silver and gold. It looked like an ancient writing and there were pages and pages of the strange script. Kiara flipped through them until she came to one that was different. On it was a drawing of a dragon, with only a single symbol beneath it. The body of the beast was an oval yellow stone and the rest of the animal was made of silver, its wings folded along its side, and tail stretched out behind.

She drew in her breath. It reminded her of Ethan's wildcat bracelet and from the way the tail and the neck were curved, joining together to make a circle, she guessed this could also be worn as a bracelet. The drawing was so realistic, it looked as if it could be picked up off the paper.

Curious, she turned the page and as she saw the next drawing, excitement, confusion and suspicion washed over her. Above another single symbol was a wildcat, *exactly* the same as Ethan's bracelet, except the body of this one was an emerald-green stone, not the milky-white colour of his wildcat. Quickly, she turned the page. There was a third illustration of a deep-red oval stone held between two silver hands. Taking this in with a glance, she flipped the paper

and found what she knew she would.

Both girls stared at the page. Beautifully illustrated and in perfect detail was a drawing of Kiara's silver flower pendant. The only difference again was the colour of the stone at its centre, which was drawn in hues of blues, greens, yellows and reds washed together. Kiara stared hard at the writing under the illustration. She recognised it at once, for the same character was engraved on the back of her flower. It must say something about her necklace, a clue that might help her, but she had no hope of knowing what.

'Do you think the Professor drew these?' Phoebe whispered in awe, forgetting she wasn't supposed to talk aloud.

Kiara frowned at her. *I don't know, but what I do know is I've definitely found what I came for.*

She ran her fingers lightly over the flower before turning the page to reveal a dark blue oval stone, set in the curving silver body of a dolphin. It was simple but still exquisite in its design. After this page there were no more drawings, just four further pages of script set out as if they may have been a poem. Frustrated she couldn't understand this either, Kiara flipped through the last few pages of the book, but they were blank. She closed it and looked again at the shimmering stars on the front. Why was she so drawn to them?

I think I know why Professor Dwight wants your necklace, Phoebe said. *It must be very old and worth a fortune! Your parents must have told him about your necklace and that's why he's come to teach at our school. To steal it. You were right after all!*

Kiara held her flower pendant and looked at it. *Yes, he wants it, but there's more to it than that. It might be old and valuable, but why can Ethan and I read the minds of everyone except the owner of this book, which has pictures of our birthday presents in it? Why can't anyone else see my necklace? Why don't I ever want to take it off? No, I don't think these are valuable just for what they might be worth to sell. The Professor must know what they can do. You know what this book also tells me? Somewhere, there might be three others like us with the other three pieces. Come on, we'd better get out of here. I'll take this with me.* She took a long, light-weight purple scarf out of her backpack and wrapped it around the book.

Do you think you should? Phoebe asked in alarm. *Couldn't you*

quickly take photos with your phone?

I don't want to hang about here anymore and I really want this book, Kiara replied, putting her pack over her shoulders. *We've hardly touched anything. He won't even know we've been here. He may not even notice it's gone for a few days,* she added hopefully as she slipped her gloves back on.

Opening the door just a crack, she listened before peering left and right down the corridor. All was still. Phoebe closed the door behind them, and the small click of the lock seemed amplified in the silence. They didn't wait to see if anyone had heard but went as fast as they could back to the open window in the conservatory. As they slipped outside, Kiara checked her watch. It was only a few minutes after seven-thirty, although it seemed as if hours had passed since they'd left her house.

They crept over to the garden bed beside the stone wall and made their way along it to the front entrance. Kiara turned the handle and pushed the gate, but it didn't move. She tried pulling it towards her, but it was locked. The two girls felt panic rising. If they couldn't get out, they would be missed at home, but worse, they might get caught by the Professor when he returned. That would be disastrous.

'You hide behind that,' Kiara whispered to Phoebe, pointing at a large camellia bush. 'I'll look for another way out.'

However, a quick sprint around the edges of the garden revealed no other exit.

'Call Ethan, maybe he can help,' Phoebe suggested after Kiara told her the bad news. She looked apprehensively up at the windows; was anyone watching them?

'No point in him getting caught too. We'll just have to wait. If we lie low in the garden until the gate opens, we might be able to get out while the Professor drives his car into the garage.'

'What if he doesn't come home for ages or what if he just parks out in the street or ...?'

'Would you stop? Come on, we need to hide.'

The girls lay as flat as they could among the bushes to the left of the gates. The minutes ticked slowly by. They talked quietly about school, movies, friends, anything, but by unspoken agreement they

didn't mention the situation they were in or the book they'd found. Eventually, both lapsed into anxious silence and at nine o'clock Kiara texted her mother to tell her they'd stopped off at another friend's house and would be back later in the morning.

At last, they heard an engine slow down and the Professor's car appeared. They pressed themselves even closer to the ground behind the foliage, which didn't seem thick enough to hide them. The gates swung silently open and the sleek, black vehicle glided past them towards the opening garage door. There was nothing to do but hope the Professor didn't look in his rear-view mirror as they made a dash for the gates before they closed. Together, they sprinted forward, but with a small cry Phoebe fell to the ground. As Kiara slipped out and behind the wall, she realised with horror that Phoebe wasn't behind her. She grabbed a stick lying on the ground and shoved it between the two gates. They swung closed but didn't lock.

Phoebe, quick, now!

Phoebe, who lay terrified where she'd fallen, looked up and saw Kiara peering out from behind the stone wall, gesturing urgently. She started to crawl commando style, certain that any second she would feel strong arms wrench her to her feet and a deep voice demand to know what she was doing there. Safety was only a few seconds away. She took a deep breath, got up on her hands and knees and scampered to the gate. As soon as she was through, the girls moved swiftly out of sight and collapsed on the ground against the wall. There was not a sound from the mansion behind them.

While they tried to regain their composure, Kiara looked at Phoebe's ankle. 'I'll try and bandage it.'

The only suitable thing she had was the scarf she'd wrapped the book in. It would be safe enough in her pack without it. She did the best job she could to strap the injury and with Phoebe leaning on her, they crossed the road to retrieve their bikes. Now that the bandage supported it, Phoebe found her ankle wasn't feeling quite as sore and by the time they rode slowly home and arrived back at Kiara's house a few minutes after eleven o'clock, it was feeling much better. They explained to Kiara's mother that Phoebe had come off her bike on their way home. Her mum looked at them,

as if trying to discern whether this was the whole truth but didn't push for further details. She gave Phoebe an icepack and made her comfortable on the couch, with her foot resting up on a cushion.

When she'd left the room, Kiara took the stolen book out of her backpack and laid it gently on the coffee table in front of them.

'When the Professor finds it's missing, he'll guess it was you,' Phoebe said grimly.

'He could never prove it and that's not our problem right now. These are,' Kiara said, picking up the book with one hand and touching her pendant with the other.

She opened the cover and looked at the symbol on the first page. It must be related to her necklace and Ethan's bracelet, but how? She flipped the pages gently back and forth between the five drawings. Although their stones were of a similar size, the jewellery pieces were all unique. Studying the symbols under each picture, she willed the pen strokes to form themselves into something she could understand. For a fleeting moment, the meaning of the writing under her flower pendant seemed within her reach. But as had happened earlier with the symbols on the study door, the thought faded before she could grasp it. Frustrated, she turned to the pages covered with the writing.

'We could show this to your mum,' Phoebe suggested. 'Old languages are her thing, aren't they?'

'If I show Mum, then I'll have to explain where the book came from, and even if she can't translate it, she'll wonder why there's a picture of my necklace in here.'

How would she explain to her parents that she'd gone to a teacher's house and searched his study on a whim to try and find out about a necklace they'd given her, instead of asking them for information first? No, it was impossible to involve her parents now.

'Maybe she *knows* why the drawing is there. Maybe you did dream about the woman and the boy in the tree, and what really happened is that your parents found the necklace at one of their digs. The book is probably from the same place.' Phoebe paused as an idea formed in her mind. 'Maybe,' she said dramatically, 'your parents stole the necklace from a dig and Professor Dwight has been sent by Interpol to find it.' Her eyes opened wide at this possibility.

'That's why he has the book with the pictures in it.'

'No!' Kiara exclaimed. 'My parents didn't steal it from anywhere. I saw where my necklace came from. You don't even know what Interpol does anyway.'

'Well, you should find another archaeologist to translate the book then. It's no use if we don't know what it says.'

'They'd ask the same questions – where it came from, why I have it, and it would be even worse if they found out who my parents are.'

'The Professor might be able to read it, but of course you can't ask him now you've stolen it from his house,' Phoebe said, staring at her friend accusingly.

Kiara took no notice of her. She was looking again at the first page of text, her expression one of great concentration, bewilderment and finally, astonishment. 'I don't think we need anyone to translate it. I can read this myself,' she said quietly.

'That's impossible!' Phoebe said, thinking she was joking.

Kiara held up her hand to silence her. She wasn't sure how it was happening, but words were forming in her mind in a strange tongue, yet she understood their meaning clearly. She became lost in the pages and the more she read, the more amazed, but troubled, she became. The story, written by an unknown hand, explained why she had her flower pendant and why she could read minds. More importantly, this journal, in the possession of a man of whom she was deeply suspicious, explained in a few pages who she and Ethan really were. Yet despite knowing what she was reading had to be true, it was hard to believe that what was detailed in the strange and beautiful script could possibly be anyone's reality, let alone her own. Kiara thought at one point of getting a pen and paper to take notes but knew she had no need of them. The knowledge from the words of this stolen, mysterious and beautifully bound book was burning itself forever into her being.

Phoebe fidgeted on the couch until finally, she couldn't wait any longer. 'You have to tell me what it says!' she burst out.

'Well,' began Kiara slowly, 'this is a sort of diary, written by someone named Alcaron, the leader of a committee called the Council of Arithnar. It's incredible, if it's true. I don't see how it could be, yet somehow, I know it must be. You thought my being

able to read minds was amazing, but there's something else ...'

'You're beginning to scare me,' Phoebe responded, half-serious, half-laughing.

Kiara looked deeply into her friend's worried eyes. There was no easy way to tell her what she had just learned about herself, it was so hard to comprehend, let alone explain. 'Phoebe, I'm not from here, from Earth, but from a place called Ethrahna. I think Ethrahna is in another dimension, or maybe another galaxy, on a world called Tartha.'

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Phoebe watched Kiara's calm but anxious face and realised she was serious. As she considered the possibility that her friend, her best friend since kindergarten, was from another world, much to her own surprise she thought it could be possible. Weird, but possible.

'It's okay with me if it's okay with you. Not that you probably had a choice, really. I guess Ethan is too?'

'He's from Tartha, but from somewhere else called Ledera. I think he's a different nationality or something. I'm an Ethrahnian, and he's an Eldar. The Council of Arithnar was made up of Eldar and Ethrahnians and its job was to protect and administer a special power they shared.'

'It was the ability to read minds, wasn't it? So, what are you two doing here on Earth? Did you come in a spaceship?'

'I don't know, but we're both here because of the mind-reading thing. Alcaron, the one who wrote this book, is also an Eldar like Ethan, and he's written the story of how they and the Ethrahnians first became mind-readers.'

'A very long time ago, the Ethrahnians and the Eldar watched a meteor shoot across their sky. The Eldar saw in the stars that night that great things were to come from it, so together they searched for the meteor. They eventually discovered it in a remote valley, but what they found wasn't an ugly lump of space rock. It was a huge, beautiful, white crystal. They named it the Stone of Arithnar, after the planet that shines the brightest in their skies. The Ethrahnians, who were apparently famous for their beautiful jewellery, took some pieces of the crystal to use in their designs. Then the strangest thing happened. Those who wore pendants set with the stone developed the ability to read minds and talk by telepathy.'

'They knew what they'd found was incredibly valuable and the

Council of Arithnar was set up to protect the valley and administer the power of the crystal. There were eleven members. Five were the leaders of the five cities of Ethrahna, five were Eldar, and the last one was another chosen by the people to represent them. The names of those on the Council when this book was written are listed here.'

Kiara tried sounding the names out as best as her strange ability to read the script allowed her. 'Alcaron, Ortalus, Elvinara, Athala, Elander, Brianala, Tasia, Myana, Coegil, Lorthin and Medeelan.

'The Ethrahnians and Eldar shared this great mind-reading power for many generations. They used it wisely, always guided in its use by the Six Aspects, which were part of their everyday life. These are love, faith, knowledge, trust, hope and peace. But eventually, a terrible thing happened – their secret was betrayed to the Vardoul. It was disastrous. The Vardoul were the bad guys and wouldn't have used the power for anything good. They wanted access to the stones to be able to read the minds of those they wanted to control, which was just about everyone. They came to Ethrahna and demanded complete access to the Valley of Light, where the Stone of Arithnar was, or war would follow.

'The Council was in an impossible situation. If they shared the power of the Stone of Arithnar, they knew the Vardoul would use the power to make it easier to win wars with others across Tartha. The Council decided the only thing that could be done was to hide the power of the Stone, so no one could use it. They did this, but it also meant the Eldar and Ethrahnians couldn't read minds anymore either and even though they'd hidden the power, the threat from the Vardoul was still there. They would still go to war to force the Eldar to tell them what they'd done with it.

'To avoid this, the many Eldar who had lived and worked with the Ethrahnians in their cities retreated to their distant mountain homeland in Ledera, where they were safe from any attack. But the Ethrahnians, my people, didn't have this option. They had to leave Ethrahna until the threat from the Vardoul was gone. Nearly all of them went to a world called Calthor.'

'Is that why you're here? Your family came here to be safe? Do you know what this means?' Phoebe asked, grabbing her friend's arm excitedly. 'There must be others like you here! We just have to

work out how to spot them all.'

'No, it's not that simple. I guess my parents and I have escaped to Earth, but I don't think there are many of us here at all. In fact, there are probably only five families from Tartha on Earth.'

'Well, Ethan's family is obviously one of them. I wonder if he'll believe it? Don't you think you should call him?' Phoebe added, feeling guilty.

'I'll call him soon,' Kiara assured her.

'But why aren't you with the rest of the Ethrahnians, wherever they went? Actually, why is Ethan even here on Earth? Didn't you say he was from the mountain place where the Eldar lived, which is safe?'

'That's where it gets even more scary than being from Tartha, and on Earth. Five of us have been sent here because of a *Prophecy*.'

Phoebe looked at Kiara. Things were becoming more unbelievable by the second. 'Seriously?'

'Yes. The Prophecy was a guide to saving the power of the Stone of Arithnar from the Vardoul and it needed five babies to make it work. *That's* why there are only five families from Tartha here. Ethan and I were chosen because we were born on the day the Prophecy said the babies had to be born.' Kiara paused for a moment, looking intently at her friend.

Phoebe stared back, struggling to get her mind around what she was hearing. 'Why *babies*?'

'The Prophecy instructed that the power from the Stone of Arithnar was to be captured within five small, pure Power Stones and hidden away until the threat was gone. These Stones were assigned to the chosen babies, known as the Chosen Ones, who were to be given them on their fourteenth birthdays, the age of Awakening. This is the age a kid in Ethrahna or Ladera was given their necklace set with a piece of the crystal of the Stone of Arithnar. To keep the babies and the Power Stones safe, they were sent to a secret place to grow up until they were ready to become Stone Keepers on their fourteenth birthdays, fulfil their destiny and return the power held in their five Power Stones back to the Stone of Arithnar.'

'That means *your* necklace is one the five stones ... and so is Ethan's bracelet,' Phoebe said in awe. 'The other three Stone Keepers

are somewhere on Earth with their families too.’ She paused, an idea forming in her mind. ‘You know what this also means? You might have heaps of cousins and aunts and uncles on Tartha. And maybe your grandparents aren’t really dead like your parents told you.’

‘They wouldn’t have lied about that, would they?’ Kiara asked, shocked at this possibility.

‘They would’ve had to,’ her friend replied simply. ‘You know, it’s a huge coincidence you and Ethan found each other.’

‘It’s not a coincidence. The Prophecy predicts the Stones will seek each other out. That’s why Ethan and I have already met. When all five Stones are together and we have returned their power to the Stone of Arithnar, everything will be okay.’

‘Won’t the bad guys just take it then?’

‘No. The Eldar don’t think so. They believe the Prophecy predicts that through the experiences the five of us have, the power of our Stones will be increased, so when the power from them is restored to the Stone of Arithnar, it will be much stronger and bound only to the people of Ethrahna and the Eldar. No other race will ever be able to make use of it.’

The two girls sat in silence, Phoebe trying to fathom how it came to be that her best friend was part of a Prophecy from another world, while Kiara wondered how much her parents knew about all this.

‘I’ll read the Prophecy to you,’ she said, breaking the silence.

The Prophecy of Arithnar

A Stone

A Power

A gift to share

To help

To learn

To give

To live

To love

*Love
Faith
Knowledge
Trust
Hope
Peace*

*Deceit
Greed
Loss
Darkness
Hate
War*

*The power of the One
Into the purity of the Five
Babes in arms
Chosen by the light*

*Five sacred Stones
The power
Transferred at the setting
Of the Cartheil Sun*

*Hide
Beyond sight and knowledge
Beyond the skies
In peace*

*In darkness they lie
Secret
Stones sleeping
Until given*

*Paths converging
The Chosen Ones
Together but alone
Stones seek*

*When Stones meet
Power grows
Age, wisdom,
Colours glow*

*Creatures
From another place
Now is your time
Repay your debt*

*Yet one not chosen
Who loves beyond love
A secret, a sacrifice
The Stone is complete*

*The power of the Five
Greater
Returned to the One
At the dawning of the Ealorin Sun*

*Love given
Faith justified
Knowledge shared
Trust restored
Hope succeeds
Peace for all*

Safe, forever more

When Kiara finished, the only sound was the ticking of the clock on the mantel. She could see and feel Phoebe's emotion and confusion as she tried to put her thoughts into words.

‘So,’ Phoebe said at length, ‘from those few words, these Eldar decided thousands of people should put their fate in the hands of five babies, then send them to another world to wait for them to grow up and find their way back to their own world to fulfil a prophecy?’

Kiara nodded.

‘That’s just stupid!’

‘I know, but it’s too late. It’s already been done. But even if they are right, I don’t see how it can come true. Ethan and I still have to find the other three, get back to Tartha, find the hidden valley and put the power back into the Stone of Arithnar. How do we find out what or when “the dawning of the Ealorin Sun” is anyway? I haven’t got a clue where to start. It’s impossible!’

‘If it really is a prophecy, maybe it will all just happen. You said it wasn’t a coincidence you and Ethan found one another. I don’t suppose there’s a “How To Fulfil the Prophecy Guide” or something in that book too?’

‘Very funny.’

‘What about the writing under the drawings?’

‘I forgot about those!’

Quickly, Kiara turned the pages to the drawing of her flower necklace. ‘It says “Knowledge”.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Well, it can’t be something about me, because I *don’t* know, but it’s the same symbol as on the back of my flower,’ Kiara replied, frustrated that the word didn’t offer some important insight to help her.

She flipped back to the first drawing, the dragon with the body made of the yellow stone. Beneath it was written “Peace”. Under the wildcat was “Trust”, below the ruby hands “Hope” and under the blue dolphin stone “Faith”.

‘They’re all one of the Six Aspects, but that doesn’t help with anything,’ she said with disappointment. She turned back to the drawing on the first page of the book ‘This is the symbol for the Stone of Arithnar and the five Power Stones, but that doesn’t help with anything either.’ She closed the Journal. ‘I think this is a picture of my night sky,’ she said wistfully, looking at the cover, ‘but how I get to Tartha, I just don’t know.’

Her heart was heavy, and her head was aching. She knew without a doubt that she was one of the five Stone Keepers of the Prophecy of Arithnar. She wore around her neck a jewel so precious it was beyond price. Yet among the thoughts whirling in her head, one thought was louder than all the others. *Why me?* Kiara felt not only frustration, but anger rising within her. There were so many questions, the biggest of which were, how much did her parents know, and when were they thinking of letting her in on the secret?

She glanced to the mantel above the fireplace at a photo of her with them last Christmas. *We all look normal*, she thought. *I know I'm not, but are they?* Her thoughts strayed back to the night she'd seen them walking across the lawn in those long, elegant robes to receive her birthday present and she knew her parents had to know something of the power and value of her necklace, even if the Council of Arithnar hadn't told them everything.

So, why hadn't they told her what they *did* know? Did they think it would all be too much for her to understand? Or did they expect gratitude from their people for risking the life of their child to save the rest of them? She thought about the Vardoul who must be looking for her, Ethan and the other three Stone Keepers and wondered what would happen if they were found by them. Whatever her parents' reasons, she still had a right to know her true identity. All she could assume was that they didn't know how important her necklace was in the scheme of things. She had to believe this because to think they knew more and hadn't told her was too hurtful.

Kiara held her pendant between her fingers. 'So, for the Ethrahnians to be able to return to Ethrahna and for the Vardoul to never get control of the power in our Stones, the five of us must find each other, find our way to Tartha and put the power from our necklaces or bracelets back into the Stone of Arithnar.' She looked at her friend with a sort of hopeless, lost look.

'Well, what are we going to do about it?' Phoebe asked. 'I mean, you are going to do something, aren't you?'

'But what *can* I do? I've met Ethan, but we don't have a clue where to start looking for the other three Stone Keepers. And if we do find them, how do we get to Tartha? I can't believe this is happening to me!'

'I'll help you find the others. Your parents will too. You have to talk to them now.'

Kiara thought Phoebe was taking the whole thing rather well, but why did she have to be so logical? Asking her parents was the only option left now.

'Professor Dwight is probably from Tartha too. That would explain why he had this book. You could ask him as well,' Phoebe suggested.

'I don't know. I'd have to tell him how I got it. And if he is Ethrahnian or an Eldar, then why hasn't he spoken to me about this already and why do I feel freaked out when I'm near him?'

'There are kids at school who make me feel like that and I'm sure they're from Earth. Well, at least I think they are. What I mean is, even if the Professor *is* from the same place as you, it doesn't mean you have to like him.'

'You're right,' Kiara sighed, 'but I'm confused about the mind-reading thing. With my parents, I can't read their minds and I assumed that was because they were my parents and it wouldn't be very good for them if I knew everything they were thinking. But I can't read Ethan's mind either and according to this book, we're supposed to be able to. The Ethrahnians and the Eldar could communicate through thoughts because of the small piece of the crystal they wore as pendants. Ethan and I can't do that with one another, even though we're each carrying one fifth of the Stone of Arithnar's power. Why doesn't it work for us?'

'You really have to find out more. You can't wait a few months for one of the other three to turn up,' Phoebe told her.

'How do I ask? Do I say, "Mum, am I from another world?" She'll think I'm nuts!'

'Well, if you're not and she's not, then she'll just think you're being silly. If you are ... well, you should get a reaction of some sort. Come on, let's do it now before you change your mind.'

Phoebe stood up and stepped carefully on her sprained ankle, but unexpectedly it took her weight without pain. Gingerly, she walked a bit and then rashly jumped up and down. It felt perfectly normal, as if there had never been an injury.

'I don't think I need this anymore,' she said, untying the

impromptu purple bandage and handing it back to her friend. 'It's all better.'

Kiara took the scarf and looked at it with a puzzled expression, before putting it and the Journal in her backpack.

As they went through the kitchen in search of Kiara's parents, Phoebe held her friend back. On the breakfast bench was a laptop.

'There is one other thing you could try first,' she said tentatively. 'The internet worked for finding out about the Professor.' She saw a light come on in Kiara's previously dull and worried eyes. 'Maybe we aren't the only two on Earth who already know about Tartha and the Prophecy. One of the other Stone Keepers might already be looking for the rest of you.'

'Great idea!' Kiara exclaimed. This gave her one more excuse not to involve her parents and any clue, no matter how small, would be helpful.

'Shouldn't we ring Ethan first?' Phoebe asked.

'No, if this works, we'll have more to tell him,' she replied, taking a packet of chocolate teddy-bear biscuits out of the cupboard. 'Breakfast!' she said with a grin. 'We'll use my computer, just in case my parents come in and see what I'm looking up.'

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The two girls leaped up the stairs to Kiara's room and shut the door. She sat at her desk, typed the word "Tartha" and hit the Enter key. They stared doubtfully at the results on the screen. Tartha was a place in Queensland for which there was a myriad of options, and there were also obscure gaming references for the name. Kiara clicked on a few links but quickly became frustrated.

'Try "Arithnar",' Phoebe suggested.

In a moment, a single exact matching entry at the top of the page stared back at them. Kiara clicked the mouse and a new screen appeared on which, in small white letters against the same background of stars she'd seen on the Journal, was the word "ARITHNAR". Underneath it were two short lines of text:

Out of this world.

If you know something, anything, reply to Sam.

'That doesn't tell us much,' Phoebe said with disappointment.

'It does. It tells me there's someone else who knows about Arithnar,' Kiara replied excitedly.

'Yes, but it doesn't tell you who, or what they know or where they are. Maybe this isn't such a good idea. It could be a trap by the Vadole or whoever they are. Let's just go and find your parents.'

Kiara heard Phoebe but took no notice of her concerns, for she'd already made up her mind. 'They're called the Vardoul and it could be a trap, but I don't think it was by chance I met Ethan, found the book and now this website. It was meant to happen.' She stared at the words on the screen. 'I just wish I knew what was going to happen next.' She placed her hands above the keyboard, and they hovered there for a few seconds.

'You're not going to answer?' Phoebe asked in nervous surprise. Without replying, Kiara began to type.

Hi. I've also heard of Arithnar. I believe it involves a rock. Can we meet you on ...

She paused and turned to Phoebe for a suggestion.

Phoebe sighed with resignation. 'How about next Saturday? Give Sam time to work out how to get here if he's a long way away.'

... next Saturday in Melbourne. Will arrange details later. Please reply ASAP.

'What if Sam lives miles away or in another state or even another country?'

'We'll worry about that when we get a reply,' Kiara told her as she typed the word "Australia" after "Melbourne".

'I wonder if Sam checks his email every day?' Phoebe asked, taking another biscuit out of the packet.

'He's sure to, with a secret like that. Wouldn't you?'

'When will you tell Ethan about the Journal and the email?'

'Let's wait until tomorrow. I want to study it a bit more and see if we get a reply from Sam. I'll ring him first thing in the morning.'

Phoebe looked at her doubtfully.

'I promise,' Kiara said.

* * *

Kiara woke up late the next morning from a deep but unsettling sleep. Instantly, everything from the day before flooded through her mind: the break-in, the Journal, the Prophecy and the discovery that she was not from the world she was living in. Thoughts tried to assemble themselves in a logical order in her mind, but as they came and receded, one thought became uppermost. Yesterday, it had seemed like a good idea to search for information about the Prophecy and Arithnar on the internet. Today, it seemed foolish, perhaps even dangerous when so much was at stake. The location of the five Stone Keepers of Arithnar was a secret and she'd practically advertised that she was one of them.

Despite these concerns, the first thing she did was to check her computer, but there was no reply. Disappointed, she knew the

next thing she had to do was call Ethan. He would be upset at not being told sooner about what she'd discovered so far, but even more upset if she failed to involve him now.

'Morning,' her father said, looking up briefly from his reading as she entered the kitchen.

Her mother glanced over her laptop. 'Out of bed at last!'

'I was a bit tired, I guess. Can Phoebe come over again today?'

'Of course,' her mother answered.

'Can I ask a new friend too?'

'Yes. Who is it?'

Kiara avoided answering by running back up the stairs. 'Thanks! I'll just go and call them.'

What was she worried about? Just because Ethan was a boy? Her parents wouldn't care, she knew that. Still, she hadn't had a boy over to her house since grade three and they might start to make assumptions. She called Ethan first and told him there was a new development requiring more than a chat in the park. Twenty minutes later he arrived on his bike, Phoebe turning in the gate half a minute later.

'Did you find out something from your parents?' Ethan asked, clearly surprised that Kiara might have finally asked them.

'Um, I've found out something, but not from my parents,' she replied, feeling guilty. How would Ethan react when she told him everything she'd done? Without him? 'Let's go in here,' she said, leading them into the family room and closing the door.

When they had sat down, she took a deep breath and plunged into the story of the break-in. He said nothing but looked at the girls in astonishment as the tale unfolded. If he thought he should have been invited along, he didn't say so.

'At the time it seemed like a good idea, but looking back, it was probably a bit stupid,' Kiara said wryly of their escapade when she'd finished.

Suddenly, Phoebe let out a little cry. 'The cat! We left the cat in the study!'

Kiara felt herself pale as she remembered. Did the cat normally go into the study? Would the Professor have worked out someone had been in there? If so, he might already have discovered the book

was gone.

‘We can’t do anything about that now,’ she said, opening her backpack and taking it out. She gave it to Ethan. ‘It’s sort of a diary or journal. Tell me what you think.’

The stars on the cover glistened and beckoned and emotions of longing and sadness swept over him. He looked up at Kiara, who nodded reassuringly, and he knew she understood. He glanced at the symbol on the first page and flicked through the decorated pages of the unknown writing, unable to understand any of it. He stopped turning the pages when he came to the drawing of the dragon. It held his attention for a few seconds as it was so beautifully detailed, but on turning the page again, he was astonished to find himself looking at a picture of his wildcat.

‘It’s the same, except for the colour of the stone,’ he said in quiet disbelief, studying the drawing and comparing it to his bracelet. ‘And this,’ he said, indicating the symbol below the drawing, ‘is engraved on the back of it.’ Curious now, he turned the page to the red oval stone held between the two silver hands. He looked at it briefly before turning the page to see Kiara’s flower. ‘If Professor Dwight had this book, he must know there’s something special about your necklace,’ he said grimly. He turned to the last drawing, the blue stone set as the centre of a silver dolphin and then to the following four pages of script. ‘I wish we could read it.’

‘Try,’ Kiara told him.

‘Are you serious?’ he asked, half-smiling at her joke.

Kiara stared back at him. ‘Yes.’

Ethan turned back to the first page of the book and glanced at the lettering again. ‘Okay,’ he said uncertainly, ‘but I’m sure you’re nuts.’

The girls sat in silence while he looked at the script. His expression was one of concentration and bafflement. Slowly, though, it changed. First to surprise and then to disbelief, followed by a huge grin.

‘Awesome,’ he said quietly.

As Ethan read, Phoebe studied his face. He really was quite good-looking. Not exactly dashing handsome, but with his pale skin, angled features and black hair, he had a certain charm. Plus,

his eyes were so deep and blue, like swimming pools.

When he finished reading, he closed the Journal slowly without saying anything. The girls watched as he put the book on the table, stood up and crossed absently to the mantel. He looked at the photos of Kiara and Phoebe, and Kiara with her parents for a few moments, before turning around.

'Right, let me get this straight. Kiara and me, our parents and my sister, Tara, are not from Earth. We're from another world, called Tartha. Kiara is an Ethrahnian and I'm an Eldar. We're also Chosen Ones, selected along with three others when we were babies by the Council of Arithnar. Together, we have five Power Stones containing the strange power from the Stone of Arithnar, which gave the Eldar and the Ethrahnians the ability to read minds. While the Eldar are safe in their mountains, the Ethrahnians are not and have gone into exile to another world called Calthor. To save them and everyone else from an evil gang called the Vardoul who want the power, the five of us, now known as Stone Keepers, have to get together and put all the power from our Power Stones back into the Stone of Arithnar. There are some animals involved, as well as someone we don't know about. If everything works out, the power we put back will be bigger and better than before and everything will be back to normal. Did I miss anything?'

'Nope, that's it,' Kiara answered.

'The whole thing is crazy!'

'I know, but the fact we can read minds because of our Stones means at least some of it has to be true.'

'There's still something Kiara and I don't understand, though,' Phoebe said. 'Why can't you two read each other's thoughts or your parents' or the Professor's? You both have so much of the power squashed into your necklace and bracelet, it should be easy.'

'It must be different for people from Tartha. Maybe our brains are different to Earth ones, and Kiara and I have to be taught how to read each other's minds,' Ethan suggested. 'Maybe that's why the Professor is here.'

'Then wouldn't he have told me who he really is, now he knows I have one of the five Stones?' Kiara asked. She paused and frowned as another idea came to mind. 'What if he's one of the Vardoul and

he stole the book to help him track us down?’

‘You only *think* he knows you have one of the Stones. And if he was here to steal it, I’m sure he would’ve taken it by now,’ Phoebe said. ‘Why don’t you try again to read each other’s thoughts? Concentrate really hard,’ she urged, looking at them expectantly.

Kiara stared at Ethan and fell silent. After a few moments she grinned. Phoebe, watching the two of them, had a strange feeling of not belonging.

Her best friend turned to her excitedly. ‘We can’t read all of each other’s thoughts like we can with other people, but we *can* have conversations. I can read your thoughts, whether you want me to or not. I think Ethan and I have to *want* the other person to see ours. It didn’t work before because we were trying to read each other’s thoughts without permission.’

She turned back to Ethan and after a few seconds he burst out laughing.

‘Okay, that’s enough!’ Phoebe said. ‘New rule. Around me you have to talk *aloud*.’

‘Sorry, Phoebe, we’ll try,’ Ethan agreed. ‘At least we know other people like us can’t just look into each other’s minds. That’s a relief. Imagine living with thousands of others and not having any secrets.’

‘Now you start to understand how I feel. It’s amazing, you know. I feel weird and I’m not the one from another world. Anyway, now you’ve got that worked out, what are you two going to do next?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, looking thoughtful. ‘The other three Stone Keepers are probably living normal lives, except for the mind-reading bit, unaware of their importance. How do we find them before the Vardoul do and before the Vardoul find us? We don’t even know what a Vardoul is. Do they look different, like some weird, ugly creatures, or like us?’ He threw his hands up in the air in frustration. ‘I don’t see how it’s possible to even start!’

‘You *have* started. You and Kiara have already found each other.’

‘That could be a coincidence. My dad changed jobs and I ended up at the same school as her. I don’t think that’s going to happen with the other three.’ Ethan sat down again. ‘Kiara, are you sure you don’t just want to ask Professor Dwight what he knows? Maybe we’re all getting worried for no reason. If the Journal is his, he’ll

be able to explain everything and help us.'

'No, I'm not going to ask him anything,' she replied stubbornly. 'But there's something else I haven't told you. After reading the Journal yesterday, Phoebe and I decided to search the internet for anything about Arithnar. I'm surprised you haven't prised that out of her head already,' she said, looking from him to Phoebe.

'Like I said, somehow she's very protective of her thoughts where you're concerned. Did you find anything?'

'Yes, someone calling themselves "Sam", who said they knew about Arithnar. I think it might be one of the others like us. I looked this morning, but there's no reply. We could go and check again.'

'Why are we sitting here then?' Phoebe asked, jumping out of her seat as Kiara picked up the Journal.

Her mother glanced up from her work as they walked past her study.

'Mum, this is Ethan. He's new at our school. He moved down from Sydney just before Christmas. Ethan, this is my mum, Sarah.'

Kiara's mother looked at Ethan and her face quickly reflected several emotions: surprise, shock, worry and something else her daughter couldn't quite decipher. Was it acceptance?

'Hello, Ethan,' she said, leaving her desk and looking at him searchingly.

She offered her hand and as Ethan shook it awkwardly, her gaze fell to his wrist, the silver wildcat obvious on his bare arm. She seemed to stare at it for a moment before moving her eyes to the book in her daughter's hand. Kiara realised she was holding her breath, waiting for her mother to say something, but instead, she dragged her gaze away from the book and back to Ethan.

'Nice to meet you,' she said with a smile, before returning to her desk, deep in thought.

They took the opportunity to bolt upstairs to Kiara's room, closing the door firmly. Kiara went straight to her computer.

'You know your mum saw my bracelet,' Ethan said.

'Yes, I know,' Kiara acknowledged.

'She looked at me really weirdly too. She knows something.'

'Well, she obviously doesn't want to tell me,' Kiara said, ending the conversation as she handed the Journal to Phoebe.

They all waited with anticipation as she checked her emails, but again, there was no reply.

'You only sent it yesterday,' Ethan said. 'Maybe Sam hasn't read it yet. I have to go. We're going to visit friends of my mum's, but text me as soon as you hear from him.' He turned and opened the door, but instead of walking through, he moved to block the exit.

'Ethan!' Phoebe exclaimed as she crashed into him.

He said nothing, but with a sense of urgency pushed her back into the room. When they were a few steps from the door he moved aside, his arm resting protectively on Phoebe's shoulder. As the three looked at the doorway the girls saw that it was filled with a glowing orange haze, through which nothing was visible beyond.

'I *told* you not to send that email,' Phoebe said in a soft voice.

Ethan took a couple of steps forward.

'Don't touch it!' Kiara warned him.

'Have you got something that's not too important I could use?' he asked her, peering closely at the haze.

Kiara glanced around her room. She grabbed a ruler off the desk and handed it to him. Tentatively, he touched the glow with the tip and then pushed the plastic a little further in. It was sucked from his grasp and vanished.

I think we should shut the door, Kiara said in Ethan's head.

Needing no further encouragement, he quickly closed it. They stood in silence, confused and scared.

'That isn't real, is it?' Doubt and fear mingled in Phoebe's words as she clutched the Journal to her chest. 'It can't be.'

'Of *course* it's not real,' Ethan answered with confidence. He opened the door a crack, but nothing had changed. 'It must be some sort of trick,' he said, closing it again and re-opening it almost immediately. He tried this several times, but there was still no sign of Kiara's hallway, just the warm glow of orange that seemed to shimmer and move slightly.

Phoebe looked towards the window, the curtains still drawn from the night before. Out of desperation, she crossed the room and opened the drapes. As they slid aside, cold fear settled over the kids. There was no view of the sky or the white house next door. Instead, there was the same orange glow. Ethan took a pen off the desk and

opened the window. In a moment, it was also pulled from his grasp.

‘This is crap!’ Kiara exclaimed. ‘It must be a projection or hologram or mind trick or ... something. Someone’s trying to scare me.’

Phoebe, pale and frightened, looked at her. ‘Didn’t you say the tree in your garden glowed orange when the woman and the boy came out of it?’

‘That would mean,’ Ethan said, returning to the door and opening it again, ‘that this is real. We *did* just find out we come from another world.’

‘You mean the pen and ruler have gone to Tartha?’ Phoebe asked in disbelief.

Kiara sat down despondently on her unmade bed. ‘Why did I send that stupid email? All I did was let someone know who I really am.’

‘You mean the Vardoul?’ Phoebe asked in a small voice, looking at the doorway as if she expected a hoard of them to leap through it at that very moment.

‘You don’t know it was the email,’ Ethan said.

‘If it was, maybe it’s not the Vardoul,’ Kiara said, ‘but the Professor. *He* could be Sam. Maybe this is how he plans to get my necklace and his book back at the same time. He could easily have found out where I live.’

Ethan took his mobile from his pocket and the girls looked at him hopefully, but he shook his head. There was no reception. Just to be sure he punched in his home number, but the call failed. He looked at the phone for a moment longer.

‘We have to find out what’s on the other side. Do you have some string or something I could tie around my phone?’

‘You’re going to let it go into that?’ Kiara asked in surprise, looking dubiously towards the haze.

‘How else can we find out if there’s something through there?’

She opened a drawer in her desk, but finding nothing suitable, closed it and tried a drawer in her wardrobe where she found three lengths of tangled ribbon. ‘Will this do?’ she asked, handing one to Ethan as she straightened out the other two.

They knotted them together and Ethan secured one end firmly

around his phone.

‘Tie this around my wrist,’ he said, holding the other end up.

‘Are you sure?’ Kiara asked. ‘What if you get pulled in too?’

‘The force that took your ruler and pen didn’t seem very strong. I’ll just let the phone go for a few seconds and then pull it back. You can hold my arms if you’re worried.’

She tied the ribbon securely and Ethan turned on the video. Standing on either side of him, Kiara and Phoebe held his arms as he tentatively put the phone up to the glowing haze and pushed it in. It was sucked from his grip and the ribbon went taut, pulling Ethan forward slightly, but the girls held him back. They waited in nervous silence for half a minute until he reeled it in. To their relief, the phone reappeared unharmed.

They closed the door and with trepidation watched the video. There were a couple of seconds of orange, then a blur of sky and trees as the phone flew through the air before landing at an angle on the ground. The remaining video was of some sky, trees and what looked like ancient, broken columns of white stone. The sound captured was equally astonishing. They could hear the rustle of leaves, birds calling and other sounds they couldn’t identify, but which they guessed were animal cries.

Kiara looked at Ethan. ‘Do you think it’s *really* a door to Tartha?’

‘I guess it could be. And if it is, if anyone comes through it, we’re trapped in here. If we agree this is real, we can’t stay and just wait to be caught.’

‘But what if the real trap is to make Kiara leave her room?’ Phoebe asked.

‘I don’t think I should stay here, where someone knows exactly where I am. You can’t either, Ethan. If there really is a forest and ruins, even if it’s a trap, we must be able to find somewhere to hide while we work out what to do. And if it’s a mind trick, then maybe after a few minutes, I’ll just find myself standing somewhere in my house. You can stay Phoebe, if you feel safer. Whoever did this isn’t after you. This isn’t your problem.’

‘I think she’s right,’ Ethan agreed. ‘Maybe you shouldn’t come with us, just in case.’

‘Just in case what?’

'I don't know really. Just in case we get lost or don't come back ...'

'No, I'm coming with you. I'd rather take my chances out there than sit in here by myself. Anyway, if you have a "just in case" moment, you might need me.'

'Well, if we're going out there, we'll need supplies of some sort,' Ethan said, looking vaguely around Kiara's room for anything that might be useful. 'Once we've gone through, we might not be able to come back here. I don't suppose you have any food?'

'I think I have an apple in my backpack and a couple of muesli bars and there's half a packet of chocolate biscuits from yesterday.'

'Great, if we don't find a way out of there, we'll starve to death,' Phoebe groaned.

'Come on, we have to hurry,' Ethan urged. 'We don't know how long we have.'

Five minutes later, the three surveyed the items piled on the bed. There was another larger backpack from Kiara's last school camp, a good Swiss pocketknife, a large and a small torch, a notebook and pens, two apples (although one wasn't looking so good anymore), three muesli bars, half a large block of chocolate and the half-packet of biscuits Kiara had brought upstairs the day before. Four water bottles with varying amounts remaining in them sat to one side. There was also an assortment of caps, a scarf and beanie, a rain jacket, a bottle of sunscreen, a towel and three other jackets, two with hoods.

'Not a bad start,' Ethan said. 'Although I'm not sure I like the idea of drinking your old water. I don't suppose you have any spare batteries?' he asked, as he turned on the larger of the torches.

Kiara opened a drawer and came up with an empty packet. 'I know Mum has some in the kitchen, but that's no use.'

'It doesn't look like enough,' Phoebe said, surveying the items. 'Do you have any other adventurer stuff? Rope, matches, spare hiking clothes, tent, shovel, first-aid kit, plastic bags, satnav, helicopter?'

'Sorry, I used up my last helicopter yesterday and the tent is in the garage. I think I have some string and a couple of plastic bags and there might be some matches in the side of the big pack. I can get some spare clothes too, although they probably won't fit you, Ethan.' As she spoke, she felt around in the deep side pocket

of the pack and found a box of matches. 'It's almost full,' she said with relief.

Ethan picked up his own pack and emptied his few things into the larger backpack before sharing the pile on the bed between the three bags. When Kiara had collected the extra clothes and distributed them, he took the larger pack, Phoebe took Ethan's smaller one and Kiara took her own. She took the Journal off the bed and held it, uncertain as to where she should put it for safekeeping, before deciding the safest place was in her bag.

'One last thing,' she said, and she selected six pairs of socks from a drawer and gave two pairs each to her friends. With one final glance around her room, she shouldered her pack and opened the door.

'I think we should hold hands,' Phoebe said, grabbing Kiara's hand as she looked at the orange-filled doorway.

'Probably a good idea,' she agreed.

'I'll go first if you like,' Ethan offered.

Phoebe nodded and tried to smile. Ethan took her other hand and without pausing to think too much about what might happen next, he walked into the haze, pulling Phoebe as he went. The trio felt a sensation of moving forward rapidly, before they slowed and stepped out into a completely foreign landscape.

They were standing at the edge of a large circle of pale, broken and uneven paving stones, which was surrounded by fluted columns of aged, white marble. There were eleven columns around the circle, but more than half had either snapped partway down or fallen over completely, the pieces strewn across the pavers. A thick, reddish-leaved vine wound its way around a few of the remaining columns, and it was hard to tell if the plant was holding the last of them up or was responsible for pulling the rest of them down. Tufts of spindly grass and tiny mauve-and-white flowers grew with abandon wherever they could get a hold, while bright green moss crept across the pavers and marble. The ruler and pen lay a few metres apart, looking completely out of place.

A stone's throw from the broken structure a dense forest towered, casting strong shadows over the ruins. The tree trunks were very wide and combined with the layers of undergrowth, which grew to

quite a height, it was impossible to see more than a few metres into it. The air was warm and smelled sweet and fresh. It was filled with the chirping of birds, the hooting cries of hidden animals and the hum of insects flitting past. The trio followed the flight of a flock of small yellow-and-red birds upwards and their gaze was drawn above the canopy. Just visible above the trees, a short distance into the forest, was what looked like the top of a cream stone tower.

Ethan took a few steps, his foot crunching down on scattered pieces of stone and debris. He took two more, crushing mauve-and-white flowers underfoot. 'It's definitely not carpet,' he said flatly.

Phoebe and Kiara, still holding hands, moved a few paces and turned around slowly. The glowing orange haze filled the space between two unbroken pillars, but there was no sign of the bedroom beyond it. Kiara walked behind the haze and over to the trees a short distance away. Tentatively, she touched one of the trunks, hoping it would feel like a painted wall in her house, but it was rough and woody. It even smelled like a tree, like a whole forest of woody, green-leaved trees. She brushed a brilliant green insect with large, silvery wings off her arm as she looked back at the others.

'I know we could be on Tartha, but I still think it could be an illusion created by someone who knows a lot about mind-reading.'

'Do you really think so?' Phoebe asked hopefully, watching one of the yellow-and-red birds fly out of the treetops and dive back in again. A trick being played inside her head was a better option than it actually being real. 'How do we stop it then?'

'I have absolutely no idea,' Kiara replied, returning to the edge of the circle.

'Well, what do you two want to do? Do we try and go back into your room?'

Kiara and Ethan looked at one another for a few moments.

'If we could get up that tower,' Ethan said, pointing, 'we could see where the forest ends. Then we can decide where we should go. And if we head for the tower, we might just find Kiara's house.'

'That would be great. There's some chocolate cake in the kitchen,' Kiara said, smiling at the thought.

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As the three kids walked slowly across the paving stones and past the tumbled-down columns to the edge of the trees, their senses were bombarded: the rich, damp scent of the forest, the mingled pitches of insects humming, the birds' calls and shrill cries from creatures hidden deep within the trees. Everything combined to give them the overwhelming certainty that what they saw and heard was real. A streak of blue swung past along the edge of the trees. It shook the branches high up in the canopy as it disappeared out of sight. Another followed close behind it.

'Blue monkeys!' Phoebe exclaimed, gazing up into the mass of green and trying to see more. 'How adorable.'

'No, you can't have one as a pet,' Kiara told her.

'I'll need a souvenir of this place. How else will my mum believe I was here?' Phoebe joked, trying to find something to lighten the situation.

'I'll take some photos,' Ethan said, taking out his phone and snapping a couple of the crumbling columns and the trees beyond.

'You'll have to send us copies,' Phoebe told him.

With Kiara leading the way, they took a few uncertain steps into the forest, staying close together as they struggled through the undergrowth. Soon the brightness of the clearing faded behind them and they were surrounded by a pale green, almost luminescent light filtering down through the plants high above. There was a constant rustle of leaves above and around them. Birds with beautiful plumage swooped by, while insects and bugs of all shapes and sizes darted, crawled and buzzed around them.

'Ouch!' exclaimed Phoebe as she flicked a flying bug off her hand. 'Careful, they bite.'

Kiara stopped, opened her pack and pulled out the sunscreen.

'It's got insect repellent in it,' she said with a flourish.

'It's the smell that'll keep them away,' Ethan commented, screwing up his face as they lathered their faces, arms and legs with the lotion.

As they set off again, an ugly animal about the size of a pig darted in front of them, disappearing as quickly as it appeared.

'That definitely wasn't adorable,' Phoebe said, 'not even if it comes in blue.'

It was hard work finding a path through the forest and the trio was just beginning to worry they had somehow missed it when the pale stone of the tower appeared ahead. They stepped out into a small space around the building and looked upwards, following the sheer, curved walls high up to a patch of blue overhead. They felt very small and very lost. As one, they walked around the tower, noting the small, glassed windows spiralling up the outside. Halfway around they came to an open, arched doorway through which a wide stone staircase disappeared up into the dimness. Surrounding the doorway were carvings of leaves, flowers and writing, the same as the script in the Journal.

'The Tower of Indrath,' Kiara read. 'And these are the Six Aspects,' she said, pointing for Phoebe's benefit. 'Love, faith, knowledge, trust, hope and peace.'

There was stunned silence for a few moments.

'This must be Tartha then,' she said quietly, not quite believing her own words.

'How do we get back to Earth without just getting stuck in your room again?' Phoebe asked in a small voice.

'The Eldar are still here somewhere. We'll find them and they can help us,' Ethan assured her.

Phoebe peered into the gloom of the staircase. 'Do you think it's safe?'

'We either go up and see where we are or go back to Kiara's room and wait,' Ethan told her, starting up the stairs.

Phoebe quickly followed him. 'You two were born here,' she commented as they climbed. 'How weird is that?'

'Our parents have a lot of explaining to do when we get home,' Kiara said, the resentment she held clear in her voice.

Some minutes later, Ethan stepped cautiously out onto the top of the tower. With a surge of energy, the girls leaped up after him. Around the edges of the flat floor were seven white marble columns a little taller than themselves, their design matching those of the circle outside Kiara's bedroom. Their tops were elaborately carved and between them ran a waist-high wall of the same pale stone as the tower. Where the trio stood was not above the tallest of the trees, but they were still higher than most so that looking out between the columns they had an almost uninterrupted view over the canopy in all directions.

What they saw was entirely unexpected and not at all what they had hoped for. There could be no doubting they were a long way from home.

'Wow, who would've thought all this would fit into your hallway?' Phoebe said softly, slowly looking around.

To the east where the sun was high in the morning sky, the forest went on into the distance, becoming sparser and merging with the foothills of a towering mountain range beyond. The range ran diagonally away from them and they could see the last ridges disappearing over the horizon to the south-east. The upper peaks were capped by snow, while the very tallest were shrouded in clouds. Turning around to the south, they saw the clearing where Kiara's orange-filled doorway still stood so strangely between the columns. The forest beyond it went on and on, seemingly forever, to the horizon. There would be no point in going that way.

Westwards, but no more than several kilometres away, the forest ended abruptly at a vast, glistening ocean over which dark clouds were massing. Lastly, looking northwards, the trees thinned and almost disappeared only three or four kilometres away. All that was visible for a long way beyond were marshlands. Sunlight glinted on the water between tall reeds and spindly trees, creating the illusion of hundreds of lights. The wetland continued around in an arc to the north-east, where it merged with the edge of the forest that became the foothills of the northern end of the mountain range.

'What do you want to do now?' Kiara asked Ethan.

'We might find people along the coast or maybe in those hills near the mountains,' he suggested.

'I don't know,' she said doubtfully, looking towards the ocean. 'The forest looks like it goes all the way to the water. We might have to walk for miles along the coast to find anyone.'

'But we could also walk all the way to the mountains and find no one there,' Phoebe pointed out. 'And what if there is no one here to find?'

'If this is Tartha, there must be someone, somewhere,' Ethan said. 'Anyway, I don't think we have a choice. We can't go back to Kiara's room and risk being trapped. I'm not letting anyone get our Stones that easily.'

'But what if the people we find aren't on our side?' Phoebe asked. 'This place is probably crawling with evil helpers who'll hand us over to the Vardoul. They're probably waiting down in the forest right now,' she said, peering nervously over the wall to the forest below.

'We saw nothing except birds and animals down there,' Ethan reassured her.

Phoebe gazed at the mountains. 'How far away do you think they are?'

'I don't know. It's probably fifteen or twenty kilometres to the foothills. It would be only half that to the sea.'

As Ethan spoke, he got his phone out and took a panoramic photo looking towards the mountains and another to the ocean. 'Smile,' he said, holding it up to take a photo of them all. 'That's probably the first selfie ever on Tartha!'

'Can we focus now?' Kiara asked him.

'You two should decide which way we go,' Phoebe said. 'You're the Stone Keepers and I'd hate to choose and then find out I was wrong.'

Ethan and Kiara were both staring towards the mountains.

'Mountains,' said Ethan. 'It could be where the Eldar are.'

Kiara nodded. 'It's much further, but somehow I'd feel better going there. At the coast I think it would be harder to hide if we needed to.'

You do know, Kiara, I have no idea how far it is to those hills. It could be thirty kilometres or more, Ethan told her in her mind.

Don't tell Phoebe that.

'Do you think we'll make it out of the trees before dark?' Phoebe

asked, as she again stared down at the forest, which seemed to take on a darker and more sinister appearance even as she watched.

'Maybe,' Kiara said as she looked up at the sun, still a little way below the middle of the sky.

She and Ethan both knew she was lying.

They emerged from the base of the tower to find that while they'd descended the stairs, the clouds from over the ocean had been blown rapidly to shore. Great swathes of dark-grey now lay above the forest. With a glance up at the forbidding sky, Ethan plunged back into the trees.

Their passage through the undergrowth became even more difficult on the other side of the tower. They battled the forest, struggling with tree roots, fallen branches and unexpected depressions hidden under plants and drifts of decaying foliage. Occasionally, they were forced to clamber over fallen trunks or find their way around those that were too big or decayed to climb over. They came across several paths, some large enough to follow which would have made travelling easier, but no one wanted to risk meeting whatever had made them. Ethan used his phone to check the time, but it was impossible to estimate the distance they'd travelled in the three hours since leaving the tower. They had the feeling it wasn't very far at all. All three were hot, tired and hungry and they still had a long way to go.

A clearing created by a colossal fallen tree, its massive roots towering above them, brought welcome relief from the oppressiveness of the forest. The space was bright as the sun's rays briefly escaped from behind the ceiling of clouds and Ethan lifted his face skywards, enjoying the moment of warmth and light.

As he did, he tried to suppress the wave of panic that gripped him. 'We're going in the wrong direction,' he said quietly.

Confused, the girls looked up and in an instant, understood. The sun was still in front of them. Now that it was well after midday, it should have been behind them over the ocean. Kiara shivered involuntarily as she realised what this meant; somehow, under the thick canopy of the trees and without the sun to guide them, they had turned in completely the wrong direction.

Tears welled up in Phoebe's eyes. This couldn't be happening.

‘We’ll never reach the end of the forest before dark now.’

Her companions didn’t answer, as they knew it was useless to pretend anymore. Without a word, Kiara looked up at the sun to gauge the direction they needed to go and set off back the way they’d come. They walked steadily and saw the sun just twice as its soft afternoon rays found openings through the now ominously dark clouds and layers of plants down to the forest floor. It was just enough to give them comfort that they were walking in the right direction, with the sun behind them. On and on they pushed themselves, ignoring their increasing exhaustion as the hours passed. They slipped more often in their weariness and their thirst and hunger became more distracting, but all were reluctant to finish their last few precious mouthfuls of food and water as that would mean they had nothing left at all.

Unexpectedly, Kiara stopped. ‘What’s that noise?’

Phoebe and Ethan froze in their tracks, but their worry quickly vanished. Somewhere to their right, distant but unmistakable, was the sound of running water. In unison, they changed direction, heading down a steepening slope towards it, and in a few minutes the trio reached a small river not more than three metres across. It tumbled over a ledge created by a fallen tree and trapped debris, before continuing on through the forest. Eagerly they made their way down the steep bank and plunged their hands into the clear, cool water.

‘Do you think it’s safe to drink?’ Kiara asked.

‘It must be, out here in a forest,’ Phoebe answered. ‘But I’ll have some first because if I drop dead, you two can still save Tartha.’

‘Phoebe! Don’t be silly!’

‘I’m not. Think about it. You two have thousands, maybe millions of people depending on you. I have just me.’

‘I won’t let you do it. What if something happens to you? It would be my fault. What would I tell your parents? What would I tell the twins?’

At the mention of her eight-year-old brothers, Finn and Kai, Phoebe’s face softened. ‘They can be so annoying, but I miss them already.’

‘Are you going to have a drink?’ asked a voice from the other

side of Kiara.

They glanced across to see Ethan grinning, his chin dripping with water. Kiara frowned at him but seeing he hadn't dropped dead, she and Phoebe drank too. Their thirst quenched, they washed their faces, cleaned the scratches on their arms and hands and filled the water bottles to the brim.

'We should follow it,' Phoebe said, watching the water bubbling past. 'Then we can't get lost or die of thirst.'

'We should also eat something before we go any further,' Kiara suggested.

She divided one of the muesli bars into three portions and handed her friends one of these and two small pieces of chocolate each. While they ate their meagre rations, the two Stone Keepers became aware of something they knew they couldn't tell Phoebe.

Do you feel we're being watched? Ethan asked Kiara.

Yes, she replied, trying to look casual as she glanced around. *It's impossible to see anything though.*

Someone's tracking us – or something, Ethan said, also glancing around unobtrusively. *I'm not getting any proper thoughts, but there's something there.*

Maybe it's just a curious animal.

Can we even read animal thoughts here? If it becomes more than just curious, I'm not giving up without a fight. We need weapons.

Where are you going to find those out here? Kiara asked as she stood up.

'We probably only have one or two hours of daylight left at the rate the sun is moving,' she said aloud to Phoebe, while Ethan picked up three long, thick sticks from nearby. 'We might be quicker now we can follow the river.'

'These walking sticks might help us too,' Ethan said, giving them one each.

Kiara led the way again, followed by Phoebe, then Ethan. They were able to travel a little faster, but not as fast as they'd hoped. The forest didn't part for the river; rather the river had carved a path through it, winding its way erratically wherever the water found the easiest path. In the end they just tried to stay as near to it as they could. It was eventually joined by another small river and became

wider and faster. The whole time they walked, the two Stone Keepers were conscious of something following their progress. They were so focused on their hidden companion that they failed to notice a faint but unmistakable sound in the distance.

‘Is that a waterfall?’ Phoebe asked.

As Ethan listened, he stared down at the creek. ‘I think we’ve all been very big idiots.’

The girls looked at him, uncomprehending and he pointed to the water.

‘Water doesn’t flow towards mountains. It comes from them. We’ve been following the direction the water is going, *away* from the mountains.’

‘But we’ve been using the sun ...’ Phoebe began, looking helplessly up at the sky.

‘Let’s find the waterfall,’ Kiara urged.

They followed the sound, the roar of the falls gradually getting louder. The forest thinned, revealing an immense space of open sky beyond and as they broke through the last of the trees, a completely unexpected sight met their eyes. They were standing on a grassy ledge just a few metres wide at the edge of a high cliff, looking over a vast expanse of dark, blue-green ocean. A few metres to their right, the water from the river fell over the edge in a never-ending, thundering cascade. A rainbow shimmered in the droplets of spray that hung permanently in the air and the sea glistened like fairy lights as it rose and fell in the light of the late afternoon sun, coming from behind them.

‘I don’t understand,’ Phoebe uttered in confusion, looking behind her. The sun was behind them towards the mountains, in the direction they were so sure they’d been heading. ‘The sun is supposed to be setting over the ocean. We went the right way ...’

Ethan gazed towards the horizon. ‘We assumed it was late morning when we went up the tower, the same as on Earth. But what if it was already just past noon when we arrived on Tartha and the sun was already moving down to the horizon? That would mean we should’ve been following the sun to get to the mountains. When we changed direction, we hadn’t actually been going the wrong way,’ he said flatly. He pointed over the water. ‘That is east, not west.’

Phoebe sank to the ground. Her physical energy was expended from the trek and now her emotions, which she'd been trying to hold in check, crumbled. Tears trickled down her pale cheeks. Ethan slumped beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. Kiara sat on the other side and held her hand as together they gazed silently over the ocean below. The scene was quite beautiful, the water and sky merging at the horizon in a pink and orange haze in the growing dusk, yet they couldn't appreciate the beauty. All they could think of was that they were trapped, lost and impossibly far from anyone they knew.

'This is *hopeless!* We'll *die* before we find a way out of this place. Stupid Prophecy!' A small sob escaped from Phoebe.

'No, you can't think like that,' Kiara comforted her. 'We just have to think of another plan. We'll get some sleep, and in the morning, I'm sure we'll think of something.'

By the look on Phoebe's face, it was clear she didn't really believe her. Ethan went to the edge of the cliff and lay on the ground, peering cautiously over. The waterfall plunged a long way down, joining with the waves as they crashed and churned continuously onto huge rocks at the base. He eased himself back and looked in either direction. The forest and cliffs continued in an unbroken line on their side of the river, but on the other bank, not far away, the land rose into a rocky headland that he couldn't see beyond.

'We should get a fire started. There's plenty of wood at least.'

'I wonder what it tastes like. I'm so hungry,' Phoebe said miserably.

They moved some distance away from the waterfall to where it was a little quieter and the air was not so moist. Together they collected kindling and dead wood from along the edges of the forest, never moving more than a few steps from one another. Dry, fallen branches were easy to find and they piled up enough to last through the night. After wasting several matches, while they watched thin flames struggle along the kindling before dying out, the fire finally took hold. Everyone felt a little better, as at least they had warmth and light, even if they were hopelessly lost in a strange land.

As the chill of the evening set in, they each put on an extra top and jacket. In silence, the three sat on logs they had dragged over

for seats, the girls huddled together with the towel draped over their legs, Ethan close by them on another. The logs were angled so they could watch the ocean but still keep an eye on the darkening forest.

Kiara took the remaining few pieces of chocolate and biscuits and the last apple from her pack. Her companions looked at the food, desperately wanting to devour it, but only too aware there would be nothing left if they did. In the end they shared the apple and had a piece of chocolate, leaving one small square of chocolate and two biscuits each for the next day. While they ate, the dusk faded completely to night and a half-moon appeared in the south. Soon, however, the clouds that had been hovering above them all day slipped across it, plunging everything beyond the light of the fire into an impenetrable and unnerving blackness.

In the darkness the sounds from the forest seemed intensified. Phoebe glanced up from the comfort of the flickering flames and looked around nervously. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she let out a small scream and pointed in silent horror. Her companions felt her sudden terror and they too became numb, frozen with fear. The light from the fire reflected off a pair of large yellow eyes about two metres above the ground, just a stone's throw away at the edge of the trees. As they looked, a second and then a third pair became visible.

Okay, now what do we do? Ethan almost screamed in Kiara's head.

Keep still! The fire might keep them away, she said to both of them as she shoved more wood on it.

They sat immobile, hardly daring to breathe. After a few minutes, the eyes dimmed and receded into the forest. There was little sense of relief as they continued to watch the edge of the trees, feeling so scared they were almost ill. But it was further along the cliff past the waterfall that they saw movement. It was very shadowy, but against the light of the moon which had emerged from the clouds for a few moments, two great animals with huge wings outstretched launched themselves from the rocky outcrop and flew out over the ocean. Kiara and Ethan watched them fade rapidly into the night.

'There's still one of them there,' whispered Phoebe, who had barely taken her eyes off the tree line.

I wouldn't worry, if two have left already, Kiara told her, trying to sound calm. They can't be that interested in us. We have to take turns and get some sleep.

'Sleep!' hissed Phoebe hysterically. 'How can I sleep, trapped on the edge of a cliff in a strange world, dying of hunger and watched by a monster hiding in the forest?'

Shhh! Kiara admonished her silently. *We'll be too exhausted if we don't. One of us can sleep while two keep a lookout.*

Phoebe stared incredulously at her friends. *What will you do if that thing comes over here?*

Put some of the long sticks into the fire to heat the ends. Then we'll have weapons if we do get attacked, Ethan said grimly.

Kiara was the first to try to sleep. She lay down on the towel facing the fire, her back against one of the logs, while her friends watched, wary and on edge. They kept the fire blazing and the creature made no attempt to come near them, although they saw the flash of eyes occasionally in the trees. It was a long and stressful night.

Phoebe was still dozing fitfully when at last the cold, pale light of dawn crept into the sky, pushing away the darkness, but not their fears. As Kiara and Ethan huddled together beside the fire, the wind strengthened and swirled in eddies, sending small sparks into the air. Large drops of rain soon followed, quickly dampening the flames and their clothes. Phoebe stirred and sat up, momentarily confused, then looked towards the trees. 'Is it still there?' she whispered.

'I think so,' Ethan told her quietly, 'but it hasn't tried to come near us.'

The rain quickly became heavier, settling into a steady stream. The three teenagers looked forlornly at the dying fire as it sent out puffs of smoke and hissing steam. The one thing that had given them a feeling of comfort overnight was disappearing before their eyes.

Kiara pushed the remaining lengths of sticks deeper into the hot coals at the centre, in the hope of keeping them alight, before pulling out her rain jacket. 'One of us may as well be dry,' she said, handing it to Phoebe.

Before she had a chance to put the coat on, Ethan grabbed Phoebe's arm and pulled her close. Surprised, she looked at him,

but he wasn't looking at her. She followed his gaze out across the ocean and her instinct was to scream, but she was unable to. Two of the winged creatures were flying straight towards the cliff top, while six more followed in the distance. In the next instant, Ethan pushed Phoebe behind him, threw his pack on and held a still burning stick in each hand. He looked terrified but defiant. Kiara did the same, while Phoebe grabbed her pack and clutched it and Kiara's rain jacket tightly to her chest.

A few moments later, one of the beasts landed nearby. Taller than anything on Earth, except perhaps a giraffe, its fine-boned, sinewy body was covered in short, dark grey fur and its large black feathered wings were flecked with dark, iridescent blue. Their eyes were drawn to its huge, sharp teeth as its mouth opened in a snarl. The creature folded its wings and advanced menacingly towards them, large, yellow, unblinking eyes penetrating deeply into their own as it flicked its gaze between them. Its companion landed close by and did the same. Desperately, the kids looked towards the forest for safety, only to see two more of the animals advancing from the trees. The four beasts fanned out and the trio was surrounded. Instinctively, they placed their backs to one another and stood terrified and helpless. The Stone Keepers' minds raced with possible solutions and in a matter of seconds, they agreed that there was only one option.

Phoebe, Kiara spoke urgently into her friend's mind, get ready to run for the trees. One, two, three ... now!

As they bolted for cover one of the beasts moved to block their way. It lowered its head and emitted a deep, rumbling noise that was both threatening and terrifying. The Keepers waved the smouldering sticks in the air, but it stood its ground, lowered its head to their level and uttered a louder growl.

They hesitated for only a few seconds before they acted, knowing it was most likely them or these creatures. Kiara pushed her sticks against the animal's chest while Ethan reached up and touched another against its cheek. There was an ear-piercing scream of pain and anger as it reared, lashing out with its front legs at its tormentors. Kiara, Ethan and Phoebe dodged the flailing claws and quickly reached the cover of the first trees.

They had a few metres' head start, but that was all.

They ran like they never had before, on and on, struggling to get deeper into the forest. The rain was still falling heavily, and huge drops fell from the canopy, making the ground slippery and clouding their vision as water rolled into their eyes. They tripped over roots and fallen tree trunks. Branches tore at them, ripped their clothes and scratched their skin, but they hardly noticed. Each time they stumbled, they willed their feet to move faster. They were exhausted, but adrenaline had kicked in, along with a strong desire to stay alive. All the time they heard the animals crashing relentlessly after them, never seeming to get closer, but never far behind. Their hunters could not see their quarry, but they could smell them running ahead, their sharp noses easily tracking the scent of the creatures they had been sent to find.

Suddenly, Kiara, who was in front, vanished from sight. Confused, Phoebe had no more than a second to wonder where she'd gone, as the next instant she found herself slipping and sliding out of control down a steep, muddy slope. They grabbed randomly at plants, but only succeeded in cutting their hands on sharp leaves that slipped from their grasp. At length, the steepness of the slope lessened and as they slowed, Phoebe crashed into Kiara, pushing her into a muddy creek. Ethan slid to a stop nearby and they all froze, staring up the steep slope in terrified silence. After several agonising minutes, hearing nothing from above, they stood up. Soaked to the skin, their clothes were ripped, they were covered in mud and bits of decaying plants and had scratches and cuts on their hands and faces.

'Do you think the Vardoul sent them?' Ethan asked Kiara.

'They could have, but whoever did, they know we're here now and they'll keep looking for us.'

‘Does it matter which way we go then?’ Phoebe asked, looking in both directions along the ravine they’d fallen into. There was no obvious way out.

‘Well, if we go that way,’ Ethan said pointing, ‘we’ll be going back the way we came, which is probably the safest thing to do as those monsters will still be running the other way. I hope.’

He took out his drink bottle and had a sip. He wanted more but didn’t know when they would find fresh water again. The murky creek that flowed past them was foul.

‘It’s hot down here,’ Kiara said, taking off the extra clothes she’d put on the previous evening. The others did the same.

‘I lost your raincoat,’ Phoebe told her.

‘Well, we’re not going back for it,’ Kiara said, as she stuffed her wet, dirty clothes into her pack. ‘Come on.’

Travelling along the bottom of the ravine was tedious. They picked their path carefully through thick, slippery mud and murky puddles which challenged their every step. Despite the freshness of the rain, the stillness and staleness of the air in the narrow space made it uncomfortable to breathe. There was not a creature to be seen, except for slimy slugs and an occasional huge spider-like creature or other creepy insects that scuttled away as they approached. The rain eventually eased, and they walked in miserable silence in an intermittent drizzle. It was well over two hours before the bottom of the ravine began to incline. As the little group clambered eagerly upwards, they startled a flock of tiny purple birds that had been feasting on berries littering the ground around a bush.

Ethan lifted the large, pale leaves to reveal small bunches of mauve fruit, rather like grapes. ‘Do you think we could eat them?’ he asked.

‘I’ll try one,’ Phoebe answered wearily. ‘I’m soaked and exhausted and I can’t go another step without food. Dying from poison berries might be better than dying from starvation or being eaten by one of those animals.’

Kiara contemplated the berries. Phoebe had a point, no matter how ridiculous it seemed. There was only a small piece of chocolate and two biscuits left for each of them, and if they didn’t find something else, they wouldn’t have the strength to go on.

Strangely, she wasn't anywhere near as hungry as she thought she should be, her hunger from the previous night gone.

Phoebe, however, was obviously in serious need of something to eat. 'Well, come on, hand over the berries then Ethan.'

'Phoebe, I don't know ... maybe we shouldn't risk it. You can have my chocolate ...' Ethan started to say.

'Oh, I'll get them myself!'

Before the others could stop her, Phoebe had plucked a few berries and popped them into her mouth. She chewed and swallowed. They looked at her expectantly.

'Well?'

'A bit like sweet, burnt apples. How long will they take to kill me if they're poisonous?' Her friends shrugged their shoulders. 'Let's collect some and if I don't drop dead in three or four hours, we'll have a feast,' Phoebe said, eyeing the ripe bunches hungrily.

Ethan and Kiara still weren't sure she should have eaten them, but they helped her gather as many of the little mauve fruits as they could find and put them into two plastic bags. They continued up the slope, looking hopefully about for any other fruits they could pick, but there were none. Soon the cries of birds and other creatures became louder and at last the slope levelled out with the forest floor. Looking back across the ravine they were relieved to see no trace of their hunters, but this was overshadowed by the fact that they were still in a hopeless situation.

Phoebe leaned against a wide trunk. 'Which way now?' she asked.

'That way,' Kiara said, pointing.

'You can't see the sun,' Ethan said, 'so how do you know?'

'I don't, but that direction is away from the hole we've been stuck in for the last few hours.'

'Phoebe, you go in front so we can see if you pass out,' Ethan told her.

'Thanks. You're so thoughtful. Can I put some dry clothes on first?'

'What?' Ethan asked a couple of minutes later, as the girls tried not to laugh. 'So, they're a bit short,' he said, looking down at Kiara's spare grey tracksuit pants he was wearing.

They worked their way through the undergrowth, weaving their way around the massive trunks of ancient trees, until they came across a small clearing filled with light. Looking up at the sun, they were able to set off in the correct direction, towards the mountains. Exhausted as they were, they found strength in a real sense of urgency to find a way out of the forest and get help.

They stopped as little as possible, but some time in the middle of the afternoon, as they plodded up a less densely wooded hill, Phoebe collapsed to the ground. 'I have to stop!' she exclaimed, sprawling on the soft layers of leaves.

'Do you feel sick?' Ethan asked worriedly.

'No. Exhausted and starving, but I'm not dying from berry poisoning. I have to eat some more.'

She sat up and took out one of the bags of fruit. Ethan and Kiara ate only a few and quickly felt full, but Phoebe had two large handfuls before she was satisfied.

'I see what you mean about the burnt apples,' commented Kiara, as she swallowed her last berry and washed it down with a swig from her bottle. 'Come on, we need to keep going,' and she put a hand out to help Phoebe up.

Near the crest of the hill they came across the remains of another tower. Its top half had toppled over long ago, plants reclaiming the crumbled pieces. Thick vines grew through the doorway and slunk up what was left of the spiral staircase, before drooping back out through the lower windows. With some effort, Ethan pulled the leaves from around the arched entrance, looking for the symbols they'd seen on the first tower. There were carvings, but pieces of stone were missing and while the tower might have had a name, he was unable to decipher it.

Exploring the area on the other side of the hill they found more ruins among the plants. There were many buildings, some quite large, but their roofs were long gone, and trees grew inside the collapsed walls. The forest was slowly devouring what must have once been a thriving town. Sunlight illuminated a weathered statue that had fallen against a tree. A noble-faced lady, dressed in robes not unlike those Kiara had seen her parents wearing, looked down at them with a blank expression. Her nose was missing, and

her right arm was broken. Kiara stared at the face, wondering who she'd been. Suddenly she froze. Ethan stopped and turned to face her. They both seemed made of stone themselves.

We're not alone, Kiara told Phoebe, dropping to the ground.

Before Phoebe had a chance to do the same, something very small whizzed past her ear with a soft hum and vanished into the undergrowth. Ethan pulled her down beside him as another object whizzed by where she'd been standing a split second earlier. This time, it didn't land in the bushes but impaled itself in a tree. It was a silver dart. Phoebe stared up at it, paralysed with fear.

There are three of them, he told her. *They're making a ring around us.* Then he realised something else. *They're looking for Kiara,* he said with surprise.

'We've been sent to help you, Chosen One,' a woman's voice called out.

Why did they shoot first then? Kiara asked her friends.

She read the thoughts of the guard who'd spoken. What she discovered was not what she'd expected. The guard was telling the truth. They'd been sent to find the Stone Keeper and bring her to safety, to help her fulfil the Prophecy. This could be just the luck they needed.

Ethan? What do you want to do?

Ethan didn't need to think about this. He was already looking for an escape route. *I don't trust them. We don't know if the good guys or the bad guys brought you here. There are a lot of people who'd love to get our Stones and I'm not sure we should trust anyone we meet anywhere in this forest, no matter what reason they've been given for finding us. Especially if they're shooting darts at us. We need to find the Eldar. They started this. They'll know what we should do.*

You're probably right, Kiara said, disappointed it wasn't going to be as easy as it had seemed for those few moments. *But how do we lose them?*

Follow me.

Taking a gamble, Ethan headed not in the opposite direction to the nearest hunter but veered to one side, aiming for a wall that would offer some protection while they worked out what to do next. It was almost impossible, however, to crawl through the plants

without moving them or making any noise in the accumulated forest debris. Soon, two more darts were shot in their direction in quick succession. Phoebe let out a cry, which she quickly stifled so it came out as a soft squeak. A dart had landed in Kiara's backpack near the shoulder strap and stuck there.

Having felt its force, Kiara turned around and the colour drained from her face. Just a couple of centimetres to the left and it could have been disastrous. Phoebe came up beside her, pulled the dart out, picked up a piece of broken paver and tossed it towards the wall. It found its mark with a loud thud and the two slithered as fast as they could in the opposite direction. Ethan scrambled after them and in a minute they reached the relative safety of a decrepit building. Clambering over the lowest point in the wall they crawled a few metres along it to the right, until they were hidden under the low, sweeping branches of a tall and sprawling tree. Huddled safely together, Kiara took a calculated risk and peered over the wall.

Through the leaves she glimpsed two young men and a woman, all with olive skin and shoulder-length brown hair. They were dressed in a simple uniform of black pants and long-sleeved dark grey tops, belted at the waist. Walking slowly and purposefully, eyes darting here and there, each of them carried a small black gun, poised ready to shoot. Yet now, as she read their thoughts, she knew they didn't mean to hurt them. The darts were tranquillisers. She dropped back down and looked around, desperate for somewhere to hide.

Not too far away thick, twisting vines dangled from the limbs of the tree under which they were sheltering. Kiara set off commando-style across the broken flooring towards its wide trunk. At the base of the tree she paused only long enough to glance past Phoebe and Ethan. There was no one in sight but she knew they were not far away.

Up here, she urged them.

Handing Phoebe a thick vine, she grasped one herself and began to climb. It was harder than she'd thought it would be, but once she reached the first large branch, the climb became easier. Without pausing she wound her way upwards, the others following close behind. Finally, reaching a point where she could go no further, she glanced down and saw nothing but branches and leaves. It was the

perfect hiding place. The three fugitives settled in for a long wait, trying to find a comfortable place to sit.

Do you think the police are looking for us at home yet? Phoebe asked after some time.

The others didn't answer immediately. It was a long time since any of them had mentioned home and all of them felt at that point they might never get back there.

Probably, Kiara replied. *Unless our parents have guessed where we are. They knew this was going to happen one day, but how will they explain where we have gone to everyone we know?*

My parents will have no idea where I am. Finn and Kai will be so upset. I miss them so much.

Kiara reached out and touched her friend's arm. She didn't know what to say. There was no point in promising everything would work out and they would all be going home soon.

I never thought I would say this, but I actually miss Tara too, Ethan admitted. *She's okay, for a sister.*

The trio lapsed into silence again. As the afternoon dragged into evening, a small band of blue monkeys swung through the trees and stopped nearby, looking with curiosity at the three intruders to their home. They chattered between themselves and after a few minutes edged closer, until they were sitting on the branches around the kids. The animals showed absolutely no fear and seemed to be settling down for the night. The littlest one was the most inquisitive and Phoebe held out her hand for it to sniff.

It'll bite you, Kiara warned.

In a few minutes, however, the monkey was curled up asleep on Phoebe's lap as she gently stroked it. Ethan and Kiara looked at her in amazement.

Whatever you do, don't name it, Kiara told her.

It was the middle of the night when they finally decided to return to the ground. They needed to sleep, and no one wanted to risk falling out of the tree. Kiara shone her torch and reluctantly, Phoebe picked up the monkey and placed it gently against the trunk where she'd been leaning. It woke up and looked at her with deep, sad violet eyes that followed her down. On reaching the lowest branch, she grabbed hold of a vine as she'd seen Ethan do and

swung silently to the ground, before darting to the wall for cover.

We'll take turns to sleep here, Kiara said when she joined them.

Anyone for berries? Phoebe asked, taking a handful out of her pack.

The two Keepers had a few, but again they didn't want as many as Phoebe before they were full. Ethan and Phoebe kept first watch, huddled beside one another for warmth. Phoebe struggled to stay awake and eventually rested her head on Ethan's shoulder. He placed an arm around her, and she thought dreamily that at least if she had to get lost in a strange world, it was with him. She didn't see his smile.

She woke at dawn, lying on her side curled up next to him, with the monkey curled up beside her. 'I'm not much use as a lookout,' she whispered as she sat up and patted the monkey.

'You don't have a Power Stone. I don't think Kiara and I need as much sleep or food as we used to. Or maybe we're just more worried as it's because of us you're in danger, so we're running on backup reserves.'

Nearby, Kiara stirred. 'Everything aches,' she said, stretching. 'I hate camping.' She looked at the monkey. 'He's not coming with us.'

Phoebe gave the monkey a quick cuddle. 'Bye Kojo. I'll miss you.'

'You named it?' Ethan asked, laughing.

Phoebe scratched the monkey under the chin. 'We're buddies now, aren't we Kojo?' She dragged her backpack over and took the berries out. 'Are we still going to the mountains?' she asked, munching on the fruit. Kojo looked hopefully at the berries. She held one out and he took it in his paws and ate it.

'Phoebe! That's all we have to eat!' Kiara exclaimed.

'I know, but he's so cute. Just a couple more.'

'I still think we should try and get to the mountains,' Ethan said. 'If the Eldar live there, we can get help.'

'Come on, we'd better get going then,' Kiara said, picking up her pack while Phoebe gave Kojo one last pat.

If they weren't being hunted and hopelessly lost in an unknown world, it could have been an enjoyable trek. The forest was not as dense beyond the ruins, the sky was clear, and the air warm and humid after the heavy rain. The biting bugs were just as bad, though,

and they stopped to smother themselves in the repellent. They rested as little as possible and by the middle of the afternoon had travelled a good distance. They were feeling less like fugitives and more relaxed when, without warning, Kiara and Ethan dropped to the ground.

They've found us, haven't they? Phoebe asked, dropping down a split second later.

Hearts pounding, they headed in the opposite direction to whoever the Stone Keepers had sensed, crouching uncomfortably and darting from one tree or bush to the next. At last Ethan dared to stop, sheltered by a clump of tall bushes covered with pale pink flowers.

Where are they? Phoebe asked, her eyes wide with fear.

They haven't followed us, he reassured her.

They set off again, but they didn't get more than a couple of kilometres before the two Stone Keepers dropped again, Kiara pulling Phoebe down with her. As she did, her eye was caught by something glinting in the sunlight. It was a tiny, perfectly carved white stone statue of a flying horse. The wings were folded neatly against its side and its head was raised. She quickly showed it to Phoebe before slipping it into her pocket.

We could be in trouble this time, Ethan said silently to Kiara.

She nodded. They both knew there were a lot more than three people searching for them and they were planning on pushing the trio towards the swamp, still some distance away, to trap them.

Ethan looked into Phoebe's eyes. *Get ready to run. Don't stop and don't look back.*

The next half hour was a blur for her. She was certain her lungs were going to collapse as she struggled for breath. If that didn't happen, she was sure her heart was going to explode. Her friends seemed to run almost effortlessly, even when the ground underfoot became soft and slippery with mud and moss. Just when Phoebe was really thinking she would be caught or die, probably both, she slipped in a shallow puddle where the ground became wet as the forest merged with the edge of the swamp. She was about to stand up when Kiara dropped down beside her and pulled her towards a small stand of rushes, looking desperately ahead for a safer hiding

place. Ethan was already crouched a couple of metres away beside another spreading plant.

Deeper into the swamp there were a few spindly trees, offering little cover, but there were plenty of reedy plants which became larger the further into the watery landscape they grew. Motioning for her to stay down, Kiara led the way, crawling from one plant to the next. The ground underneath their hands was slimy and the water was cold and in places quite deep. There was no hope of keeping their packs dry.

The Journal will be wrecked, Kiara told Ethan, not caring about anything else in her bag.

Too late now, he replied, thinking the same thing about his phone.

Just then, Phoebe, a couple of paces in front of him, slid completely under the water. He grabbed her by her pack and hauled her up.

Are you okay?

What do you think? she replied, annoyed at needing to be rescued.

They hadn't gone much further when they heard a sound that sent a chill down their spines. It was the howl of animals that had picked up their scent. Phoebe looked around in desperation; she was not going to get caught. About a hundred metres away a small island rose above the water, dotted with a few trees and ruins.

Too obvious, Kiara told her, reading her thoughts.

I've got another idea ... she began.

That might just work, Ethan said before she could finish. *Did you get that from a movie?*

Do I ever get a private thought with you two around? she asked, exasperated.

No, he replied with a quick smile.

Following Phoebe's desperate plan, the three half-crawled, half-swam to a tall clump of reeds. Kiara fumbled with the pocketknife, her cold hands struggling to grasp it, and it seemed to take forever before she managed to cut a few dead pieces of the tubular reeds from the underside of the plant. Quickly, they submerged themselves and experimented to find a tube they could breathe through. When they'd each found one, they moved beyond the island to an insignificant

clump of grasses and waited.

Ethan and Kiara heard the thoughts of the trackers before they saw them fanned out across the swamp, scanning for movement. The beasts accompanying them looked remotely like large dogs but had smooth, greenish-coloured skin instead of fur and mouths and noses more like those of dolphins. They were not very attractive but looked as if they would be very at home in a swamp.

Shit, Ethan exclaimed. *Time to dive!* he shouted in the girls' heads as the dog-dolphins looked in their direction.

In a few seconds, there was no sign the three kids from Earth were anywhere in the swamp. If those hunting them could have sensed fear though, they would have known exactly where to find them. Beneath the cold murky water, eyes tightly shut, the Stone Keepers and their friend huddled close together. They were trying to breathe slowly and stay calm, but they were not calm. They were petrified.

Their pursuers splashed through the swamp, calling out for the Stone Keeper to show herself. But the longer they looked, the more frustrated they became that they had once again lost their quarry. More than one of them was upset, as they truly believed they'd been sent to rescue the Stone Keeper and couldn't understand why she was running from them. Ethan and Kiara wondered if they'd made the right decision. What if these people *could* take them to safety and help them find the other three Stone Keepers? But they didn't move, both knowing that if they were wrong it would be disastrous for the Prophecy, and probably for them too. The thoughts gradually faded as the group moved on and eventually left the swamp as nightfall descended.

The teenagers emerged cautiously from the water.

I'm frozen, Phoebe said, shivering. *I think I'm going to die.*

Ethan took her arm and draped it around his shoulder to support her. Kiara took her other arm and together they half-carried her to the island. Once there, they moved to the highest ground and crawled into the ruins of a small room. Phoebe was shivering uncontrollably, and Kiara and Ethan were not much better.

Ideas? Ethan asked Kiara.

Before she had a chance to reply, she and Ethan knew one of

their pursuers was coming back towards the island, still looking for them. Kiara pulled at Phoebe's wet sleeve, and slowly the trio crept backwards. There was no hope of escape, as they unwittingly backed themselves into a corner.